

## A vision to make Boston a fresh-seafood capital Developers plan huge processing facility, hundreds of jobs on waterfront

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By Thomas C. Palmer Jr., Globe Staff | November 3, 2005

A group of local business people is planning a large seafood market and processing complex on the South Boston Waterfront that would put idle harbor edges to maritime uses and potentially create hundreds of jobs.

A team including Leo F. Rusk Jr., who operated Ellery Cold Storage Ltd. in the late 1980s, advised by the consulting firm of former Environmental Protection Agency regional administrator John P. DeVillars, is looking to secure as many as 30 acres of what is primarily city-controlled land to expand marine-related industry.

The plan envisions a 500,000-square-foot facility that would encompass processing, packaging, cold storage, selling, and shipping -- traditional Boston maritime businesses that have been squeezed in recent decades by development and residential expansion.

The facility, costing as much as \$100 million, could help the Boston area's declining fishing fleet expand again, said a spokeswoman for the team, Stephanie Pollack, a partner of DeVillars in the consulting firm BlueWave Strategies.

But neither she nor a lawyer for the group would disclose who else is involved as a partner or investor.

"The team to develop the project is in flux," Pollack said.

The group has its eye on the underused acreage around and including an old shipyard and dry dock near the Bank of America Pavilion, which is located on Northern Avenue two blocks east of the Fish Pier and is used for summertime concerts. One possible part of the plan is to reposition the entertainment tent on top of a huge, modern building with marine uses.

Reached at his home in West Roxbury, Rusk acknowledged he was involved "to a degree" but declined to elaborate. "I just don't have any comment on it," he said.

Those involved were reluctant to talk, said Pollack, because the plan is not complete and has not been presented to City Hall.

But Pollack, a former senior vice president of the environmental group Conservation Law Foundation, said the team has the expertise and financial wherewithal to make Boston the fresh-seafood capital of the East Coast.

"This is basically the last best chance to keep the fishing industry in Boston," she said, "to put it on a platform where it will survive and grow."

The South Boston Waterfront is a rare place where fishing boats, easy access to an international airport, and an interstate highway are in close proximity, Pollack said. "This is the golden opportunity," she said.

Several public officials who were involved in discussions about an earlier version of the plan provided details. Mayor Thomas M. Menino said he did not know Rusk but recalled being briefed.

"They were going to close the Fish Pier down and move all of them over" to this new facility, Menino said. The picturesque Fish Pier, home of small seafood businesses and the No Name Restaurant, is controlled by the Massachusetts Port Authority.

Pollack said a group of investors that is still being assembled is forming a company to formally propose the complex to the city, which would have to agree to make the land available.

She said they have discussed the plan with Paul Haley, the former Massachusetts House Ways and Means chairman now working with the investment banking firm Lehman Brothers, which is tentatively interested in helping to provide bond financing. Haley could not be reached for comment.

Taxable and tax-exempt bonds may be used to cover up to 80 or 90 percent of the costs, Pollack said. Tax exemptions could be allowed because the plan involves capital investments in public property on land controlled by the city's Economic Development Industrial Corp. In addition, "We do have enough private equity to make the project work," she said.

Creation of a large marine products operation on the waterfront could be advantageous for the city, creating hundreds of jobs. But it is also likely to be controversial, because it would involve increased traffic and would require the cooperation of existing landowners in the area, like Commercial Lobster Co. at 300 Northern Ave. By one account it could also require filling in some of the harbor along the South Boston piers. State law, under Chapter 91, controls development along the waterfront.

Roger Berkowitz, president of Legal Sea Foods, whose headquarters is in a building on the water nearby, said, "Anything that furthers seafood development down there has to be viewed as a good thing." Like other business owners in the area, he had heard rumors but was unaware of details of the current plan.

"I'm in the dark," said Dennis Kelley, treasurer and co-owner of Commercial Lobster, next to the Bank of America Pavilion. His company signed a 50-year lease with the Economic Development Industrial Corporation three years ago.

Rusk himself could be a controversial feature of the nascent plan. In 1992, when he was 37, he pleaded guilty to storing and distributing food that was filthy, rodent-contaminated, and unfit for human consumption. According to court records, he served a 36-month sentence on probation for the misdemeanors. Rusk also filed for personal bankruptcy after the conviction, and his debts were discharged. The amount he owed could not be learned.

Kelley, of Commercial Lobster, said he had known Rusk for 16 years and done business with him.

"He used to sell scallops," Kelley said. "I don't know him to be a land developer."

The lawyer representing the group said Rusk was a "guy who made a mistake," pleading guilty, and "paid a price for that."

One public official said he had his fingers crossed for the project. "They're talking about something that if it happened would be a major accomplishment," he said. "But there are a lot of ifs."

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