

Master plan should guide island's future

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After years of studies and meetings, including a number of workshops to solicit input from the public, the West Side Master Plan finally was released this week.

This is good news for the island communities, including Newport, Middletown, Portsmouth and the Navy - which may release excess property along the west side of the island in the future, driving the need for such a plan. The process and the resulting plan, if adopted by each municipality, provide not only unified goals, but recommendations for achieving them.

Robert Quigley, who served as chairman of the West Side Master Plan Task Force, established by the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission in 1996, wrote this about the island in a Guest View published in The Daily News in October 2004:

"With an underutilized railroad corridor, substantial industrial property, potential leasing of Navy property and 10 miles of coastline, the west side of Aquidneck Island is a unique place to take the island to new levels of economic competitiveness, create alternative modes of transportation, expand the island-wide greenway trail and enhance the social well-being of the people of Rhode Island."

That's a heck of a tall order. But, guided by the planning commission and its task force, local, state and federal officials and residents have been working together - and with consultants hired to compile the 350-page plan and nearly 40-page executive summary - to propose ways to do just that.

Yet, despite all the work that's already been done, the really challenging part is next: For the plan to be effective, the island's three municipalities need to approve it and commit to implementing it.

The casual observer might think that shouldn't be too difficult, given that local representatives have been actively involved in the process along the way. But when politics get involved, anything can happen.

Of course, political will is just what is needed to make the key parts of the plan happen - such as promoting high-quality development, improving parking and transportation options, encouraging growth of high-tech industries, protecting open space and water access and requiring affordable housing - never mind the more controversial aspects, such as creating a "Shoreline Drive" using Burma Road in Middletown and Portsmouth.

The aim of the master plan is twofold - to provide a plan for the eventual release or reuse of Navy property along the west side, as required by the federal government, and to enhance the Navy's presence and viability on Aquidneck Island, which has been critical to its success in the latest federal base realignment and closure process.

It is vital to continue bolstering the base, a linchpin of the local economy, and to have a blueprint ready if and when the federal government decides to make Navy property available.

Recognizing the challenge ahead, the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission set aside part of the federal funding it received for the development of the master plan for its implementation.

"We're being proactive, not reactive," Quigley said recently. "We're not just going to put this plan on the shelf."

That is the key. We already have seen how valuable the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission, its resources and the West Side master planning process have been to our local communities, during the BRAC process as well as the privatization of Navy housing.

Now it is up to local officials to take up the challenge and figure out how to make the master plan an integral tool in planning for the island's future, not just another report that sits on a shelf.

We hope they are up to that challenge.

SEE FOR YOURSELF

The West Side Master Plan is available at the Newport City Hall, Middletown and Portsmouth town halls and at local libraries.

The first four of the plan's six chapters are available on the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission's Web site, at www.aquidneckplanning.org, by clicking on the 'Current Projects' link.

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