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On the waterfront: City of Sturgeon Bay moves to implement west-side plan

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The old Midland granary that sits on a vacant lot on Sturgeon Bay's west side has done nothing for several years but fade the large M that once boldly identified its owner.

A new city plan that elevates the old cooperative building as a key structure in the West Waterfront Redevelopment design is moving from the dreaming stage to reality.

"We are now beyond conceptual," said City Administrator Steve McNeil. "We are ready to both plan and fund the public improvements."

The city is working with Vandewalle & Associates, a Madison architectural and consulting firm, to develop the plan. When implemented, it's hoped the plan will bring more activity to the bay and the city, build future tax base, provide new jobs and draw year-round residents.

"There is no purchase of real estate by the city in this," McNeil said. "Vandewalle facilitated the concept. The city likes it and we continue to have discussions on other

parts of the project. We're hoping what we put together will interest a qualified developer."

The granary

In the past, finding a qualified developer for the former cooperative site with an abandoned granary and another large commercial building has not been easy. Even though it's on the waterfront, it has been empty at least seven years. But the last developer who owned it did move through some engineering studies, said Realtor Heidi Neubauer of ERA Starr Realty, who now has it listed for sale.

Neubauer said the former developer was in phase three of the project when the real estate market took a tumble in 2008. The project ended up back in the hands of the bank after being foreclosed. The price is now listed for \$550,000 — about half of what was once asked.

"The studies he completed are a definite

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plus for any potential developer," she said. "They can learn a lot about what is going on there from those reports."

The former owner, for example, took soil samples to study for possible contaminants, as the site at one time had a service station. Engineering and feasibility studies of the granary are on their way.

The project is likely to be a combination private/public sector said Vandewalle, and grants are already being sought for restoration.

Construction workers who have crawled up inside to shore up and secure the granary were amazed at what they found, Neubauer said.

"Most people don't realize how large it is," she said. "The beams crisscross all the way up. The chutes are all still in there. They were in awe of how it was built."

The former co-op was the workplace for Carl Weidner, a Maplewood resident who worked there for 48 years. Weidner remembers the facility when it was used to clean grain such as corn, oats, wheat, barely and soybeans. It is one of the three granaries that once stood on the city's west side.

"I think it's pretty sturdy yet," Weidner said. "We had a distributorship for flour and sugar — that would come in on rail cars. We would take a whole car of flour to Knaapen Bakery downtown and bring 50-pound bags to all the grocery stores."

Products would be carried by rail to and from the granary across the canal at Madison Avenue next to the former Applebee's (where another granary burned down in 1961) and over to the former train station that now sits vacant near the shipyard, he said. A cheese storage building was once across Maple Street where Glas Coffeehouse is now. Cherry and apple processors were just across the canal.

The new plan would once again make the area a food distribution center with the granary serving as backdrop for a public plaza and four-season market next door. The granary, visible from the Bayview Bridge, would be a trailhead for food tourism similar to what the Door County Maritime Museum is for the maritime tourism in Door County.

Maritime museum

The Door County Maritime Museum is glad to see the plan come together, said Bob

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Desh, the museum's executive director. The museum is working on an expansion of its own that includes an observation tower, higher than the old granary, giving visitors panoramic views of the canal. The west-side plan gives the museum room to expand its exhibits to include boats and other large objects.

"We would love to have neighbors," Desh said. "At present we have an empty nest to the north (the former Applebee's) and the abandoned co-op property to the south, and we are sandwiched in the middle."

Besides having visitors moving past their doors with completed walkways, Desh said, the new plan has a space for large visiting ships, such as the Denis Sullivan, to moor. In the past, the tugboats used by Selvick Marine, temporarily moved to allow the tall ship to dock. The new Vandewalle plan shows no tugboats but instead has a pontoon boat rental and docks for pleasure craft.

"Part of the attraction is having a working waterfront with boatyards still active," Desh said. "Tugboats are an element of Sturgeon Bay important to its character. There are other solutions."

Tugging at the tugs

City aldermen approved the current west-side plan but were dismayed at what appeared to be displacement of the tugboats. Mayor Thad Birmingham reminded aldermen that the plan is "a work in progress."

Formal discussions have not yet begun with key players, including Fincantieri/Bay Shipbuilding Co., whose shipbuilding business is the lifeblood of Sturgeon Bay. Sturgeon Bay's general manager, Gene Caldwell, said his company supports Selvick tugs as an integral part of the marine industry in Sturgeon Bay.

"I look forward to working with the city in an amicable relationship with all parties involved," Caldwell said.

One of the two tugboat operators who works for Bay Ship, Dennis Schermerhorn, said it would be a huge loss to the city if Selvick moved its operation.

"Every time one of the lake boats comes in for repair in the winter, there are at least three Selvick tugs assisting them," Schermerhorn said. "Every time we dock a boat in the graving dock, there's at least two or three. They are absolutely necessary. I just don't see where they would go."

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Schermerhorn, who knows the ins and outs of the canal well, said a tugboat needs a minimum draft of 12 feet and the water is too shallow in other areas. But he favored the waterfront development.

"It doesn't have to be one or the other," he said. "You can do what you want for the waterfront on the shore and leave enough room for Selvick's to operate. It's a great idea — it wouldn't have to interfere or curtail a working waterfront."

The public will be able to weigh in during hearings and citizen participation committees will develop as a community development block grant application is under way. The city is moving quickly to meet November deadlines so, should a developer step forward, the city's building blocks are ready to make the project happen.

» Elements in the West Waterfront design

- » The West Waterfront Redevelopment was developed by a team of marketers from Vandewalle & Associates, who presented their findings and had the plan approved by the city council. Brian Vandewalle, CEO, and his associate, Jolena Presti, sketched out a proposal to turn the former Door County Cooperative site and adjoining city parcel into a four-seasons market.
- » The design includes restoring the granary as an historic icon and providing a nearby spot for a niche hotel with national affiliation.
- » Walkways would connect with the Door County Maritime Museum, and a boardwalk would connect everything from the former Applebee's restaurant to Sawyer Park. Eventually, the walkway would extend farther west to Otumba Park and east to the Department of Natural Resources building.
- » The plan also includes potential apartments across from Bridgeport Resort on Larch Street and apartments with a water view on the corner and lot beside Bayside Bargains at Maple Street and Madison Avenue.
- » The U.S. Coast Guard would relocate their buoys and equipment in a building east of Oregon Street by Sawyer Park. The Coast Guard currently leases the land from the city, and their operation would continue to play an element in what Sturgeon Bay would market as its operating waterfront.
- » Restaurant reuse of the former Applebee's. Suggestions include a new access point to boardwalk and redesigned entrance. Transient slips for diners' use for customers off the water.
- » Pontoon boat rental and other ways for public to access the water.
- » Maple Street commercial building for waterfront outfitters or fishing retailers.



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