

# Planning commission to map all open space on the island

By Matt Sheley  
Daily News staff

NEWPORT — The Aquidneck Island Planning Commission is in the midst of a comprehensive yearlong project to map out open parcels across the island.

Known as the “Aquidneck Island Open Space Mapping Project,” the effort will look at every lot on the island from the southern tip of Newport along Ocean Drive through Middletown north to the Sakonnet River in Portsmouth.

The project is being led by Chris Witt, the commission’s director of planning and communications, with funding provided by the van Beuren Charitable Foundation.

Cataloguing everything from permanently protected open fields and farmlands to parks, estates and similar properties, the study will rank the “threat level” on each site from development and other factors.

“Open space is important for a number of reasons,” Witt said. “Besides the beauty and quality of life factors, there are things

**‘Besides the beauty and quality of life factors, there are things people don’t usually think about, like runoff, impact on wildlife habitats and agriculture, all things we need to consider now and into the future.’**

**CHRIS WITT**

director of planning and communications,  
Aquidneck Island Planning Commission

people don’t usually think about, like runoff, impact on wildlife habitats and agriculture, all things we need to consider now and into the future.”

Witt said he’s catalogued properties in Newport and Middletown so far, with work in Portsmouth under way. He said it was unclear at this point how many parcels would be classified as “open space” on the island, but said there likely would be more than people

expect.

“I don’t think most people realize how many open spaces there truly are, even in some of the more developed parts of the island,” Witt said. “Going through the properties so far, it’s pretty interesting how many aren’t protected, either.”

The study is expected to be completed by the end of December.

Part of the project entails getting the information into the hands of the public, likely through a new searchable online database, which would be first of its kind for the area, Witt said.

Based in offices on Broadway in Newport, the nonprofit commission is comprised of representatives from Newport, Middletown and Portsmouth along with Naval Station Newport, the state of Rhode Island and other agencies.

Best known for its West Side Master Plan to guide release and development of former Navy properties on the west side of the island, the planning commission has led other high-pro-

MAP A4



David Hansen ♦ Daily News staff

Chris Witt discusses on Thursday a plan to map all the existing open space on Aquidneck Island, including public, private and preserved properties, through the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission.

# Map

Continued from A3

file projects, including a large-scale study of traffic for the island and a review of the Bailey Brook watershed and serves as a contact point for the process of disposing of 225 acres owned by the Navy.

Commission Executive Director Tina Dolen said the current mapping project grew out of a study performed about a decade ago on the island. Once the current open space mapping work is finalized, Dolen said comparisons between the two documents will be possible to see where there have changes, such as losses of open space, and where things have remained relatively constant.

Witt is using various local, state and federal records along with documents from Vision Appraisal's online database and other sources to compile the most complete, comprehensive document possible.

The information will be made available to town officials and residents in Newport, Middletown and Portsmouth, she said.

"We hope it's a useful tool for

the municipalities," Dolen said. "I know Chris has put a lot of work into it so far and it will be the most in-depth study of its kind for the island. I'm really excited about what we've found so far."

Alison Ring, principal planner for the town of Middletown and its Geographic Information System manager, said the effort by the planning commission would be useful on a number of fronts.

"In general, open space mapping will allow residents and decision makers to see where open space has been preserved and will assist in making decisions on where is best to target efforts and funds for additional open space preservation," Ring said.

"Making this data available online through the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission website can put the data in the hands of more people," she said. "Middletown has open space GIS data for our town, but having detailed data for the entire island can assist in planning for open space on a regional scale possible and assist in distributing the data to a larger audience."

---

*Sheley@NewportRI.com*