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Maine Voices: Portland's eastern waterfront redevelopment meets community goals and needs

The rezoned area would provide needed housing, boost tax revenue and maintain most views.

By Nathan Smith | April 6, 2015

In 2000, a group of our neighbors and elected representatives set out to generate a vision for what the community wanted to see on the city's eastern waterfront. The Portland Co. property, in decay for decades, had and still has striking potential to serve many important public interests: waterfront accessibility, housing, recreation and economic development.

Over the course of several years, there were numerous public meetings, involving hundreds of Portland residents and various consultants. Ideas were reviewed and refined by the Planning Board, presented to the City Council and unanimously adopted as part of the city's comprehensive plan in 2004. I was mayor for the city of Portland during the latter stages of this process.

Too often, notwithstanding the hard work of citizen volunteers and the careful balancing of competing interests, these exhaustive public goal-setting exercises are shelved, grow stale and are forgotten – or, worse, get ignored. Yet in this case, there have been significant positive signs: the construction of Ocean Gateway, the Eastern Prom Trail and now, potentially, the Portland Co. property.

In the summer of 2013, the Portland Co. property was poised for sale. CPB2 LLC, a mostly local group led by Jim Brady and Casey Prentice, took an interest in the property. However, before purchasing, they consulted Portland city planners about the comprehensive plan and the need for rezoning.

CPB2 bought the property with the express intent to build the vision of the Eastern Waterfront Master Plan, creating a “vital and active urban area that generates life and use every day of the year.” This is why they've applied for a zoning change that extends the abutting B-6 zone as contemplated by the master plan.

The City Council's consideration of this zoning change builds on the hard work of many citizens, of the previous City Council and Planning Board and, most recently, of the current Planning Board, which has unanimously recommended extending the B-6 zone. This is not a casual proposal – it's a recommendation deeply grounded in hundreds of hours of work by citizens, Planning Board members, city staff and city councilors.

To be clear, this rezoning fulfills the Eastern Waterfront Master Plan's directive, advancing and protecting a thoroughly debated and longstanding public vision:

- The change in zoning would allow housing and other mixed uses while preserving the immediate waterfront for marine-related uses.
- The Eastern Prom Trail would not change – unless it's to move it closer to the water's edge, on state and city approval.
- Any forthcoming citywide affordable-housing policy for major residential developments could be applied to this property, too.
- Because the zoning specifically calls for preserving view corridors and creates various height restrictions, many, but not all, of the existing neighborhood water views over this private property would be preserved (and, in some cases, enhanced). Specifically, the zoning calls for 50-foot-wide view corridors at the ends of St. Lawrence, Atlantic and Waterville streets.
- Even after the zoning is complete, any site redevelopment would be subject to rigorous site plan review and approval by the Planning Board.
- A discussion of the preservation of certain historic structures on the property has begun and will come before the City Council in the coming months.
- Portland has a housing shortage, and market forces are ratcheting up housing costs in ways that make Portland unaffordable. Portland needs new housing stock, lots of it, of all types. This project could create hundreds of new housing units.
- Redevelopment of the property will be a vital addition to Portland's tax base. A recent estimate by economist (and Maine Sunday Telegram columnist) Chuck Lawton projected that, once the property is fully developed, \$1.5 million in annual property tax revenues will go to the city of Portland – 10 times what the city currently collects from the property.

There are voices distracting us from the simple truth that what's being proposed truly embodies the vision of the Eastern Waterfront Master Plan and the adjacent B-6 zoning. Certainly, careful scrutiny of major public decisions is a good thing. That said, this is an opportunity that all of Portland should grab with both hands and not let go of.

Nathan Smith is an attorney with Bernstein Shur who represents the owners of the Portland Co. A former Portland mayor and city councilor, he is a founder and former president of Portland Trails.