

LOCAL NEWS

HINGHAM SHIPYARD: An eyesore for years, shipyard is poised for dramatic rebirth

By JOE MCGEE, *The Patriot Ledger*

HINGHAM - First it was a shipyard. Then it was an eyesore. Now the Hingham shipyard on Route 3A is slated to become the largest residential and commercial complex on the South Shore coastline since Marina Bay was built 20 years ago in Quincy. Developers this week celebrated the long-awaited rebirth of the World War II shipyard in grand style. Now the party is over, and the region is getting a clearer picture of what they'll get out of the multimillion dollar project at the mouth of the Back River separating Hingham and Weymouth. Four to six weeks from now, public hearings on a revised concept for the commercial side of the project will begin.

The hearings will determine whether developers can add an eight-screen cinema to the project.

No matter what happens, local residents and people driving by on Route 3A can expect to see construction for at least two years.

That's because most of the master plan for the 130-acre site was permitted three years ago and demolition has already started.

The east side of the property behind Building 19 corporate offices will boast 380 luxury homes for rent and for sale.

At least 14 restaurants will be built on the west side of the shipyard, along with several thousand square feet of shops and condominiums.

No retailers have announced lease signings but the cinema, if it gets built, would likely be operated by Patriot Cinemas.

Hingham shipyard will be the largest undertaking of its kind on the South Shore since Marina Bay, the former Squantum Naval Air Station on Dorchester Bay that developers Peter and William O'Connell turned into the region's premier waterfront village. It was a precursor to what is happening in Hingham and across the country today, as cities and towns try to recreate town centers.

When the O'Connell brothers first saw Squantum, it reportedly looked like a big mud flat, with a dilapidated hangar in the middle and decaying piers. Hingham had the same forlorn appearance when Paul Trendowicz, president of marina operator Sea Chain, visited the site in 1996.

But he knew there was promise.

"He knew it immediately," said Joe Sugar, vice president of operations for the company.

At the time, Sea Chain only operated a marina on the site and the 130 acres had a hodgepodge of owners.

Within a year, the company bought the massive general services administration building and drafted a master plan.

Two years later the development team was on board: Roseland, Avalon Bay and commercial developer Samuels & Associates.

"We knew all along that this was on a scale beyond what we do, and we needed more expertise," Sugar said.

Early on, Roche Bros. supermarkets was slated to be the anchor for the commercial side of the property and the project was moving forward.

"We felt the right use was mixed-use development, but development needs an anchor, and at the time we thought it was a grocery store," said Joel Sklar, a principal with Samuels.

The grocery store idea, now dead, was opposed by neighbors and the owners of Lincoln Plaza, an adjacent shopping center where a Stop & Shop is located.

With no anchor store in place, the master plan went forward, anyway. In 2003, developers got approval from the zoning board for a mixed-use development where thousands were expected to live, shop and dine.

Construction was delayed for another three years while Sea Chain worked out a key land swap deal with the state.

The MBTA runs a popular commuter ferry out of Hewitt's Cove adjacent to the shipyard. The large parking lots for the ferry riders ate up crucial parts of the property.

The MBTA agreed to consolidate its parking more in the center of the shipyard, freeing up land valuable to the developer.

That happened this summer, paving the way for the project - 10 years in the planning - to get started.

At the same time, the federal government, through the work of U.S. Rep. William Delahunt, appropriated more than \$7 million to enhance amenities for ferry commuters. For example, there are more than 1,500 parking spaces that need to be

repaved. If ridership grows, the state has the right to build a deck on top of the parking area to increase capacity.

Despite the optimism, developers say there is much work to be done to convince residents that the new vision for the shipyard is right for Hingham and the South Shore.

Samuels & Associates bowed out of the project in 2002 but got involved again two years later. The commercial developer proceeded to brainstorm ways to attract visitors when the shipyard was redeveloped.

A grocery store was now out of the question because by that time the Derby Street Shoppes had been built at the other end of Hingham, and it included a Whole Foods supermarket.

Sklar said that when they picked the cinema option they came up with at least four reasons why it fits in Hingham: Arlington, Va., Boca Raton, Fla., Bethesda, Md., and West Hartford, Conn.

All four communities are demographically similar to Hingham. All four also have mid-sized movie theaters incorporated into mixed-use village communities. The proposed shipyard theater would be about 20,000-square-feet, much smaller than a megaplex.

Without a big draw like a theater, the core concept of the project doesn't work, Sklar said.

The shipyard, he said, isn't just about shopping. It's a place where people will live, work, eat, dine or just take a stroll by the water.

"The whole point is that this isn't driven just by the retail cycle," Sklar said. "This is how people really live. That's what it's all about."

Jim Watson, a professional municipal planner and Hingham resident who has followed the shipyard development, agreed that the shipyard makes sense. But if the wave of the future is a return to the old town center, it comes with consequences, he said.

"If you want a lively area you need to attract people, for better or for worse. I don't see it as a problem, but then again, I don't live there," he said.

Who's building what at the shipyard ...

—Avalon Bay: 235 apartment homes. Developer and manager of luxury rental communities in the Northeast, Mid-Atlantic, Midwest, Pacific Northwest and Northern and Southern California regions.

—Roseland Properties: 150 luxury townhouses. Urban redeveloper of luxury apartments. Manages the Highpoint apartments in Quincy and owns the Highlands at Faxon Woods apartment complex, also in Quincy.

—Samuels & Associates: 240,000 square feet of retail and office space and 94 condominiums. Real estate developer controls a portfolio of 22

commercial and residential properties, comprising 5 million square feet in Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts and New York.

—Sea Chain LLC: Marina owner, operator of 500 boat slips and 100 moorings on Hewitt's Cove. Company president Paul Trendowicz was the first to envision mixed-use development at the shipyard.

Shipyard history

—1940: Hitler invades France.

—1941: Hingham site is recommended for production of destroyer escorts. Navy assigns Bethlehem Steel.

—1942: In January, U.S. District Court authorizes seizure of 123 acres of land for \$174,772.

Groundbreaking takes place in February and the first ship is launched in September.

—1944: Shipyard sets record for building destroyer in less than a month.

—1945: War ends. Bethlehem Steel gives property back to Navy.

—1961: Government sells property to Allied Industries for \$553,000 but keeps 35 acres and seven buildings, including the general services administration building, the largest one-story building in New England.

—1967: Shipyard is bought by Neelon Company.

—1976: MBTA launches the first commuter boat services from Hewitt's Cove.

—1994: MBTA expands commuter boat parking.

—1996: Sea Chain LLC purchases Neelon property at the shipyard and initiates a master plan to redevelop the property.

—1997: Sea Chain purchases general services building and presents redevelopment plan to Hingham officials.

—2003: Mixed-used development of condos, offices and retail is approved.

—2006: Groundbreaking begins; retail developer Samuels & Associates proposes new plan to build movie theater.

Source: Sea Chain LLC

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Rubble from a retaining wall piles up as demolition work begins at the former Hingham shipyard. (GARY HIGGINS/The Patriot Ledger)

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