

Tribes express interest in surplus Aquidneck Island Navy property

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Two area Indian tribes have expressed interest in acquiring surplus Navy properties on Aquidneck Island, a move that could upset community plans for the land.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs, on behalf of the Narragansett Indian Tribe and the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head, on the Massachusetts island of Martha's Vineyard, has asked the Navy to extend by 60 days its deadline for filing formal requests to acquire the properties. Federal agencies are given preference in acquiring surplus military properties, and the bureau indicated it plans to file such a request.

The bureau's March 30 letter does not indicate which of the disparate properties the tribes are interested in or for what purpose. On Wednesday, the Navy's Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) program granted the extension.

"All of the Navy land that's being discussed was, and is, historically the ancestral lands of the Narragansett Indian people and certainly that ancestral land was shared with other tribes," John Brown, medicine man in training for the Narragansett Indian tribe, said on Thursday.

Brown said the Narragansetts and Wampanoags are working cooperatively in seeking to acquire the Navy land and are interested in all of the parcels. He dismissed the idea that the tribes would be interested in developing a casino there.

"What's happening to just about every gaming institution in the country?" he said. "Why would we do something that is inherently going to be a loss?"

He said the tribes are coming to the table late — years after the island communities began preparing for the transfer of the properties by creating a master plan for their reuse — because "it wasn't a public process ... We weren't involved or notified."

" he said. "It was like a sign that said 'No Indians,'

The Navy intends to dispose of multiple parcels totaling about 400 acres along the western shore of Aquidneck Island. Among the properties are the former naval hospital in Newport, former fuel-tank sites in Portsmouth, a waterfront site in Middletown and all of Burma Road, also known as Defense Highway.

Municipal officials, led by the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission, envision a variety of uses, including maritime business development at Melville, public parks, intermodal transportation, walking trails and a bike path.

When asked how the tribes would use the land, Brown said for "what they are currently being used for ... We definitely need a hospital for our people" and the "fuel depot is in excellent condition." Neither has been used for those purposes for many years and officials regard both as in need of

costly cleanups.

“We are stewards of the land and there comes a time where as Indian people and as Indian nations we have to remain those stewards,” Brown said.

Although federal agencies get first option on surplus Navy property, they must meet 10 requirements, according to Greg Preston, deputy director for the Navy’s northeast BRAC office. These include payment of fair-market value and accepting the properties in their present condition, which in the case of the island parcels include contaminants that must be cleaned up.

Tina Dolen, executive director of the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission, acknowledged the Narragansetts’ right to seek ownership of the property through the Bureau of Indian Affairs and said she wasn’t concerned that the move posed an imminent threat to the communities’ plans for the properties.

“We recognize the standing of the tribe to make their interest in the property known. We will simply wait to see what their application looks like,” she said. But, she noted, the 10 requirements “are steep.”

Dolen said she has heard estimates that the tank farms alone are in need of a \$25 million cleanup, and that’s just for their reuse as industrial properties. Developments with more intensive public uses would have to meet even more stringent and costly standards.

Entities other than federal agencies would have more time to plan for the reuse and purchase of the properties and might not be required to accept the properties in their current, polluted condition, she said. Even if the tribes were to acquire any of the properties, she said any plans would have to abide by the West Side Master Plan as well as other local and state development rules.

She said the commission, as the representative of the three island communities, will take advantage of the 60-day delay to make its own preparations.