

## Naval station redevelopment faces lengthy state review

The Boston Globe

By Robert Preer, Globe Correspondent | December 25, 2005

The \$1 billion plan to redevelop the former South Weymouth Naval Air Station, after receiving key local approvals over the summer, now faces scrutiny from state regulators.

The state Executive Office of Environmental Affairs and its secretary, Stephen Pritchard, last week invited public comments on the LNR Property Corp.'s plan for 2,855 homes and up to 2 million square feet of commercial space on the former air station.

Statements can be submitted in writing until Jan. 20, and a public hearing probably will be held by the middle of next month. Many other hearings and comment periods will be held in the course of the lengthy state review process.

The three towns -- Weymouth, Abington and Rockland -- that share the 1,400-acre property approved zoning changes needed by the developer at well-attended meetings earlier this year. In Rockland and Abington, town meetings open to all registered voters decided the issue. In Weymouth, the 11-member Town Council gave the key approval.

While the town proceedings were at times raucous affairs, marked by heated debates, they were completed over the course of this year. The state's formal process -- officially called a Massachusetts Environmental Policy Act review -- is likely to take 1 1/2 years or longer, according to officials of LNR, a Miami-based developer, and the South Shore Tri-Town Development Corporation, the regional agency that oversees it.

The state proceedings, though, are critical in determining important details of the development, including what and when improvements will be made to the road network, and how water and sewer services will be delivered.

"Given the fact that when concerns were raised in the towns, the developers said they could be resolved in the MEPA process, then, yes, this is an important process," said state Senator Robert L. Hedlund, a Weymouth Republican.

Dominic Galluzzo, an East Weymouth resident who led opposition to the project in Weymouth, said, "I can only hope the residents of the three towns make comments in writing and send them to Mr. Pritchard."

In the first phase of the state review, Pritchard is inviting comments from the public on what topics the environmental review should consider. Once the comment period closes, Pritchard will issue a decision within seven days outlining a list of topics, likely to include such matters as traffic, air pollution, wetlands, noise, and endangered species habitats.

LNR's consultants then will prepare a draft environmental report, which will deal with each of those topics. As the consultants present findings to the naval station's 15-member citizen advisory committee, there will be a series of hearings and comment periods.

Once the environmental official approves the draft report, the consultants will prepare a final report, which will face the same hearings and comment process.

Although approval of a final environmental impact report is a key step in the state review process, the developer still has to obtain permits from a series of state agencies, among them the Department of Environmental Protection, the Massachusetts Highway Department, and the Division of Fisheries and Wildlife. These agencies rely heavily on the findings of the environmental affairs secretary in deciding whether to issue their permits.

The main concern voiced by residents, so far, has been traffic. Critics of the station projects contend that traffic to and from the development will overwhelm Route 18, an already congested commuter road.

John DeVillars, a former state environmental secretary and now an LNR adviser, said that with the planned improvements to intersections on Route 18 and the eventual widening of the road, traffic flow will be better than it is now when the station is redeveloped.

DeVillars said wetlands, water quality, and wildlife habitats also will be improved by the project, which has been contaminated by decades of use by the military.

"By every measure, the environmental conditions at the base will be improved by this development," DeVillars said.

In 2002, then-state Environmental Affairs Secretary Robert Durand approved a first phase of the air station project, to consist of 300 units of senior housing and 300,000 square feet of commercial space. LNR has asked Pritchard, the current secretary, to approve a change in the construction mix to allow 500 units of market-rate housing and 150,000 square feet of commercial space. Pritchard is expected to rule on that request in late January or early February.

If Pritchard approves the request, LNR hopes to start construction of the commercial space sometime next year. The Telephone Workers Credit Union has agreed to occupy a 60,000-square-foot building on the property. Housing construction would start in 2007, with the first units ready for occupancy in the fall of 2008, according to Terry Fancher, executive director of the Tri-Town Development Corporation.

To comment on the air station redevelopment plan, send remarks to Secretary Stephen Pritchard, Executive Office of Environmental Affairs, Attention: MEPA Office; Aisling Eglington, EOE #11085R, 100 Cambridge St., Suite 900, Boston, MA 02114. Comments can also be faxed to 617-626-1181 or e-mailed to [aisling.eglington@state.ma.us](mailto:aisling.eglington@state.ma.us). Robert Preer can be reached at [preer@globe.com](mailto:preer@globe.com). ■