

West side plan draws applause

By Meaghan Wims/Daily News staff

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The Aquidneck Island Planning Commission on Monday released its West Side Master Plan, a detailed collection of recommendations on how to improve transportation, the environment, commerce and quality of life along the 10-mile swath of land on the island's west side, from the Sakonnet River Bridge to the Gateway Center in Newport.

But those ideas won't move beyond the paper they're printed on without the support of officials from Newport, Middletown and Portsmouth, as well as the Navy. The planning commission will meet separately with local leaders to ask for their endorsements.

"This marks an ending and a beginning," said Tina Dolen, the planning commission's executive director. "It is a beginning of the process to improve the future for all who live on Aquidneck Island."

Dolen likened the 350-page plan, about a decade in the making, to a master key. It's now up to the island's communities to "turn the key and open the door," she said.

Some local leaders signaled that their communities would be receptive to the plan.

"I'm thrilled with this," said Portsmouth Town Council President Mary Ann Edwards. "We have a lot of work to do. I tell you, it's got a lot of good things."

"I have full confidence we will wholeheartedly support it," said Newport City Council Vice Chairwoman Jeanne-Marie Napolitano. "We have the movers and shakers all here. This is a real unique effort. I hope it continues. It's good for the entire island."

In addition to dozens of local and naval officials, the commission and its West Side Task Force were joined Monday morning by Gov. Donald L. Carcieri, U.S. Sens. Jack Reed, D-R.I., and Lincoln Chafee, R-R.I., and U.S. Rep. Patrick Kennedy, D-R.I., at the Officers Club at Naval Station Newport. A public presentation followed Monday night at Middletown Town Hall.

A driving force behind the master plan is anticipating new uses for excess naval land, should the federal government make available some of the land and former tank farms along Narragansett Bay.

The master plan includes calls for enhancing Naval Station Newport by situating compatible businesses and services nearby and for reusing the tank farms for, among other options, wind turbines, light commercial and industrial business, outdoor theater, marine uses, affordable housing, a Portsmouth waste management plant and open space.

Perhaps the most dramatic concept is a proposal to transform Burma Road into a "shoreline drive," to divert traffic from the congested West Main Road.

Burma Road would become a two-lane road from a realigned intersection with Stringham Road in Portsmouth, by connecting the Gate 17 Access Road to Coddington Highway in Middletown and extending Simonpietri Drive through the naval station.

The master plan proposes marketing the road as a scenic drive, "second only" to Ocean Drive in Newport. It also would provide better access to the Navy base for employees and deliveries, the plan says.

The plan also calls for: establishing a "Blue Trail" on Narragansett Bay with landing areas for small boats and kayaks from Long Wharf in Newport to Willow Lane in Portsmouth; preserving and creating open space and recreational areas; developing a bicycle route from downtown Newport to the Sakonnet River Bridge; and creating a scenic vista and fishing area at the Midway Pier, near Greene Lane in Middletown, among other proposals.

"It is inspirational, yet it is practical," Dolen said about the master plan.

"We're trying to show the state how regional planning can be done at its best," said Robert Quigley, chairman of the task force. "We have shown how three communities can work together."

"This is a great product you've got," Carcieri said. "It's nice to see you looking forward and having a vision for where you want to go."

"The kind of planning that went into this, it's exemplary," Carcieri added. "The key for me in planning is to take what is good and build on it, but be careful. People come to attractive places. Don't lose the key ingredients: Your attractiveness."

Next, the planning commission will begin to sort priorities from elements of the master plan and develop strategies for funding, said land use planner Teresa A. Crean.

"The Aquidneck Island Planning Commission is really committed to maintaining the momentum," Crean said.

The commission recently received a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency "smart growth" technical assistance grant, and next week members of the EPA will review the plan and the municipalities' zoning ordinances. In February, the team will present recommendations to the communities on how they can implement elements of the master plan.