

Land reuse plan takes step forward

It was encouraging to see the redevelopment of the west side of Aquidneck Island take a long-awaited step forward last week.

The notice announcing the establishment of the Aquidneck Island Reuse Planning Authority was posted in the Federal Register, meaning the local group officially can begin its work.

The process of releasing some 260 acres of property owned by the Navy in Newport, Middletown and Portsmouth for new uses is something for which local communities, under the auspices of the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission, have been planning for years.

The West Side Master Plan was established and approved by all three communities in anticipation of the Navy's announcement in 2008 that it no longer had use for a number of west-side properties, including the former Naval Hospital in Newport, the former Navy Lodge property in Middletown and Tank Farms 1 and 2 in Portsmouth.

Despite that extensive planning, the process was delayed several times at the request of the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs on behalf of the Narragansett Indian tribe. With the notice in the Federal Register, those delays seem to be in the past.

Now the Aquidneck Island Reuse Planning Authority, made up of planning officials from the three island communities, can begin the 14- to 18-month process of negotiating the release and guiding the redevelopment of critical properties along the west side.

The West Side Master Plan already served as an example of how the three communities can work together to promote common interests. The next step presents another opportunity for true collaboration that can benefit individual communities as well as the island as a whole.

"It presents the opportunity for each of the towns to mirror the roadmap laid out by the

WHAT'S NEXT

A public workshop and tour of the west-side sites being released by the Navy has been scheduled for July 28 at 3 p.m., starting at Middletown Town Hall, 350 East Main Road.

West Side Master Plan," said Arthur S. Weber, chairman of the Middletown Planning Board and Aquidneck Island Planning Commission, who also will serve as chairman of the Aquidneck Island Reuse Planning Authority. "For Middletown, there's been significant interest in passive recreation, for Newport, there's a real opportunity for economic growth with the hospital property, and then Portsmouth has any number of ways they can go with the tank farms."

Weber is joined on the authority by Newport Planning Board Chairwoman Naomi Neville and Newport Redevelopment Authority member Bill Corcoran, Middletown Planning Board member Jan Eckhart, and Portsmouth Redevelopment Authority Chairman Fred Faerber and Redevelopment Authority Vice Chairman Keith Humphreys.

"This is true consolidated planning," Weber said. "That's the best thing, having people working together and striving for the same thing about what's best for the island."

This is an exciting opportunity, indeed. Finally, we can look forward to seeing the fruits of these labors.