

Design plan takes wing

Communities back redevelopment concept for naval air station in S. Weymouth

The Boston Globe

By Stephanie Ebbert, Globe Staff | September 18, 2005

SOUTH WEYMOUTH -- With its weed-strewn expanses stretching from abandoned runways to forlorn airport hangars, the shuttered South Weymouth Naval Air Station is not much to look at today. But planners eye this wasteland and see the future of Massachusetts development -- a vibrant, updated version of an old classic, the New England town center.

Within a dozen years, this spot will be transformed into a neighborhood for roughly 7,000 residents who can work at a nearby office campus, eat lunch at cafes, do their shopping along Main Street, exercise at playing fields, and never need to drive. The "Village Center" development will be easy to navigate -- everything will be about a 5-minute walk from the commuter rail station -- and officials hope it will provide a model for the redevelopment of other military bases as New England faces another round of closures.

Just as striking as the planned transformation is the reception with which people have greeted the massive, \$1 billion redevelopment. In a region famous for its skepticism toward new development, the towns of Abington, Rockland, and Weymouth all embraced the plan this summer.

It did not hurt that the California-based developer had plenty of goodies to spread around. LNR Property Corp. promised to boost the three towns' tax bases, create up to 3,000 permanent jobs, and include in its 2,855-home build-out moderate-cost townhouses, apartments, and senior housing complete with a shuttle bus service.

LNR saved an unusually large portion of the land for open space and recreation -- more than 70 percent. Parks and playgrounds, biking and hiking trails, and a golf course are planned, and former Red Sox general manager Dan Duquette is partnering with a Boston firm to build a private indoor sports complex with an ice hockey rink, athletic fields, a restaurant, video arcade, and day-care center.

"I like it because it's a little bit of everything," said June Sheehan, 56, a South Weymouth neighbor of the base who may try to buy a Village Center condominium. "It's not perfect, but if they stick to what they're supposed to do, I think it will work. There's enough land to do it."

Indeed, there is enough land to do almost anything. The nearly 1,400-acre lot expected to be sold at low cost by the Navy is a rare find in Greater Boston. But the developer is able to leave plenty of it untouched -- and still turn a profit -- because of the design. The moneymaking homes and offices are squeezed onto compact lots in tight neighborhoods. Don't expect broad lawns in the Village Center development. Most homes will be built on small parcels, clustered together intentionally to encourage close-knit neighborhoods.

"The contrast is with the sort of low-density, suburban development in which you homogenize the landscape but produce neither a neighborhood nor usable open space," said Stephen Burrington, a top state development official who was recently named commissioner of the Department of Conservation and Recreation.

The development follows a design known as smart-growth, which aims for compact communities near public transportation, where children can walk out the door and play with their neighbors, and where parents do not have to hop in the minivan for every trip for milk. The Romney administration has been pushing the smart growth design and impressed upon town officials that the base redevelopment should fit the agenda.

"It became very clear to us here that we were not going to get the kind of assistance or permits we needed" if the redevelopment did not incorporate housing near public transportation, said Weymouth Mayor David Madden.

The South Weymouth base was closed in 1997, and plans to redevelop the land faltered after two false starts. In 1998, town residents embraced a plan by Virginia-based Mills Corp. to build a 2-million-square-foot mall and entertainment complex. But it became apparent that the costs of infrastructure would drain the economic benefits and the plan fell through in 2000.

"During the mall plan, everybody was looking at the money," said Bill Ryan, a former Weymouth selectman who now directs government and media affairs for LNR in the region. "In this plan, because of what happened in the mall exercise, people were looking at the impacts . . . and whether they could be mitigated."

LNR's strategy, he said, was to acknowledge right away that the project would cause some nuisances and to offer to mitigate

them. Fretting about security? The development's tax revenue will cover the cost of new police coverage. Worried that newcomers will bring droves of children in need of new, expensive schools? Have no fear: LNR will build a school in Village Center. Residents who were afraid the developer would bail out after building homes won assurances that commercial construction would come before planned additional phases of home building. The plans include a biotechnology campus, and the developer is trying to attract firms in both biotech research and manufacturing to bring in a variety of blue-collar and white-collar jobs.

Savvy local politicians were able to eke out even more perks in return for the strain on town services. In negotiations with town leaders, LNR agreed to pay Rockland \$6.3 million, Abington, \$1.975 million, and Weymouth, which has the largest acreage on the base, \$13 million for a host of improvements, including library renovations, a new middle school boiler, and band uniforms.

"There's a sense that the community should share in the financial benefits," Madden said. "This is a national company."

Opponents still argue that the perks do not go far enough. Topping neighbors' list of concerns is traffic congestion along Route 18, which borders the base. Federal funding will help pay for road improvements and a parkway is planned to cross the development and lead to Route 3.

Some residents suspect traffic will increase more dramatically than LNR admits, and they have a hard time believing so many people will walk or use public transportation.

"The trains are full now," said Dominic Galluzzo, a Weymouth resident who helped organize an unsuccessful petition drive against the project after his town officials approved it. "So what are you going to do to accommodate 7,000 new residents you claim are going to ride the trains?"

Other neighbors find plenty to like in the project, which is still about 2 1/2 years away from construction; the board overseeing the redevelopment voted this month to ask the Navy to turn over the land. Gerti Gillen, president of South Weymouth Neighborhood Association, said she plans to visit the parks and maybe even look for a new job there. She retired early after getting fed up with the strangled commute to Cambridge.

"Something has to go in, and I think there is still lots of room to have everything," Gillen said. "I think it's a very well-thought-out plan that they represent, and the nice thing is also that they are trying to listen to see what the concerns are."

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