

Development could consume land by 2050



This rendering shows what a mixed-use 'town center' could look like at the Middletown plaza where the former Benny's store is located. VIA THE AQUIDNECK ISLAND LAND TRUST

What can be done to keep Aquidneck Island from running out of unprotected open space?

Scott Barrett

Newport Daily News
USA TODAY NETWORK

PORTSMOUTH – If the current rate of development continues, Aquidneck Island will run out of unprotected open space by 2050, according to a recently released report by the Aquidneck Land Trust that was presented to the Portsmouth Town Council on Monday night.

The Aquidneck Island Development Impact Analysis was compiled in 2019 with the help of Sasaki Associates, a planning firm with offices outside of Boston and in Shanghai, China. It is being presented now largely because of the COVID-19 pandemic, said Chuck Allott, executive director with ALT.

"In 2018, the Aquidneck Land Trust realized that we weren't protecting enough land fast enough," Allott told members of the council. "We were conserving more land every year, but time wasn't on our side. Development was outpacing conservation."

The analysis explores two scenarios: Scenario 1 predicts what Aquidneck Island will look like if the current trends of development continue, the "status quo," said ALT Conservation Director Alex Chuman, who gave the presentation.

Scenario 2 is called "plan and protect." This examines how current unprotected open space can be conserved through different types of development, specifically mixed-use areas over



An aerial view of Newport. PROVIDED BY ED PEPIN

suburban subdivisions.

According to the report, the population on Aquidneck Island remained steady between 1980 and 2017, though there has been increased development to the tune of roughly 6,200 units during that span, a rate of 165 units per year.

Chuman attributed that to three causes – more second homes, an influx of short-term rentals and smaller family sizes.

During the next 30 years, according to the report, there will be another 5,000 or so housing units added – using

that 165 units per year average – under both scenarios. What separates the two is how they are created.

In Scenario 1, Chuman showed a slide of farmland in Portsmouth that was developed into a subdivision.

Scenario 2 leans toward keeping that farmland and using existing developed areas. As an example, he showed a photo of the commercial plaza on West Main Road in Middletown, the one with the former Benny's store.

Rather than an expansive parking lot

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and several one-story commercial spaces, the report shows a mixed-use development there, including several two-story buildings with shared residential and commercial uses.

"Both of these visions accommodate the same amount of commercial development, the same amount of residential development in terms of units," Chuman stressed. "The second scenario just takes up far less space and allows for far more

conservation."

To do this, Chuman and Allott both suggested a regional approach to land conservation from officials in Newport, Middletown and Portsmouth. They also said how communities go about altering their zoning will be key to protecting open space.

"The Land Trust is doing advocacy work with municipalities to look at changing zoning, to create more innovative zoning that allows for mixed-use development that would allow for these types of developments to take place," Allott said. "We don't have the tools

to do it. Municipalities do."

Chuman pointed out in his presentation that Scenario 1, the status quo, would have significant impacts on scenic views, the amount of farmland, drinking water quality and flood risk.

According to the report, nearly 40% of the island is classified as open space. The report also breaks down by community how much unprotected open space remains on Aquidneck Island. In Portsmouth, that number is 2,206 acres. There's 1,373 acres in Middletown and 588 acres in Newport.

Town Council President Kevin Aguiar said he supports the idea of land conservation, but there's a balance between development and keeping Portsmouth a "rural community."

Councilor Daniella Abbott agreed "wholeheartedly" with everything in the presentation, and suggested the Land Trust review the town's Comprehensive Plan that is being compiled currently "to improve the track we're on."

When asked by council member Linda Ujifusa what the biggest hurdles are in getting to Scenario 2, Chuman said there are

two: Getting municipalities to update their zoning, and the current real estate market.

"The land market is extremely high," Chuman said. "Folks who have open space are looking to capitalize and maximize their value by selling to a developer. It's a big ask to come up with that type of money to save that land."

Allott said the Land Trust in the future will be approaching Portsmouth officials to potentially put a bond question before voters to save open space. He said he wants ALT and the town to work "in partnership for these important last properties."

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