

Symposium: What Will Newport's Waterfront Look Like In 2030?

“Newport's Harbor Management Plan”

by L. Neill Gray 10/06/07

The overall purpose of a HMP:

As a comprehensive harbor management plan, a HMP is a method to establish a community's goals, objectives, and policies for the public and private use of its tidal waters. The Rhode Island Coastal Resources Management Council (CRMC) mandates that all coastal communities develop and submit formal plans to address all water-front and shore-side permitted uses, water quality, and safety issues. CRMC requires specific elements to be studied; and that rules and recommendations be developed for their management so that conflicting and overlapping use issues can be resolved equitably. Implementation programs outlining strategies for achieving and enforcing goals and policies of the plan are also required.

Required plan elements are:

Public Access	Mooring Management
Water Quality	Storm Preparedness

Communities may also include other elements of concern in their plan. Newport's plan has the additional elements of Maritime Management and Facilities.

A HMP will provide guidance to city government, boards, and commissions when making decisions regarding appropriate harbor development and maritime activities. A plan will also function as a reference for state and federal agencies, reflecting the intentions and desires of the city for projects coming before those agencies.

One major issue of concern in Newport's HMP comes under our Maritime Management element. Traditionally, the harbor has been under-valued as an economic resource and has been neglected in terms of capital investment by previous administrations. In 1854, when Newport's government changed from a town to a city, the Mayoral address states in part, “Our harbor has been very much neglected and requires much to be done”. In 1882, Harbormaster Stephen A. Gardner in his report states “Our harbor, one of the finest in the country, should receive more frequent care and attention from city authorities.”

The majority of the city's income is derived from property taxes. It is understandable why development of lucrative properties along the waterfront might be viewed as advantageous. However, unrestricted waterfront development would dramatically change the character of this colonial city. If Newport loses its famous colonial charm, people would be less attracted to the city, which would be self-defeating to the tourist-based economy. The future of the harbor, and even of Newport's prosperity, requires a careful balance to maintain viable modern businesses and yet preserve, and where lost, to recreate Newport's unique colonial character.

To address these issues of financing and development direction, Newport's HMP calls for the establishment of a separate accounting of funds generated from and spent on the harbor. The city in the past few years has identified the harbor as an enterprise zone and recently created a new management position to specifically oversee such zones. Development direction can be guided by using the Newport Historical Society as a resource for historical authenticity for future development, and perhaps expanding the historical district requirements already in place.

Another major issue is identified as the HMP's second element, Public Access. Adequate public access to and, whenever possible, along the shore is necessary to meet commercial and recreational needs and to support tourism. History has shown that the loss of traditional water dependent businesses also has meant the loss of public access as these historic sites become privatized. Public access points provide the only link between the inter-tidal zone and the upland areas. To ensure that these links don't disappear, the city must strive to expand and improve public access. The city needs to maintain current and detailed documentation regarding existing rights-of-way; and it should be the policy of the city to guarantee, protect, and maintain public access to and along its tidal waters. Public access to the shore is guaranteed under the provisions of the Rhode Island Constitution, Article I, Section 17.

As a means to achieving this, the city should assign at least one employee within the Maritime Department with the responsibility to oversee a "Public Access Program" and to work with interested parties to ensure the Program's success. CRMC is our ally in developing creative solutions of achieving public access and the city must partner with them to accomplish this goal.

The third and final issue I'll talk about today is the plan's Facilities element. Newport and Newport Harbor have become primarily a tourist destination. At the same time, commercial fishing, boatyards, and marine businesses are needed to bring diversity to our economy.

In order for Newport to maintain its status as a world-class cruising port, the city must offer safe, clean, and useful service facilities around the waterfront that are inviting to yachtsmen. Currently, public service facilities for the recreational boater are grossly inadequate. The development of the city's Armory building and its adjacent waterfront into a Mariner's Visitor Center would fill the current void of restrooms, showers, trash disposal, fresh water, laundry, postal services, etc. The creation of a harbor shuttle between various shore side locations would help alleviate traffic on city streets. New public dinghy docks at various locations throughout the harbor would provide public access from the water to the land at locations convenient to the boaters' destination. Marine service businesses need a city landing or pier from which they can load supplies and materials to service boats in the harbor, again access between land and water.

Innovative zoning and taxing must be investigated to support the viability of ship yards, repair facilities, and commercial fishing docks; so that these traditional activities that have been part of Newport's historical character are not squeezed out completely by non-water dependent uses, such as hotels, condominiums, and restaurants. The City-by-the-Sea must support a visible working waterfront in order to maintain its maritime heritage and charm.

The Harbor Management Plan is a working document that can be updated or modified as conditions and issues change. It is a guide to help the city, its boards, and commissions move the harbor's development forward based on input from all its stakeholders.