

Navy releases Master Plan

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By Tom Shevlin/East Bay RI

NEWPORT. - After more than 16 months of purposeful planning and community input, the Navy has formally released its long-awaited and much-anticipated Master Plan.

Calling for the disposition of eight major parcels totaling 384 acres along the west side of Aquidneck Island, the plan paints a sweeping vision for both the Navy and the island's three municipalities.

This is a big deal, said Naval Station Newport Commanding Officer Capt. Michel Poirier.

From improving the base's traffic flow, to incorporating environmentally friendly design elements and demolishing a swath of antiquated buildings, the plan lays out what the 1,397 acre base might look like in 2035.

The overall goal is to establish Newport as a hub of Naval research and educational excellence.

A position of leverage

The work, which is at this point planned, but not guaranteed, will largely be determined by federal funding. Should the next president decide to cut the defense budget appropriation, the base may not be able to realize the plan's full scope. However, according to Capt. Poirier, by focussing the base's mission around education, it will be difficult to justify any significant divestment in personnel or funding for the base.

We're coming in from a point of leverage, he said, adding that as of this year, two-thirds of the Navy's officers will have received some training in Newport.

Islanders who remember the Navy's decision to pull out of Newport in the 1970's needn't look further than base population figures to illustrate the Defense Department's commitment to the base. In 2006, full-time equivalent base personnel totaled 6,470. By 2011, that number is expected to grow to 7,620. Additionally, student throughput is also projected to increase by 74 percent, from 9,222 to 16,069 according to Public Affairs Officer Lisa Rama. "That's encouraging," she said.

Building for the future

The good news story here is that there is a plan for a growing base, said Capt. Poirier. Prior to the conclusion of the Pentagon's most recent base realignment and closure process, Newport had faced an uncertain fate. Today, it's building for the future.

Currently, eight projects are either underway or approved for funding. They include the construction of a new fitness center, combat training pool, hazardous waste storage building, training building for the Naval Supply Corps School and a new home for the Maritime Subsurface Sensor Operations facility. Renovations are also underway to Building 1183, while an addition to the base dental clinic, bridge replacement, and waterfront improvements to Marginal Wharf round out the current green-lighted projects.

Members of the Naval base met with community members on Thursday, July 31.

The Aquidneck Island Planning Commission and its federal, state and local partners have worked for years toward this event, said Tina Dolen, executive director for the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission.

The plan dovetails with the AIPC's West Side Master Plan, which was developed and endorsed by each of the island's three communities plus the Navy.

One notable exception to the plan, however is the elimination of the Navy's Simonpietri Drive as a potential public travel corridor.

This interior Navy roadway, had it been available, would have provided a clear path to the development of a scenic Shoreline Drive that would have connected northern Newport to Portsmouth. Due to security concerns, Capt. Poirier said the Navy thought it best to retain the rights to the roadway.

In an e-mail, Ms. Dolen did not rule out the possibility of pursuing the Shoreline Drive concept to fruition. It is likely that the AIPC and its partners will initiate research into possible alternatives connecting Burma Road to Coddington Highway," she said.

Naval Station Newport and in particular Captain Michel Poirier have been extremely supportive of AIPC and its West Side planning process during the past year, and their participation in our four day community problem-solving workshop at Harvard University's Kennedy School underscores their willingness to serve as a partner with the communities."

Municipal opportunities

Current landholdings by the Navy include Coddington Cove, Coddington Point, Coaster's Harbor Island, and hospital site. Other outlying property include tank farms 1 through 5, Mellville Backyard, Defense Highway, Carr Point and portions of Fort Adams and Gould Island.

While other branches of the military could potentially claim rights to the land before it becomes available for public sale, each of the island's three communities stand to benefit from the process.

For Newport, the most significant potential land acquisition would be the former Navy Hospital. Located just north of the Claiborne Pell Bridge, the site is comprised of 10 acres of waterfront property, including three acres underwater.

According to Navy officials, environmental tests have been conducted on the property that indicate minimal environmental remediation would be needed for the property and institutional knowledge suggests that soil contamination would likely not be a problem.

Everything from luxury condominiums to a mixed use development has been discussed by city and business leaders for the site.

Under the 2007 North End Master Plan, for example, the property is identified as a potential residential and marina complex featuring 100 housing units, 100 hotel rooms, 250 surface parking spaces, a waterfront park, water shuttle and concrete pier, and a semi-private marina.

Meanwhile, Middletown may be able to take advantage of the release of two properties: Burma Road north of NUWC and the site of the former Navy Lodge on West Main Road.

By far, Portsmouth stands to gain the most property under the plan with tank farms 1, 2, 3 and 4, as well as the Mellville Backyard property all within town lines.

According to a timeline and disposal process outline provided by the BRAC Program Management Office Northeast, both the former Navy Lodge and hospital sites appear ready for quick disposal. The tank farm sites will likely require environmental remediation.

The Navy awarded the contract for the Master Plan in April 2007 to EDAW, Inc, an international architectural and engineering firm.

EDAW studied the current mission and future growth at Naval Station resulting from BRAC and other operational requirements. The purpose of the Master Plan is to provide a guide for site development, efficient facilities utilization, sustainable development and land use over the next 25 years.

The process of preparing a master plan included site orientation discussions; data collection interviews; senior leadership review; the drafting and government comment period and finally the plan submission, review and approval.

The last master plan at NAVSTA Newport was completed in 1986.