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From the May 31, 2010 edition
DEVELOPMENT

Waterfront development by consensus

By Chris Barrett
PBN Staff Writer

On one side of the Providence River a fiery debate over the future of the waterfront along Allens Avenue has dragged on for years. On the other side, discussions over the waterfront's future appear far more muted.

The official East Providence waterfront district encompasses more than 300 acres of land, most of it former industrial land bordering the Providence and Seekonk rivers. The city first adopted a long-range vision for the land in 2003, which calls primarily for a mix of commercial and real estate development along a new road to be built by the state, the very sort of developments many businesses on the other side of the river bitterly oppose.

The less raucous debate is the result, in part at least, of the East Providence waterfront containing far less industry than the Providence side. And the East Providence industry that does exist is geographically spread out, unlike Allens Avenue, where heavy industry is squeezed into a roughly 1 mile stretch. Business owners also say the city of East Providence has been more attuned to their needs than planners in the capital.

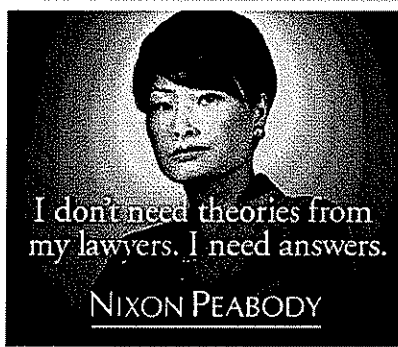
"It's a totally different approach that East Providence has taken," said Joel Cohen, who owns land on both sides of the river. "They've been supportive. They've been helpful. They've been non-threatening."

Cohen and his brother, David, own Promet Marine Services Corp. along Allens Avenue in Providence and, on the other side of the river, an industrial warehouse and a commercial building.

East Providence City Planner Jeanne Boyle said officials took pains to involve existing property owners while drafting the 122-page plan that breaks the waterfront into sub-districts.



IMAGE COURTESY VILLAGE ON THE WATERFRONT
PLANNING AHEAD: Developer Michael Hennessey says a waterfront plan spurred the Village on the Waterfront project.



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"It was a different situation," she said comparing her city to Providence. "We had the buy-in of all the property owners, and we didn't have the displacement."

Boyle said most of the industry along the waterfront is long gone, except for two small industrial parks north of the Henderson Bridge. The plan calls for keeping one of those areas, along Dexter Road, for light-industrial facilities. The Phillipsdale area north of that would become a residential and commercial area, although plans for a project at the former Ocean State Steel complex are in legal limbo.

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Waterfront development by consensus

(Page 2 of 3)

Along the waterfront land south of the new Interstate 195 bridge, city planners see the planned Waterfront Drive opening up development opportunities for residences and commercial spaces. Construction is anticipated to start this year on a \$41 million, 148-bed nursing home near Bold Point Park, which sits across the river from India Point Park.

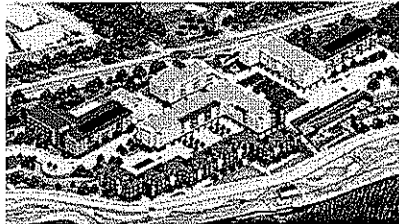


IMAGE COURTESY VILLAGE ON THE WATERFRONT

PLANNING AHEAD: Developer Michael Hennessey says a waterfront plan spurred the Village on the Waterfront project.

South of Boid Point, planners envision a commercial development rising from the roughly 40 acres that jut out into the river. The Providence and Worcester Railroad created the land using fill as part of a never-realized plan to develop a port.



Scott Conti, the railroad's president, said the company is seeking the best offer for the land, whether that's in the form of a private developer looking to construct a retail complex or a partner who wishes to pay for the development of a port. But constructing a port there would encounter challenges.

For one, Conti said, the railroad has no prospective partners. And since the company filled in the area in the late 1970s, it has gained access to three ports, including across the river at the Port of Providence and to the south at the Port of Davisville at Quonset Point. As part of its waterfront plan, the city also rezoned the railroad's lot from industrial to mixed use.

Then in the early 2000s, the P&W ripped up the tracks leading to the area. Although it maintains a right-of-way, reconstructing the roughly 1.5-mile line could top \$1.5 million, Conti said. Still, he said the company has not ruled out someday developing industry on the land, two contiguous lots forming 45 acres.

"We're keeping our options open," he said.

Whatever is built in the area will mean a new neighbor for Capital Terminal Co., which maintains a pier and pipeline to the north. Barges pull up to the pier and unload petroleum products that are pumped two miles to the north through an underground pipeline to the company's facility along Dexter Road. Todd Turcotte, president of the company, said the city's vision for the land as a commercial area does not overly worry him because city planners have worked with him to ensure Capital will remain.

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(Page 3 of 3)

Capital Terminal's new neighbors will need to understand that the unloading process creates noise, though it's minimal compared with the activities across the river, Turcotte said. A developer "is going to have to realize it's an operating industrial facility and the city's been great about understanding that," Turcotte said.

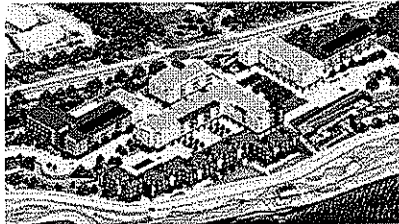


IMAGE COURTESY VILLAGE ON THE WATERFRONT

PLANNING AHEAD: Developer Michael Hennessey says a waterfront plan spurred the Village on the Waterfront project.

South of the railroad property sits a former Chevron Corp. tank farm that the oil giant is cleaning up in preparation for a proposed development of 600 condominiums and townhouses along with retail space. Known as the Village on the Waterfront, it would be one of the largest developments in the state.

Developer Michael Hennessey said that the 2003 waterfront plan helped spur the development because the plan rezoned the waterfront, including shifting the Chevron portion from industrial to mixed use. Normally, zoning changes can take years and prove costly for developers, Hennessey said.

"The city did a bang-up job," Hennessey said. "We're really following part of their vision."

The plan also provides a hedge against a perhaps unwelcome industrial neighbor moving into the railroad property to the north. Such a plan would require a zone change approved by the city.

"For them to approve anything to be detrimental to our site, I would hedge our bets against that," Hennessey said.

As for the views of the industrial waterfront across the river that about 95 percent of the property's units will overlook, Hennessey said his company, Village on the Waterfront LLC, believes people will enjoy looking at the activity.

They also may enjoy the Metacomet Country Club to the east. The club's treasurer, Joe Rainone, said the club hopes the village brings with it residents interested in playing a round of golf, dining at the club or even joining. Rainone said he remembers the industrial waterfront from decades ago and he much prefers today's slow march toward a new waterfront.

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"We're very supportive and as a private golf club it can only benefit our club," he said. •

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