

Mayor tries to ease coal dock concerns

Written by Kristyn Halbig Ziehm
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Huebner acknowledges complications in obtaining land but says Port is committed to developing lakefront site

Members of Port Washington's coal dock committee on Tuesday asked officials if, after months of planning and thousands of dollars in consulting fees, the city will be able to develop this valuable lakefront property.

Recent Ozaukee Press stories reporting that obtaining control of the land will not be as simple as officials anticipated have raised questions in people's minds about whether the project has stalled, they said.

Mayor Scott Huebner, while acknowledging unanticipated complications, said the city remains committed to the coal dock project, adding he is confident the city will be able to gain control of the land.

"The city is going to get the land," Huebner said. "The question is just the course we are taking."

When the city began talks in earnest about planning for the property, state officials told them the easiest and quickest way to obtain control of the land was to lease it from the state, he said.

The other option would be to obtain a lakebed grant from the Legislature.

Officials followed that advice, believing the city would directly lease the property from the state. But earlier this year, the state informed the city and We Energies that only the utility could lease the coal dock from the state. To control the dock, the city would have to sublease it from We Energies.

Huebner, who called the information "a curveball" that neither the city nor We Energies expected, said he sees benefits to the city in either method.

"There's as much good in being the sublessee, I think, as in a lakebed grant," Huebner said. "It gives us some rights. The state continues to have a vested interest in it. We Energies will have a vested interest."

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The lease arrangement would be for 50 years, with We Energies having the first right to renew the lease. Huebner said he would like the city to have the second right to the lease, so if the utility does not want to renew the document, the city would have that option.

Discovery World in Milwaukee was built under a lease arrangement, Huebner said.

“They’re not worried about losing the land,” he said. “The state’s not going to let us invest millions of dollars and then take the land away.”

The city can’t afford to let the opportunities presented by the coal dock slip away, said Richard Hitchcock, president of Hitchcock Design Group, which was hired by the city to design the coal dock development.

“This opportunity is so immense. It would be a shame to have it stall because of these questions,” he said.

Although the country is in a recession, this is the ideal time to pursue such a massive public project, he said.

“There’s no better time to think big,” Hitchcock said. “People are looking for things that can be uplifting and give the community hope.

“And you will never buy site improvements as cheaply as you will in the next 12 months.”

Although the overall cost of the coal dock development plan is estimated at almost \$30 million, even a relatively small initial investment will show people the potential of the land, Hitchcock said.

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“For \$4.5 million to \$5 million, you get something you would be pretty proud to show off,” he said.

The city is working on applications for three grants — Department of Natural Resources non-point and stewardship grants and a Coastal Management grant — to help fund portions of the project, he said.

In addition to grants, other potential funding sources include donations from individuals and foundations, local appropriations and the proceeds from the sale of 40 acres of land We Energies will be donating to the city, he said.

Hitchcock broke the design work into eight segments with potential timetables and rough cost estimates, adding these are subject to change:

Work on the entry to the coal dock and installation of a large portion of the harborwalk, which he said could occur in 2010 or 2011, and would cost roughly \$4.5 million.

The south dock, which would largely be converted into a natural area with trails, could be done in 2010 or 2011 for \$1 million.

That cost, Hitchcock said, is based on the city’s design, but We Energies does not have to follow that plan. It could develop and implement its own plan that takes into account state requirements for the property.

Naturalizing the Sauk Creek area near the entrance to the coal dock in 2011 to 2012 could cost \$1 million.

Improvements to Wisconsin Street, which would likely be done as the construction road through the We Energies site is improved, is estimated at \$1 million.

Creation of a floating pier on the northeast end of the dock where boaters could tie up for a short time

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could be done in 2013 or 2014 for \$1 million.

The east end of the dock, including walkways, lighting, a natural area and a pedestrian bridge to the south coal dock, could be done in 2014 or 2015 for an estimated \$4 million.

Creation of a children's garden or themed, interactive area in 2016 or 2017 is estimated to cost \$4.5 million.

Construction of a two-story, multi-use building on the north side of the dock in 2017 or 2018 at an estimated cost of \$10 million.

A bridge from Rotary Park to the coal dock could be built in 2019 or 2020 for \$1 million.

The most immediate concern is to come up with a grading plan for the coal dock area, said Bill Schmidt of Hitchcock Design.

We Energies is preparing to remediate the property, and the plan is needed so the utility can do rough grading that will facilitate the city's plans for development of the dock, he said.

We Energies is scheduled to turn the coal dock land over to the city by the end of 2010, Schmidt said, but its work is ahead of schedule. The utility could turn the property over to the city by September 2010, he said.

Huebner said the Common Council will look at the plans for the coal dock and set priorities for the property sometime in late April or May.

After the grading plan is completed and priorities set, fund-raising work will begin, he said.

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