SATURDAY, OCT. 13
First Newport Waterfront Walk

Walk the wharfs with us. Use this newsletter as your guide. You'll see why the Friends of the Waterfront has battled for seven long years (so far) to keep our historic wharf streets and rights-of-way to the water open to the public.

You'll see firsthand the damage that uncontrolled development can do to an historic seaport while speculators squeeze all the profits they can out of that waterfront.

Traditional public rights to own and use historic streets to the water were not considered as speculative claims to public lands and won approval after approval to build the most profitable ventures they could.

The result is a wall of condos, hotels, parking lots and timeshares that have grown topsy-turvy — with traditional public access to the harbor line blocked by 45-ft.-high buildings, wooden barriers, chain-link fences and guards.

We believe you'll become angry, too, at this first stage of exploitation of our unique harbor resource.

We think you'll also ask, as we have for years, why there still isn't a master plan, and why the city doesn't claim all historic city streets to the water (Scott's Wharf being the only one claimed so far). Just two items that would assure permanent, public access, not only to the end of the wharfs, but into the harbor itself as our forefathers always assumed was their right.

Right now, the poor economy has temporarily stopped the speculators. But they'll be back. We have to be ready with a thoughtful waterfront development plan that guarantees the right of every citizen to view, enjoy and use Newport Harbor.

Friends of the Waterfront is not alone in recognizing that public access to the waterfront is a must if Newport is to preserve its historic charm as a seaport city.

In 1987 the Rhode Island Coastal Resource Management Council commissioned the University of Rhode Island to develop A Special Area Management Plan For Newport Harbor.

The result is a detailed study of how public access to the waterfront could easily be established, regulated, and maintained. It includes maps showing a public walkway from the Goat Island causeway to King Park which, if implemented, would permanently solve public access problems.

All that is missing is the will to do so. Please take this opportunity to assess and explore the Newport Waterfront with us Saturday, Oct. 13.

Meet us either at the State Pier starting at 9 am for a guided tour, or join us anywhere en route that Saturday morning.

Good solid walking shoes are the uniform of the day, and we are sure this walk will broaden your understanding of our major resource... the one and only Newport Waterfront.

WHARFWALK POINTS OF INTEREST

1. Storer Park —
This park is one of few, unobstructed, public-access ways to the water in Newport. Therefore, we strongly objected when the city included Storer Park in its Traditional Marine District (which starts here and runs along Washington Street, Long Wharf to Perrott Park on Americas Cup Avenue).

Under TMD rules, a developer could possibly expropriate Storer Park's public purpose and build a marine-related business, marina, or even a restaurant.

2. Newport Shipyard —
Newport's last shipyard will move across the Bay in the near future. Developers have drooled over this choice waterfront location and the firm that last owned the land proposed building a large condominium/marina complex.

The city rejected residential development as a violation of zoning laws and, to make sure that use of the property remained marine-related, included the shipyard in its Traditional Marine District. The financing bank foreclosed on this property and bought it at the foreclosure auction.

3. State Pier (South Pier) —
The state purchased this pier to provide dock space for independent fishermen who are being pushed out of inner harbor by speculators. A couple of years ago, $3 million was allocated from a state bond issue to repair and upgrade this pier. To date little has been done in this regard.

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Help preserve what little open

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4. Washington Street Pier —

In 1986, the city, Inn Group Associates (owner of Inn on Long Wharf), and Newport Realty (owner of the land on which sits Newport Oil Company tank and truck filling rack) agreed to maintain historic rights-of-way to the water in this area.

One of those rights-of-way is the Washington Street Pier itself and its access way from Washington Street. Under the agreement, the Inn Group rebuilt the pier, but the public retained the right to walk on the pier (although not to dock boats).

But, The Inn Group recently sued the city and Newport Realty to gain sole ownership of the pier. Will the city give the pier away? They will, unless we fight for it!

5. Gravelly Point —

The Inn on Long Wharf, Newport Oil Company tank and filling station, sewerage pumping station and Newport Yacht Club are on a spit of land known as Gravelly Point. More than 250 years ago town fathers permitted the construction of Long Wharf and the building of warehouses and businesses on Gravelly Point — but only with the strict provision that 30-ft.-wide rights-of-way be maintained along the south shore (running east and west) and at the east and west ends and center of Gravelly Point (running north and south).

Records show that colonial officials protected those rights-of-way for many years by ordering businesses to remove “sheds and other encumbrances” when they encroached on the ways. When the city recently made Gravelly Point a Traditional Marine District, it did not mention, and thus did not preserve, these rights-of-way or the Washington Street Pier. Does this mean the city, after 250 years of protection, will give away these public rights-of-ways to private developers? Past performance says they will if we don’t blow the whistle!

6. Market Square, Bowen’s and Bannister’s Wharfs —

Although purists will disagree, the development of these wharfs is not as bad as it could be. At least there is relatively free access to the waterfront, marinas, and the Aquidneck Lobster Company has preserved the flavor of a working harbor. There is a variety of restaurant and shop buildings, none of which are out-of-scale with historic structures.

Having said that, we would not like to see this concentrated tourist mecca duplicated in other parts of the waterfront. Enough is enough!

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access there is to the harbor!

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7. Scott's Wharf —
Developers want to construct a building on land which includes Scott's Wharf. They sued when the city, in a rare show of backbone, refused a building permit saying that Scott's Wharf is a city street.
Another case concerns rights-of-way on the wharf. These cases are now pending. Note, however, the 10-ft. high chain-link fences at the end of the wharf street which prevent public access to the water.

