

Local Officials Take Issues to Washington

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Aquidneck Island officials ventured to the nation's capitol last week to get some face time with the local congressional delegation.

Leaders from Newport, Middletown and Portsmouth traveled Thursday to Washington, D.C., where they met with Rep. Patrick J. Kennedy, D-R.I., along with members of the staffs of Sen. Jack Reed, D-R.I. and Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse, D-R.I. (Reed and Whitehouse left to participate in votes after greeting the local delegation.) The trip was coordinated and paid for by the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission.

The discussion ranged from the sewage and stormwater concerns facing each of Aquidneck Island's communities to how they are working together on the ongoing master planning process for Navy land along the west side of the island.

"It was an excellent chance for the city and the towns to articulate what's going on here and what we're up against," Middletown Town Administrator Shawn J. Brown said. "By having everyone at the table, it presents a much more complete picture and sends a stronger message to the delegation."

Area leaders and representatives from the planning commission or the Newport County Chamber of Commerce go to Washington at least once a year to talk about issues of mutual concern. However, to go as a group and speak about plans and problems facing each of the municipalities is a relatively new thing.

Mayor Jeanne-Marie Napolitano and City Manager Edward F. Lavallee represented Newport, Brown and Town Council President Christopher T. Semonelli represented Middletown, and Town Council President Peter J. McIntyre was there for Portsmouth. (Portsmouth Town Administrator Robert G. Driscoll was unavailable because of prior commitments.)

Tina Dolen, executive director of the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission, represented the

nonprofit planning group, which maintains its headquarters on East Main Road in Portsmouth.

Local leaders were given a chance to speak on a variety of issues during three discussions that lasted between 45 minutes and an hour each.

Napolitano said the meeting was an opportunity to speak about major infrastructure projects that will require federal assistance. Newport must build a new Lawton Valley water treatment plant by Dec. 31, 2014, according to a consent agreement between the city and the state Department of Environmental Management. The city also is planning to upgrade its Station 1 water treatment plant on Bliss Mine Road.

Newport expects in fiscal 2011 to borrow an estimated \$11.45 million from the state revolving fund for the Station 1 work. In fiscal 2012, Newport will need a \$41.1 million loan for the design and construction of the Lawton Valley plant.

The state also is requiring Newport to eliminate combined sewer overflows at the CSO facility on Wellington Avenue. AECOM Technology Corp., a consultant to the city, has recommended building a 4-million-gallon tank under Spencer Park to capture stormwater and sewage overflows. The firm estimated the construction cost of the project at \$46.4 million.

“We are going to have to work with our federal and state legislators on these projects,” Napolitano said. “We had a productive meeting ... we wanted them to know what our needs are.”

McIntyre said he brought up several topics of importance to Portsmouth, including the wastewater issue, the town center project along East Main Road, and the future of property that is expected to be freed up by the Navy in coming months.

“It was interesting to meet all three (federal legislators) and talk to them and their staffs,” McIntyre said. “I learned a lot by just sitting and listening to what everyone was up against, and I think it’s fair to say we have a lot of the same issues on our plates.”

Besides wastewater and stormwater, Middletown concerns that were discussed included several projects put forward for federal funding, highlighted by a more than \$1 million improvement to the Aquidneck Corporate Park and other ideas to help local businesses, Semonelli said.

“It was very productive,” he said of the meeting. “Talking about our common problems and issues facing the island was helpful, along with the prospects of working together and combining forces. Based on what I heard and saw, I got the sense there’s a lot of interest from the federal delegation

about what's going on on the island.”

Dolen was in Washington for the week to attend a conference of the National Association of Regional Councils and to meet with representatives of the Department of Defense's Office of Economic Adjustment.

She is writing a request for a grant of about \$300,000 from the OEA as part of the Base Realignment and Closure process, under which the Navy plans to release 384 acres of land on Aquidneck Island's west side. The three communities on the island will form an Aquidneck Island Re-Use Planning Authority to consider proposals for the land.

Dolen said the grant money would pay for a marketing analysis and a detailed development plan for the Navy's surplus property. The plan would be based on the West Side Master Plan in 2006. Whitehouse, Reed and Kennedy were brought up to date on these plans, Dolen said.

She said the planning commission had obtained federal grant money through the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to fund the local leaders' trip to Washington.