

Blue Trail provides glimpse into the future

Water trail is the first project of the West Side Master Plan to be realized

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By Tom Shevin

MIDDLETOWN – When the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission cuts the ribbon on the first of 10 planned kayak launch sites along the west side of Aquidneck Island on Friday, Aug. 22, it will not only christen the first leg of the Narragansett Bay Blue Trail, but it also marks the first project to be completed under the highly-anticipated West Side Master Plan.

Commissioned in 1996 to provide a road map for the future of nearly 5,000 acres along Aquidneck Island's western shore, the plan provides a sweeping vision for an area stretching from the Gateway Center in downtown Newport to the Sakonnet River Bridge, replete with recreational facilities, a scenic shoreline drive and acres upon acres of accessible open space; all of which would be connected by an intermodal transportation network that promises to ease congestion along the island's central traffic corridors.

Fittingly, the plan's first project is one that connects islanders to the water and encourages the use of environmentally friendly transportation.

"Paddle boats are becoming incredibly popular," said Tina Dolen, executive director of the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission. "They don't use gasoline, they're eco-friendly, and they allow access to Rhode Island's finest natural resource: Narragansett Bay."

Kayakers wishing to take to the trail will be directed by map at each of the trail's launch sites, guiding paddlers close to shore and around some of the bay's lesser-traveled inlets and isles.

At first, project developers anticipate the trail to be used primarily by island residents, however in time, expect the Blue Trail to become a tourist draw itself.

A similar blue trail in the Chesapeake Bay and Potomac River has become a popular destination for both weekend explorers and anglers.

Containing more than 100 recommendations for the future use of the west side of Aquidneck Island, the 350-page West Side Master Plan is a touchstone for planning gurus and has stirred the excitement of island officials and residents alike.

No one may be more excited by the plan than Dr. Robert Quigley.

"This is a start," he said. "There are a lot of other things that will need to happen, but it's important that we show the public that something is happening. At least we're at a start."

A Portsmouth resident, Dr. Quigley has been involved in the planning process since its inception – first as chairman of the West Side Task Force and currently as chair of the AIPC.

While other projects in and around Newport County have been mired by delays, the West Side Master Plan is promising to move with much more purpose and expediency.

“Our goal is to advance several projects simultaneously,” Ms. Dolen said. “The driving force is the excess property that is coming up,” she said referring to the more 384 acres of prime real estate soon to be released by the Navy under its own recently released Master Plan.

Last month, the AIPC announced plans for the island’s first comprehensive traffic study, which would include an analysis of all existing arteries and recommendations for improving traffic flow across the island.

Funding for the trail was provided by the van Buren Charitable Trust, The Prince Charitable Trust, and several state and federal grants.