8. North Commercial and Commercial Wharfs —
These wharfs have a controversial history as landowners have sought to incorporate public streets into their adjacent property.
In fact, it was this type of public landgrabbing that so angered a group of concerned citizens in 1982 that they organized a watchdog association you know now as Friends of the Waterfront.
Despite our protests, abutting landowners are still allowed to block, for their own advantage, these public streets with fences and stored floating docks.

9. Ann Street Pier —
This city-owned pier is an oasis in a desert of privatized waterfront.
It is the only public landing place in the city where visiting yachtspeople can tie up their dinghies for a few hours (for a small fee) while they patronize restaurants and shops.
A city council resolution proposes to use $200,000 of UDAG interest money matched by $200,000 of state open space and recreational area bond funds to extend the pier an additional 400 feet into the harbor and to construct a facility for the harbormaster at the end.
The wharfs are city streets. Historically, most Newport wharfs are simply continuations of city streets. Ann Street Pier is a good example. Look on the map: Ann Street runs from Spring Street, across Thames Street to the pier. According to “upland ownership” law, if Ann Street were extended into the harbor by bulkheading and filling (like most other wharfs), the city would also own the new wharf to its very end.
A competent title-search attorney, hired by the CRMC agrees with this contention and states, for several legal and historic reasons, that the wharfs he studied are indeed city streets. Why, with all this evidence, won’t the city council claim ownership of our wharf streets and thus assure irrefutable and permanent access to the harbor by the public?

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Join us on Waterfront Walk day

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We've been asking city councils this question for years and have yet to receive an answer. Get mad! These are our streets they are giving away!

10. Taylor's Court and Cottrell's Wharf —

Newport Onshore was one of the first, huge, time-share hotels to be built on our wharfs with the blessing of a city council worried about the economic health of the city.

Bending over backwards to appease the speculator, this council allowed the builder to construct the hotel over Taylor's Court and Cottrell's Wharf — but with the provision that the owner provide a public right-of-way to the water. No such right-of-way exists, as you'll see on your tour.

11. Brown & Howard Wharf

Three years ago, the Brown & Howard Wharf Company purchased property on both sides of Brown & Howard Wharf Street, combined the land, including the street, into one plat and proposed to build a marina and condominium complex.

We objected and the city council in office at that time did hold hearings (later abandoned) to determine ownership of the street. Then, in January, 1988, a newly-elected council caved in and gave away the street in an agreement apparently concocted by speculator lawyers. Later that year and in 1989, Friends of the Waterfront hired attorney Arlene Violet to contest the developer's application to the Coastal Resources Management Council.

After six months of hearings, the CRMC approved the development even though it violated several of its own regulations. The speculators have since run into economic problems and the wharf and development rights are scheduled to be auctioned soon.

Note on the map that Brown & Howard Wharf and Lee's Wharf (on the south side of the proposed development) are extensions of publicly-owned Dennison Street and Young Street, respectively.

12. Howard Wharf —

This wharf just to the north of the Pier Restaurant, was the site of the well-known Williams & Manchester shipyard (which moved to another state where marine-related industries are more appreciated). The speculator, who purchased this property, proposed building a huge complex encompassing a number of expensive condominiums and a parking garage for 420 cars.

Given the abysmal track record of Newport city councils and the CRMC, only a poor economy has prevented the construction of this monstrosity.

Note: West Howard Street is an extension of Howard Street. The CRMC recognized this and declared Howard Wharf a public right-of-way.

13. Spring Wharf, West Extension Street, Waite's Wharf

This is the site of the proposed $10 million Newport Coastal Partners development which would include the old, four-story, brick Newport Electric building on West Howard Street and run south to Waite's Wharf.

The project, as proposed, would include four historic and public wharf streets and violate our present zoning codes. Therefore, the developers asked for, and got from our compliant city council, a special meeting at which they requested special zoning for the project.

You'll recall our city council's proposed Planned Unit District ordinance in 1989 which would have allowed our city council to make deals with speculators to change our zoning laws any way they felt like it — completely bypassing our zoning and planning boards and the right of citizens to appeal.

The council deliberated for about 10 minutes and then approved the request. Friends of the Waterfront led the fight to postpone (we hope permanently) this ordinance that would have meant millions of dollars in profits to speculators and large landowners to the detriment of the public.

The developers have run into serious financial trouble, but are still fighting to rezone this area into another hotel, more condominiums, more shops and as big a marina as they can squeeze in. Naturally they want to absorb the related public rights of way!

Note once again that Spring Wharf is an extension of Pope Street and West Extension Street (also known as Sisson's Wharf) is an extension of Extension Street.

The CRMC has declared Waite's Wharf, Sisson's Wharf (West Extension Street) and Spring Wharf to be public rights-of-way. Their title-search lawyer also stated he believed these streets to be publicly-owned city streets.

14. Wellington —

Last summer Wellington Hotel Associates gave the city an easement on a 15-ft-wide public walkway along the water from Codington Wharf to Wellington Avenue in return for permission to convert some timeshare units into full time condominiums on the property.

As usual, the city makes these agreements and then does nothing to enforce them. The walkway is not marked and fences prevent access at each end.

WALK INFORMATION HOTLINE: 846-2074