

Fort Dupont project combines waterfront development with historic preservation

By [JON HURDLE \(/PEOPLE/JON-HURDLE\)](#) • AUG 19, 2016



On the west side of Fort Dupont's sprawling coastal campus, a yellow backhoe is taking bites out a squat red-brick building that once housed state-run medical facilities.

The demolition is just the start of the redevelopment of the 325-acre historic site that will eventually include a new residential community, shops and an entertainment center while preserving many former military buildings that date back to the 19th century.

The developer, the Fort Dupont Redevelopment and Preservation Corp., plans to remake the base as a waterfront community where residents can live amid – and in some cases in – renovated military buildings, and enjoy the proximity of the Delaware River and the Chesapeake & Delaware Canal.

Two years after Gov. Jack Markell signed legislation setting up the entity to redevelop the formerly state-owned property, and five months after taking title to it, the corporation is pressing ahead with the plan. It expects construction to start in early 2017 on the first phase of new housing.

Jeffrey Randol, executive director of the corporation, said he expects to select a builder for the first phase of new homes by October, after hearing recommendations from the corporation's board.

The first phase will include 75 new single-family homes on the west side of the site, close to the canal that separates it from Delaware City. The early work will also include the sale of 12 lots to builders or private individuals, and the renovation of three former officers' homes that will be rented to private tenants.

The officers' homes, built in the early years of the 20th century, will be kept as rental properties rather than sold, so that the corporation can retain control over their historic character, Randol said. The buildings, whose roofs are currently covered with blue tarps, will eventually be rented for \$1,500-\$1,700 a month, he said.

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Two of the historic structures were moved on barges from Fort Mott, NJ in the 1930s to provide a quick addition to officers' accommodation as the Delaware base expanded.

The base's history began in 1863 when it was built as a coastal defense during the Civil War, and that role expanded during the First and Second World Wars. It is now designated as a National Historic District, and has 63 surviving buildings that contribute to that status.

Funding for the project will come from a variety of sources including state and federal grants, private investment, historic tax credits, debt, and the sale of land parcels, Randol said.

In one indication of the engineering challenges facing the project, the site for the first phase of new construction will be raised by three feet to take it out of the flood plain, and remove the need for future owners to have flood insurance. Elevating that section of the land will require dumping 80,000 cubic yards of dirt, or enough to fill 8,000 trucks, Randol said.

The preservation plan includes a theater built in 1933, and a nearby PX building that served the base until it was deactivated for military use in 1948. A new courtyard will be built between the two buildings, and the three spaces will become part of an entertainment complex overlooking the Delaware River, Randol said.

The entertainment venue will be on the edge of Fort Dupont's centerpiece, an 18-acre lawn that was once used as a parade ground and will be used for parking during public events. The space, currently used for community events like soccer games and dog-frisbee competitions, will not be paved over to make a parking lot, Randol said.

Facing the parade ground is a 30,000-square foot former barracks building that will be made available for development, said Randol, who works out of a 1910 building that was once occupied by Ulysses S. Grant III, grandson of President Ulysses S. Grant, when the younger man was commander of Fort Dupont.

Elsewhere on the base, the preservation plan includes a lookout tower that is the last remaining part of a camp that housed some 3,000 German prisoners of war during the Second World War.

Randol said he hopes to attract new residents who want to live by the water in a location where they have access to a 150-slip marina and a trail system, and which is at the northern end of the nature-rich Delaware Bayshore region. The marina will be part of a "retail village" with shops on the ground floor and about 175 apartments on the second and third floors.

The new development aims to integrate with its natural surroundings rather than replacing them. "We're not going to build real estate across the riverfront ecosystem," Randol said.

The project has been welcomed by neighboring Delaware City, a community of about 1,700 people that has been prevented from expanding because it is currently bordered by the Delaware City Refinery on one side and the Delaware River on the other.

In May this year, the city solved its space problem by annexing Fort Dupont, which is now legally part of Delaware City. That move has boosted its prospects for economic growth and will provide more tax revenue, said city manager Dick Cathcart.

"With the annexation of land and a residential/commercial development, we're looking an additional 500-600 houses over there, and that has the potential of nearly doubling our population," he said.

But the biggest advantage of annexation, Cathcart said, is that it will allow the city to influence the nature of the Fort Dupont development.

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The annexation was put to a referendum among Delaware City residents, and was approved by a 2-1 margin, overcoming opponents' arguments that the move would increase traffic and add to the city's costs, Cathcart said.

When the new development is complete, Delaware City's tax revenue would grow by an estimated \$1 million - \$2 million a year, almost doubling its current income, Cathcart said.

The new revenue will help pay for additional services like public safety, code enforcement and trash collection that Delaware City will have to provide for the new development, which could include some 500 new homes when it is complete. The additional income will also make it easier for the city to afford 24-7 policing, which is already scheduled to begin in mid-2017.

In seeking residents for the new development, officials will be emphasizing its out-of-the-way location along the waterfront.

"People are looking for places where they can be more isolated from the hustle and bustle of the rest of the county," Cathcart said. "The major advantage that this site offers is waterfront property, and that's very rare in Delaware, especially in New Castle County."

While the corporation is being guided by a master plan, the details of how the development evolves will be determined by the market, Randol said.

"We've got a lot of other land here, and we're still evaluating how we want to develop that out," he said. "If we have more demand for higher density or some condos, or there is more demand for detached singles, then that's going to dictate how many units."