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TOP STORY

Bainbridge looks to break ground in 2020

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The many miles of abandoned roads at the former Bainbridge naval training center near Port Deposit are poised to once see life with renewed redevelopment efforts underway.

CECIL WHIG PHOTO BY SCOTT SERIO

ELKTON — The Bainbridge Development Corporation is confident that shovels will break ground at the long-dormant Bainbridge property in early next year, once a deal is reached with the U.S. Navy on site cleanup work.

With an unnamed distribution center eyeing about one-third of the former naval base for a future warehouse, the BDC announced this week that it's drafting an environmental services cooperative agreement (ESCA) to streamline site work.

The ESCA would allow the BDC, a 20-year-old, state-chartered organization tasked with redevelopment of the site, to oversee the work and solicit bids for contractors, with the Navy covering some costs for it. Cecil County would not contribute any matching funds for the site work, according to BDC officials.

Details of the scope of the work and costs are still early, and the Maryland Department of the Environment has to approve all environmental reports before the deal is signed, but BDC Chairman Carl Roberts expects to execute the contract in August, with work starting as early as 2020.

“I’ve never been this optimistic,” Roberts told the council Tuesday. “It’s going to happen. Exactly when it’s going to happen, it shuffles around, but this council is going to see development before the next election.”

The unknown prospect is also considering expanding beyond the 400 acres it’s expressed interested in, with at least four phases with larger and smaller scale buildings. But the main goal remains preparing the 400 acres for development.

Once the ESCA is executed, it would cut dollars and time spent, since it would involve one contractor doing the work for both the BDC and the Navy, explained BDC Project Coordinator Toni Sprenkle.

“We [won’t] have to go back and remove material afterward ... and we would have those environmental teams out in the field with the construction,” she said. “So everything is handled once and we don’t have to go back and repeat the same stages.”

Bainbridge’s pollution has been the bane of development efforts since the BDC took over the 1,200-acre site from the state in 1999. Original plans included mixed-use development of residential, office, retail and industrial usage. But soil contamination unearthed later forced the developer to reassess those plans — and eventually soured the BDC and the U.S. Navy’s relationship when talks turned to who would clean it up.

After the threat of a lawsuit and \$1.5 million in federal grants, additional soil sampling was done in 2017 to complete environmental reports. Later, the Navy indicated it would support redevelopment plans, and the BDC scaled back the residential component and essentially make Bainbridge an industrial and commercial enterprise.

Another blessing was that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and MDE agreed to adopt new remediation standards that lower the amount of Bainbridge that would need to be cleaned up of contaminants. Before, 38% of Bainbridge exceeded standards for contaminants, but now it's been lowered to 2%.

“That took a very big issue and made it very, very, very small, very manageable,” Sprenkle said. “The simple things you'd have to do with a building footprint and parking is now not as cost prohibitive or cumbersome to developers.”

The historic Tome School for Boys campus on the western edge of the property is not included current development plans, but Roberts explained that the end goal is to make that as ready for development as possible. The first step may be relaxing Maryland Historical Trust preservation easements, now that Gov. Larry Hogan signed a bill that authorizes a study to examine the adaptive reuse of historic properties.

The bill will study three historic properties for a report due by the end of the year, and Roberts hopes to get the Tome School among those test cases.

“The concept is that could there be some expectation to maintain the external integrity of historical easement, and allowing flexibility within the walls,” he said. “One of the problems with [Tome School] is those rooms are very small. They're dormitories. No private sector person can do anything with the dormitory.”

Adaptive reuse has been successfully completed in the county in the past, most notably with the former Cecil County Jail in Elkton that was turned into the North Street Senior Residences, but it can also be costly and cumbersome for development.

Looking to the future, Bainbridge will still have to contend with a lack of water and sewer infrastructure. The county is still reviewing proposals for a new sewer treatment plant that would serve Port Deposit and Bainbridge's prospective tenant, while Artesian Water is reportedly in talks to provide water to the site.

Although infrastructure costs are typically borne on the developer, Roberts said he's looking for grants to help ease those costs.

To handle the truck traffic from that site, BDC officials expect some road improvements to be done. Although that has yet to be formally looked at, possible improvements include a left turn lane at the intersection of Perrylawn Drive and Jacob Tome Highway.