



Contributors

Tiffany C. Smythe: Models for working waterfronts

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THE GROWING DEBATE about the Allens Avenue waterfront in Providence is an opportunity for Rhode Islanders to rethink the management of one of the Ocean State's greatest resources — its working waterfronts. Both in Providence and throughout the state, working waterfronts deserve priority consideration in future waterfront planning and development.

The Providence City Council has been considering a new municipal Comprehensive Plan that recasts a swath of the Allens Avenue waterfront as a “growth” area ideal for mixed-use development. Concerned that this new zoning plan may force them to relocate or to close shop, Allens Avenue waterfront businesses, a group that includes a home-heating-oil supplier, a road-salt repository and a shipyard that dates back to the 1930s, have formed the Providence Working Waterfront Alliance. It has hired a public-relations firm to help communicate its members' value to Providence and to protect their place on the waterfront.

This debate over the future of Providence's waterfront is not unusual.

Coastal communities in locations ranging from Maine to Florida to California are also debating the future of their waterfronts. Though the location may vary, the questions are fundamentally the same: Should waterfronts be reserved for working-waterfront businesses, such as shipyards and port facilities? Or should they be made available for mixed-use development, including condominiums, hotels and restaurants?

And how do tourism and recreation-oriented businesses like marinas, ferries, and cruise ship terminals fit into the picture?

Rhode Islanders need to weigh these issues carefully when deciding on the future of Providence's working waterfront. To that end, it is vital that the City Council, city residents (such as myself), and other stakeholders give careful consideration to the following:

Why do working waterfronts have value? To many, this question comes down to numbers: jobs versus property- tax income. While condominiums are often viewed as more lucrative because they will generate more tax revenue for a city, working-waterfront businesses contribute economic value to the residents, city and to the region. They offer high-paying, skilled jobs to marine tradesmen, and provide access to much-needed products such as fuel and construction materials. These products, and the many other services provided by Providence's waterfront industries, benefit not only the city of Providence, but also the entire state of Rhode Island.

The value of shipyards and port facilities extends far beyond their proven economic return. Working

waterfronts also have non-market benefits, such as cultural value. Working waterfronts are our connection to our history, and in New England, that means maritime commerce. It is ironic that here in the seaport city of Providence, the state capital and just downriver from the birthplace of the American Industrial Revolution, maritime industrial businesses have felt compelled to launch a public-education campaign to ensure their longevity. Rhode Islanders should not forget the importance of maritime trade to the colonial growth of the “city-state.”

Furthermore, working waterfronts have aesthetic value. While some may look at commercial/industrial parts of the Providence waterfront as an “utter stain” (to quote from Lee A. Johnson’s Sept. 27 Journal letter), others see beauty — fishing trawlers, tugboats, ferries and the occasional tall ship, framed against the backdrop of the Providence River.

Rhode Islanders should not underestimate the fact that people like working ships. They find them intriguing. The popularity of such events as the annual New Bedford Working Waterfront Festival, and tugboat festivals held in New York and San Francisco is testament to this interest. Providence could and should capitalize on these non-market values by recognizing them and incorporating them into its plans for the Allens Avenue waterfront.

Does mixed-use development mean the end of the working waterfront? It might, but it doesn’t have to. Mixed-use development can mean many things, and several potential combinations of uses could work. Water- dependent recreational uses, such as marinas, ferries and cruise ships, might be viable.

While many of the Allens Avenue businesses may cringe at the thought of more recreational-boat traffic in the Providence River, mixed commercial- and recreational-boat traffic is the norm in every other commercial port and harbor from Boston to Norfolk, Va. On the other hand, residential-condo towers next to a working shipyard might not fit. While many love looking at shipyards, few could manage to sleep next to one; after all, shipyards are noisy and brightly lit, and they often operate around the clock. Further, with rising coastal-home-insurance rates, coupled with projections of rising sea levels and more intense hurricanes, does it even make sense to increase residential development in such vulnerable areas? By comparison, ship repair and port facilities must be on the waterfront; their operations require direct water access.

With careful planning, a well-chosen mix of uses can indeed succeed.

Consider Portland, Maine, where a waterfront vibrant with tug boats and ferries is complemented by restaurants, marinas and cruise ships.

Portland’s waterfront does work. Portland is now the largest port in New England (by cargo tonnage) and, according to the city, contributes half a billion dollars annually to Maine’s economy. Furthermore, and important for the Providence City Council to note, it is Maine’s most popular tourist destination, and is ranked by some sources among the nation’s most livable cities.

Can’t we just relocate the Allens Avenue working-waterfront businesses elsewhere? Some may wonder why these businesses can’t simply be moved to some other part of the state. One important reason is that no other waterfront in the state has direct access to a 40-foot federal shipping channel, upon which the Allens Avenue waterfront businesses rely. This illustrates an essential point — that relocating these working-waterfront businesses requires the availability of another appropriate site.

Some say that Quonset Point is the right place for the state’s working-waterfront businesses, but Quonset is not necessarily appropriate, much less available for these uses. Moreover, relocating

waterfront industrial facilities would require a prohibitive investment of time and resources. Facilities like Promet rely on a complex array of heavy equipment and infrastructure that can't simply be packed into a few moving trucks. The costs of relocating these businesses, and who would bear those costs, must be given careful consideration.

More importantly, whether Quonset or some other site is a suitable alternative highlights an additional problem that points to the need for better planning: At present, there is no statewide coordinated management of all the state's various working waterfronts. Unlike Boston, New Haven and many other ports, no port authority or equivalent agency manages Rhode Island's port facilities. These facilities include not only Rhode Island's shipping terminals in Providence and Quonset, but also the state's ferry and commercial fishing terminals in locations including Point Judith, Newport and Block Island.

This means that if one facility is displaced, there is no guarantee that it will be relocated or replaced elsewhere. What does this mean for the Allens Avenue working waterfront? If these waterfront businesses are forced to shut down, they are probably gone from Rhode Island — and its economy — for good.

With thoughtful, forward-looking planning and civic leadership, the debate over the future of Providence's working waterfront could be transformed into an opportunity. Providence must plan for a vibrant Allens Avenue waterfront made up of new uses that would enhance, not conflict with, the existing uses. Providence residents, myself included, should reconsider the many values of not only the Allens Avenue businesses but all of the Ocean State's working waterfronts, and carefully weigh the implications of any changes, including their relocation or removal.

Finally, we should call upon state agencies, such as the Statewide Planning Program and the Coastal Resources Management Council, to coordinate management of all of the state's working-waterfront resources, before it is too late. Working waterfronts can and should be part of Rhode Island's future.

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