

## AIR BASE RENEWAL PLAN APPROVED BY WEYMOUTH COUNCIL

By Michael Kunzelman, Associated Press Writer | July 26, 2005

WEYMOUTH, Mass. --The former Naval air base here looks like a forlorn World War II movie set, with crumbling hangars, boarded-up barracks and overgrown runways that sprawl across 2 1/2 square miles and spill over into two adjoining towns.

Now, a developer can embark on an ambitious \$1 billion plan that will convert the former South Weymouth Naval Air Station into a de facto town of roughly 8,000 people, complete with more than 2,800 housing units, a golf course, offices and retail space.

The development project, which had already been approved by Abington and Rockland, faced a final hurdle Monday night before the Weymouth Town Council.

The council voted 8-3 in favor of the project. At least eight votes were needed for the plans to proceed past the blueprint stage.

"You have to have all three towns buy into this or none of this takes place," Terry Fancher, executive director of the South Shore Tri-town Development Corp., a quasi-public agency that oversees the property, said before the vote.

The "Village Center Plan" is touted as an economic engine for the region and a model for "smart growth," which calls for constructing new housing near town centers and public transportation.

"Not everybody says that, but folks do realize that a parcel like this doesn't lay fallow. Something is going to happen there," said former Weymouth selectman Bill Ryan, who is now a lobbyist for the project's Miami-based developer, LNR Property Corp.

Developers are pleased, Ryan said, but "more than anything, this is a beginning."

The developers still need to obtain numerous permits to begin construction.

The project's opponents fear the project will snarl traffic on already-congested roads, strain municipal services and jeopardize the property's wetlands and wildlife.

"I'm disappointed, in the place of my children and people that are in the school system," said Councilor Ken DiFazio, who voted against the proposal. "I think it's going to potentially adversely affect the quality of their lives."

Since the 1,400-acre facility closed in 1997, the property has been eyed as a potential site for a 2-million-square-foot mall, a wind farm and a commercial airport. But the development project, which would be one of the state's largest planned communities, became a front-runner when it was unveiled last September.

Ryan and other Village Center supporters warned that the Navy may opt to auction off the property if a development plan fails. The project's opponents call that a scare tactic.

"What seems to be driving this is a fear of what could happen if you don't approve it," said state Sen. Robert Hedlund, R-Weymouth. "I don't think the plan before us is the optimal plan, but we seem to be locked into this one."

The base used to be a training ground for more than 1,500 military personnel and 300 civilian employees. Today, the property is virtually deserted, home to fewer than two dozen Coast Guard families, several schools and a State Police academy that is about to close. Deer and geese roam the runways, and the massive hangers are littered with piles of rubble.

The redevelopment of South Weymouth is particularly relevant today, with dozens more military installations across the country slated to close under the Pentagon's latest base realignment proposal. These include nearby Otis Air National Guard Base, on Cape Cod.

Of the 79 bases that were ordered closed by the Pentagon in 1995, Weymouth's is one of only three that the Navy hasn't turned over to local redevelopment authorities, according to Fancher.

"The Navy still has most of the land, so there is no tax revenue being generated," he said.

Rick Packard, who was the Naval Air Station's facility manager for 12 years, now manages the property for the Tri-Town Development Corp.

"I spent my entire career preserving this base," Packard said. "To see it fall into this state of disrepair has been an adjustment for me."

Packard, who has been working at the base since 1980, knows every inch of the place. When he was 12 years old, he and his friends from Rockland used to sneak through holes in the fence that rings the facility.

"This used to be its own little town. We had virtually everything. It was very much like a family," he said.

While Packard and others long to return to the days when the base was a vibrant community, many of its neighbors aren't ready to make room for a project of this size.

Linda May Ellis, 52, of Rockland, wants to see the property preserved as open space.

"It is valuable land, but its value lies in the fact that it is undeveloped land," she said.

If the developers are allowed to break ground, it is expected to take about 12 years for the project to be completed.

In the meantime, Weymouth officials have given LNR Property Corp. a wish list of \$32 million worth of capital improvements and other "mitigation" payments designed to soften the impact of the project on the town.

DiFazio, who opposed the proposal, said the payments didn't sway him.

"The only thing mitigation means is that this particular developer acknowledges there are deficiencies in the plan," he said. ■