

Residents pitch ideas for coal dock park

Written by KRISTYN HALBIG ZIEHM
Wednesday, 17 October 2012 18:21

Proposals for lakefront land offered at meeting include kite festival, ski area, planetarium, museum and more

Ideas as disparate as a kite festival, cross-county ski area, a planetarium and a shipwreck museum were suggested for Port Washington's coal dock during a public information meeting Tuesday.

About a dozen people attended the meeting to hear about infrastructure that is being constructed on the dock and to propose ideas for uses of the park.

"We're looking for ideas, either for specific events or permanent improvements," Public Works Director Rob Vanden Noven said, noting that many of the uses included in a 2009 master plan are concepts.

Port Washington Tourism Director Kathy Tank, a member of the Coal Dock Committee, cited a proposed community center on the coal dock.

"At the time, we envisioned the historical society museum to be out there," she said. "Now, they have a home in downtown. We need to look at that."

Dan Micha suggested the city create a planetarium on the dock, noting there is no such structure nearby.

"I'm thinking about a draw," he said. "We can enjoy this as a community year-round. There's no reason a 9 or 10-year-old can't go there and get excited and learn."

The city should approach We Energies' foundation to seek funding for the proposed community center on the dock, Micha added.

"Approach them, get the check and get it done," he said.

John Sigwart asked whether the city had considered building a structure that could create revenue for the community, particularly on that portion of the dock that isn't governed by the state's public trust doctrine. That document requires the dock, most of which is filled lakebed, to be used for public purposes, not private ones.

That's unlikely since the city is leasing the dock from We Energies, said Vanden Noven, noting that the utility is not interested in allowing the city to do that.

One man asked how realistic it is to think the city could become headquarters for a proposed shipwreck sanctuary by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration with a flagship building on the coal dock.

When the sanctuary was proposed in 2010, NOAA officials stressed that its creation would

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take a long time and was in the early stages.

Today, creation of the sanctuary is stalled at the federal level, Tank said.

“If they ever move it off center, we’re in the running,” she said. “Stalled doesn’t mean dead.”

But with federal budget struggles looming, the immediate prospects aren’t good, she said.

Bill Moran suggested the city consider holding a kite festival on the dock, noting the lack of power lines and the lake winds would make it an ideal location.

“I want to go out there and fly a kite with my granddaughter,” he said.

Several people spoke to the need to have portable toilets available on the dock, at least until the proposed community building is constructed.

The coal dock park, which was approved in concept in an agreement between We Energies and the city in 2001, is envisioned as a four-season park that will both the community and attract regional visitors.

The south dock, which will be connected to the north dock by a pedestrian bridge, is home to a bird sanctuary and a pedestrian pathway that leads to the south beach.

But the 17-acre north dock holds infinite promise for the city, Vanden Noven said.

The city is currently building a 1,000-foot-long promenade along the north side of the dock, an entry drive, parking, east-side boardwalk and docking spaces for tall ships and other large vessels.

The former crane rail, which runs near the promenade, will be overlaid with concrete to create a bench. Wooden benches will also be installed every 100 feet.

A World War II memorial has already been approved for the site. It will be built on the southeast corner of the dock.

At Tuesday’s Common Council meeting, Ald. Jim Vollmar said the city should reconsider its decision not to install a railing along the promenade, saying there needs to be a barrier to keep people from falling into the lake.

“That whole area is going to be open,” Vollmar said, adding that ladders the city installed to help anyone who falls get back onto land aren’t adequate.

Vanden Noven, who noted that the Coal Dock Committee had not expressed any concerns about the lack of fencing, said it’s common not to have a railing in areas where large ships moor

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because it gives maximum flexibility in docking these boats.

The promenade is 18-1/2-feet wide, giving people plenty of room to walk, he added.

“In summertime, we have hundreds of people navigating the breakwater, which is much narrower, without falling in,” Vanden Noven said. “It hasn’t been an issue.”

The issue will be placed on the next Coal Dock Committee agenda for discussion, he added.

Mayor Tom Mlada said he expects Tuesday’s public informational meeting will be the first in a series of community forums on the coal dock, noting the community needs to help determine the uses for what will be a showpiece park for the city.

“I certainly don’t view that one meeting as the be all and end all,” Mlada said. “My hope is we get people to understand they can still play a role in determining what we need that coal dock to be.”