

*MIXED-USE DEVELOPMENT REPLACES
TANK FARMS ON EAST PROVIDENCE SHORES*



Reviving Rhode Island's Urban Coast

by **Hugh Markey**

FOR 200 YEARS, MUCH OF RHODE ISLAND'S URBAN waterfront was the realm of industry. Manufacturing plants, shipping ports, and acres of “tank farms”—land dotted with massive oil tanks—lined the shores of upper Narragansett Bay. During that time, little consideration was given to the environmental impact of these industries, from untreated waste pumped into the bay by overburdened sewage plants to heavy oil seeping into the soil around the tank farms. Bathing beaches such as Sabin Point and Crescent Park in East Providence, which had attracted summer tourists since Grover Cleveland held the White House, were eventually deemed unsafe for bathers. The general public gave up on the urban waterfront, either because businesses had built up to the waterline and no access was available, or because the small portions that were open were dotted with dead fish and garbage.

By the 1980s, many of those industries had disappeared as a result of changing times. However, the problems remained. Many lots were now brownfields, nearly useless for most development, and both the shifting economy and business relocations had left the lots abandoned. East Providence City Planner Jeanne Boyle says that early attempts to rezone some of the city's waterfront areas from industrial to mixed use had limited results. The city was stuck with some 300 acres of unusable land. “There really wasn't any litigation protection for businesses interested in selling the properties that were contaminated. The process of obtaining environmental approval in Rhode Island was a difficult one,” she says, “The other problem was that the sites lacked infrastructure to allow for mixed-use

development. These original businesses had been mainly accessed by rail or by waterway, and there were few roads to the areas.” Problems with limited access to fresh water and proper sewage treatment complicated the situation even further.

However, federal brownfield regulations changed in the early 2000s, allowing businesses to work with environmental agencies to clean up properties such that they could be developed. However, byzantine permitting processes needed to be simplified to create an incentive for businesses to build.

In Rhode Island, the state's coastal development regulations had been created with places like South County in mind, where changes to the shore were overwhelmingly residential. James Boyd, coastal policy analyst with the Rhode Island Coastal Resources Management Council (CRMC), says that setback lines and other restrictions were intended to preserve pristine waterfront environments. Clearly, that would not work for cities like Providence and others. “We're not talking about relatively undisturbed and somewhat rural sites; we're talking about thoroughly developed lands that had been heavily disturbed for as much as 150 years or more,” he says, “These lands were highly altered, and the districts wanted to have them rezoned for mixed uses, and wanted to create something that would provide an economic boon to the local areas,” which included 24 miles of shoreline in Cranston, Providence, Pawtucket, and East Providence along the Providence and Seekonk rivers.

In order for that to happen, a number of entities, some of them traditionally at odds with each other,

SOME COASTAL REGIONS ARE OPEN TO THE PUBLIC FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE THE CIVIL WAR

would have to sit down and come up with a plan. That plan became the Metro Bay Special Area Management Plan, or Metro Bay SAMP.

Jennifer McCann, director of U.S. Coastal Programs at the Coastal Resources Center and extension director for Rhode Island Sea Grant, describes facilitating a team of experts that began the lengthy process of researching existing policies and techniques locally and from around the world to adapt for Rhode Island.

“In the beginning, there was a lot of mistrust,” McCann recalls. “Industry thought, ‘When was the last time a state agency was a place you went for help?’” However, she adds, the “collaborative effort” of the SAMP included building a stakeholder group that brought together “academia, industry, legal experts, regulators, municipalities, and environmental organizations” who weighed in on the developing plan that ultimately acknowledged the concerns of everyone from environmental advocates and municipal decision makers to commercial developers and marine industries.

Boyle was among those who worked to develop the policy. “CRMC recognized that their requirements for buffers and setbacks really didn’t work for urban areas. Both Providence and East Providence shared the goal to rejuvenate the waterfront,” she says, “In many cases, public access had been closed for decades. We tried to work with CRMC so that there was a reasonable amount set aside for public access. At the same time, we knew that small parcels were constrained and needed flexibility in order to be developed. The input that the communities provided to CRMC was very helpful, and the end result was a set of standards that seems to be working pretty well for the developers, along with the community.”

