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Port officials to unveil details of utility agreements that will pave way for development of lakefront park

The Port Washington Common Council was expected on Wednesday, Feb. 16, to begin public discussions of the leases for the coal dock property the city plans to develop into a premier lakefront park..

City Administrator Mark Grams said Tuesday the leases, which have been negotiated over the past several years, are “99% completed.”

The remaining changes, he added, won’t be “anything earth-shattering.”

The leases are required because the coal dock was created by filling in the lakefront in the 1930s, when We Energies needed an area for freighters to unload the coal that fueled its power plant.

Since the dock is no longer needed by the utility, ownership reverts to the state. We Energies, which has riparian rights to the property, will lease the 20 acres from the State of Wisconsin and sublet the land to the city.

The main assurances the city has sought are that the docks have been properly remediated and that the city has no liability for anything remaining from We Energies’ use of the dock to store coal, Grams said.

On the south dock, the city also wants to ensure that if the utility expands its power plant, We Energies will be required to relocate the bike and pedestrian path planned for the property, he said.

These concerns have been addressed, Grams said.

The proposed leases provide the city 50 years to use the north and south coal docks, with a separate lease providing access through We Energies property to the docks.

The city also has the right of first refusal to renegotiate and renew the leases for 50 years.

The three leases each call for an annual payment of $10, a total of $30 annually.

In an apparent nod to the city's plan to build a community center on the north coal dock, there is a provision that if the city leases the north dock and generates a substantial amount of revenue, the utility will receive a portion as additional rent. The exact amounts are not specified in a draft document released recently.

The city's use of the coal docks is limited to recreational purposes, improved navigation and construction of harbor facilities.

The proposed leases call for the city to only make such improvements as called for in the master plan for the coal dock unless the city receives approval from the utility.

On the south dock, We Energies is required to ensure that a 10-foot-wide paved pedestrian and bike path is maintained to connect the north dock with the south beach.

The sublease calls for the utility to clean up the coal dock land and monitor the groundwater there for two years, as required by the DNR, and to repair the sheetpile walls surrounding the dock, officials have said.

The city would then be responsible for maintaining the north side of the sheetpile wall on the north dock, where it plans to install boat docks, they said.

The city is preparing to spend millions of dollars to improve the former coal dock, turning what was once considered an eyesore into the centerpiece of downtown and an attraction that will draw visitors and residents to the lakefront.

The leases will not only open the coal dock property to the public, they will also pave the way for the city to implement an ambitious plan for an estimated $30 million development that includes walking trails, a multi-use community center, themed interactive area, floating docks for visiting boats and improvements to Wisconsin Street.

Officials have also expressed hope the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration will build a headquarters for a proposed shipwreck sanctuary on the dock.

The city is poised to build much of the infrastructure for the dock in the coming year or two. It has received a $250,000 recreation grant from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources that will pay half the cost of building a promenade walkway with lighting along much of the north side of the dock. The promenade is expected to be built

this year.

The grant, however, is contingent on the leases for the coal dock being approved.