

# Officials tour Navy land to be declared excess

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Paige Bronk, Newport's director of planning, phone to snap a picture of the former Naval Hospital site during Tuesday's bus tour of properties that the Navy will declare as excess. (David Hansen/Daily News staff)

The main buildings of the former Naval Hospital property on Third Street must be preserved, whether Newport or a private developer acquires the property when the Navy gives it up.

The Navy's Tank Farm 2 consists of 96 acres high up on a hill overlooking Weaver Cove and Narragansett Bay, but any developer is going to have to build about 11 underground concrete storage tanks, each about 30 feet deep and 120 feet in diameter. Each tank once held 2.56 million gallons of heavy grade fuel for ships.

Those are just some of the challenges facing developers of the 384 acres of land that the Navy plans to declare surplus within 60 to 90 days. More than 30 officials from Newport, Middletown and Portsmouth — including city and town council members, planners, planning board and redevelopment authority members — went on a bus tour of the different properties Tuesday afternoon.

A new Aquidneck Island Re-Use Planning Authority, made up of representatives from the three island communities, will hire a consultant to put together a development plan for the properties once the Navy declares them surplus. Some of the members of the planning authority, as well as state officials, legislators and members of the media went on the bus tour.

Cornelia Mueller, an environmental scientist with Naval Station Newport's environmental division, briefed the officials on the status of environmental clean-ups on the properties.

The tour began at the Naval Hospital, a property with seven acres of land and three acres of submerged land that runs parallel to the shore.

"The city has demonstrated an interest in acquiring and developing the property," said Paige Bronk, Newport's director of planning, zoning and economic development. It is possible the city's

Redevelopment Authority could purchase it, or the state's Economic Development Corporation, which would work with the city on the development, he said.

The former main hospital building is a three-story brick and concrete structure constructed in 1913. Built in an H-shape and encompassing 147,566 square feet, it was used as an in-patient hospital until 1997. A study done for the National Park Service determined the building and others on the property "are representative of the theme of architecture and engineering of 20th century military buildings."

The state Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission is likely to require that most of the buildings remain, Bronk said.

Tina Dolen, executive director of the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission, arranged the tour. When the Navy announces which properties will be declared surplus, other federal agencies and organizations that provide housing for the homeless will be able to claim the properties if needed, she said. However, the agencies and organizations must present plans that are funded, she said.

The Navy is requiring that "fair market value" be paid for the properties.

The Aquidneck Island communities' development plan for the properties will be based on the West Side Master Plan that the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission released in 2006, Dolen said.

"The planning process will take about two years, 18 months at best," she said.

There were some surprises on the trip. For example, the Navy has decided to release the three acres at West Main Road and Coddington Highway in Middletown, the site of the former Navy Lodge. The lot is next to the ball field owned by the town and is adjacent to the Middletown Public Library. Next to the library is Kennedy School, which the Middletown School Department will close at the end of the school year.

Ron Wolanski, the Middletown planner, said all four properties are zoned for use by public institutions. The town has made no plans for the former Navy Lodge property, he said.

"Unlike Newport, the town does not necessarily plan to acquire that property," he said.

It could be re-zoned for recreational, commercial or mixed-use development, depending on what

the Town Council decides, Wolanski said.

The town has definite ideas for the 15 acres of shoreline property across from Greene Lane, around the Midway fishing pier.

“There is no public access to Narragansett Bay on the west side of town,” Wolanski said. “The pier would be expanded and improved, with nearby picnic areas and connections to bike and pedestrian trails. The Town Council has voted twice to support the concept.”

Joseph Dias, chief for planning and development for the state Department of Environmental Management, said it has committed to building the pier and creating parking at the site. A boat ramp also might be built, he said, adding that the town would have to maintain it once completed.

The Navy also plans to release five former fuel tank farms located off the Defense Highway, better known as Burma Road. Mueller said the tanks have been cleaned up and imploded at two of the farms. The tanks remain on the other three parcels.

Bob Gilstein, the Portsmouth town planner, said the town hopes the tanks are not imploded on those farms because it destabilizes the ground and closes off a larger area to development than if the tanks had been cleaned and left alone. Four of the tank farms are located in Portsmouth, with sizes of 96 acres, 83 acres, 49 acres and 41 acres.

The 49-acre Tank Farm 1 is likely to be a continuation of the Melville marina area now planned for development by the O’Neill Group, Gilstein said. Brian O’Neill has obtained permits from the town to build a 1,500-slip marina there.

James Boyd, a coastal policy analyst with the state Coastal Resources Management Council, said O’Neill is seeking a CRMC permit for the marina. A “wave fence” or a wave barrier that would cost more than \$20 million must be constructed to protect the boats in the planned slips, Boyd said.