Until that time, developers had only one option if they could not meet CRMC’s buffer and setback requirements: they would have to go through a variance process, which could be onerous and unpredictable. Even so, they would not have been able to build as close to the water as they are able to do under the provisions of the SAMP.

For example, existing regulations required that coastal buffer zones—a 200-foot-wide area of shoreline that made up the setback zone—be undisturbed in order to encourage wildlife habitat. In the heavily developed urban area, some lots had pre-existing buildings within the setback zone, or were too narrow to accommodate the setback. In other cases, leaving the shoreline to its own devices simply wasn’t practical.

CRMC decided that the new policy should allow for smaller setbacks and development closer to the water. “In turn, the projects had to provide public access, not only along the waterline, but from the street to the waterline. This would allow the public to access those areas,” says Boyd. This option not only streamlined the regulatory process, but it also provided latitude in how a development could meet the more liberal requirements.

The degree of flexibility within the requirements varies based on the four zone classifications developed for the Metro Bay area. Most pristine is the Area of Particular Concern, characterized by important habitats and recreational and conservation opportunities. This designation triggers the most restrictive development requirements. Next, Residential Zones are those with existing single- and two-family homes; development here must be done through the original CRMC requirements. Areas that already contained roads and sidewalks between the coast and proposed development were considered part of the Inner Harbor and River Zone. The area of most flexibility was the Development Zone. Much of the Metro Bay area comprises this zone, where high-density development is either designated or has already taken place.

One unique requirement of the plan was that 15 percent of the development be vegetated. While some sites already had some vegetation, what was there was not necessarily desirable, according to Boyd: “In some cases, there was some existing vegetation, but in most cases there wasn’t much. We’re talking about old tank farms, and so in the intervening years since those tanks were removed, some vegetation grew up, but the ground underneath was still contaminated. So that vegetation had to be removed in many cases, and the soil was reclaimed or removed. From there the shoreline had to be revegetated and integrated with the public access component.”

While the prospect of reserving parts of each parcel as “green” sounded reasonable to conservationists, developers had serious doubts. “Some of the developers thought, ‘What, you want me to take 15 percent of my property and not develop it?’” says McCann. However, thanks to the new policy, the vegetated element could also include the installation of green roofs, designed to slow and filter stormwater runoff. It might also be met with the construction of permeable surfaces. Rather than paving walks and parking lots, the use of



Millions of dollars of development is slated for East Providence's waterfront. Photograph by Seth Fandetti

gravel, stone, and other materials allows stormwater to soak into the soil, rather than to drain directly into the water. Even rain barrels could count toward the 15 percent goal.

The years following the ratification of the policy in 2006 and the amendment in 2011 have seen a renaissance in development of urban areas. McCann said that in some places, coastal regions are now open to the public for the first time since the Civil War. Although changes in the economy slowed construction in some cases, a substantial number of properties have been developed.

"At Kettle Point, we had a lot that had held oil tanks for about 100 years. That 40-acre parcel is being redeveloped into 407 condominium and apartment units, and the first phase of occupancy will be ready

within a year," says Boyle. "There is an additional lot of 30 acres of what once were oil tanks. Thanks to a \$200 million project, that will hold 600 units of residential development. A 27-acre former site of a steel mill, one of the most heavily contaminated in all of New England, has received \$5 million in grants and loans to be cleaned up. Even now, there is a 10-acre development where the Tockwotten senior living center is that is a \$53 million development. They also donated a parcel of land now known as Tockwotten Park for use as public access. All of these projects are providing for really extensive access to the waterfront."

And it's this increased access to the waterfront that, Boyle says, is another significant contribution to the plan: "There's much more public open space: places like Kettle Point, the East Bay Bike Path. There are public viewing areas, a kayak launch. There's going to be a huge change in the amount of public access that's available after these developments take place."