

Two Tribes want to check out Navy land

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The Narragansett Indian tribe and the Wampanoag tribe of Gay Head may be interested in properties on the west side of Aquidneck Island expected to be freed up by the Navy.

The deadline to submit formal requests to re-use some or all of the 400 acres along Narragansett Bay that the Navy plans to declare “excess” was pushed back by two months to June 5, according to correspondence between the federal Department of Interior and the Navy. The change took place after both tribes argued that they didn’t have adequate notice of the Base Realignment and Closure process or time to evaluate the properties.

In the past, both tribes have expressed interest in pursuing casino gambling ventures along with other development. While local leaders said speculation about what the tribes might do with the land, should they obtain any of it, would be premature at this point — neither tribe has filed a request yet to officially become part of the process — the news about the delay piqued interest across the area.

“I took a couple calls about it today, with people asking if we should be concerned,” Keith W. Stokes, executive director of the Newport County Chamber of Commerce, said Wednesday. “I said, ‘No, not at all.’ The same interest was expressed at Quonset Point in the 1990s and more recently in the Melville area (in Portsmouth), and there’s such a broad range of historical, social, cultural and economic uses the tribes could be interested in, to focus on something like a casino now is shortsighted.”

A little more than a year ago, the Navy unveiled a plan to release — or excess — several noteworthy properties on the west side of the island, including the former Naval Hospital on Third Street in Newport, the former Navy Lodge site at the corner of Coddington Highway and West Main Road in Middletown, and 67 acres land along Burma Road straddling the Middletown-Portsmouth line.

Most of the surplus property, about 269 acres, is located in Portsmouth. Navy officials have said the cleanup of former tank farms — once used for fuel-storage depots, but untouched for years — is estimated at about \$25 million.

As part of the process overseeing the discharge of those sites, other federal agencies get the first opportunity to take them over, followed by other federally recognized groups, including Native American tribes, and local municipalities.

Officials in each of the island communities, which have identified proposed uses for the properties if they should become available, participated last month in a bus tour of the sites, sponsored by the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission. The commission led the development of a West Side Master Plan to guide the process.

The commission, which acts as the primary contact for local communities regarding the BRAC process, received word from the Navy about the two-month delay Wednesday morning and notified Newport, Middletown and Portsmouth officials, Executive Director Tina Dolen said.

“Under the established guidelines, the tribes have priority over the local communities when it comes to the disposal of this land,” Dolen said. “However, with that being said, they still have to present a full suite of qualifications to the Navy to show they have the wherewithal to move forward with any development, should it get that far.”

Dolen said based on what she was hearing from local leaders, there was an understanding that the move by the tribes was just another part of the process.

“It doesn’t mean too much right now, other than a delay in the process,” Dolen said. “Basically, it’s just going to slow things down a bit, and we’ll see what they file, if anything.”

John Riendeau, defense industry manager for the state Economic Development Corp., said regardless of what direction the Navy decides to go with the properties, the West Side Master Plan will be the guiding force for how those sites are used.

Released in November 2005, the master plan serves as a roadmap for the west side of the island from downtown Newport to the Mount Hope Bridge in Portsmouth.

As for the tribes’ potential interest, Riendeau said there have been no formal talks to date with Narragansett or Wampanoag representatives.

“It’s up to them to show just cause and why they deserve some of the property,” Riendeau said. “I have no idea how their applications are going to read or what they’re going to say.”

No particular interest in any piece of property or indication of what might happen should either tribe take over any of the sites was expressed as part of the request made by the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs — an agency in the Department of Interior — on behalf of the tribes, according to Navy Base Closure Manager Gregory Preston.

Among 10 requirements for either tribe to take over any of the properties, the BIA must certify it will receive the land in “its current condition” on the tribe’s behalf and pay the Department of the Navy fair market value for the property, Preston wrote in an e-mail to The Daily News.

Calls to the BIA and leadership of both tribes — Narragansett Chief Sachem Matthew Thomas and Wampanoag Chairwoman Cheryl Andrews-Maltais — were not returned Wednesday. The Narragansett tribe is based in Charlestown and the Wampanoag tribe is based in Aquinnah, Mass.

Newport City Manager Edward F. Lavalley and Middletown Town Administrator Shawn J. Brown both said Wednesday that a casino wouldn’t make much sense in their communities, given the properties that would be available for such a project. Attempts to reach Portsmouth officials Wednesday were unsuccessful.

“As part of the process, they’re entitled to express an interest,” Lavalley said, referring to the tribes, “and we realize that we’re not No. 1 on the list. We’re down the line a little bit. I don’t think anyone expected this to go by without at least some passing interest, because there are some very attractive properties out there.

“The thing some people might be forgetting is the Newport property is only 10 acres and it’s not very large,” Lavalley said. “For municipal development, we could do a pretty expansive project, but there are all sorts of constraints there when you talk about anything more significant than that, not to mention the fact there are historic buildings that have to be protected and the location has some real constraints when it comes to the surrounding neighborhoods and the Navy base.”

As for the former Navy Lodge and Burma Road properties in Middletown, Brown shared Lavalley’s position.

“We haven’t had any conversations with them,” Brown said, referring to tribal leaders. “Our council has endorsed the West Side Master Plan and a casino project isn’t anything close to what was imagined there.

“This is a very exacting process and I don’t think a casino is something that the town of Middletown could support, not on three acres at the corner of West Main Road and Coddington or some property on Burma Road that isn’t suitable for building such a facility like that,” Brown said.