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## Governor Plans to Redevelop Fort DuPont

At Fort DuPont, preserving the past means protecting against a certain future of sea-level rise. Can it be done affordably?

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PHOTO BY CARLOS ALEJANDRO

Critics may question whether it's wise to redevelop the flood-prone Fort DuPont area of Delaware City, but the project's main champion says it's worth looking into, come what may. "It's a really beautiful piece of property in a great location, but it's under-used," Gov. Jack Markell says. "Environmentally, and in terms of economic development, it's something good for the community." Last summer, Markell signed legislation that would create the Fort DuPont Redevelopment and Preservation Corporation. The authority will be charged with raising funds for and coordinating the redevelopment of the state-owned historic area into a live-work-play community that would also be a destination for outdoor recreation.

The 325-acre site on the Delaware River, a National Historic District, is bounded by the Chesapeake & Delaware Canal to the south and the Branch Canal on the north, adjacent to Delaware City. The area encompasses the Governor Bacon Health Center and Fort DuPont State Park. The fort dates to the Civil War, when it was built as an auxiliary to Fort Delaware on nearby Pea Patch Island. It was used for military purposes through World War II when, among other uses, it housed German prisoners of war. It was later acquired by the state. With little money available for its upkeep, however, the property and its historically significant buildings have fallen into a state of neglect. When the heads of state parks and the Department of Health and Social Services showed the area to Markell several years ago, he saw the need for historic preservation and the potential for significant economic development.

Two years ago Markell and local legislators rallied stakeholders, from state officials to Delaware City residents, to create a vision for the area. Current plans for the property—considered the northern gateway to the Delaware Bayshore and the eastern terminus of the Michael N. Castle Trail on the C&D Canal—call for the preservation of existing buildings, development of a 150-slip marina on Branch Canal, a bridge to downtown Delaware City, waterfront and other new housing, some commercial space, ball fields, an extensive network of trails through the surrounding woods and wetlands, and some wildlife habitat restoration. Markell describes the vision and the development authority as similar to the Riverfront Development Corporation in Wilmington, though on a smaller scale. The project is not without obstacles. There are some concerns about hazardous materials at an Army landfill onsite. Existing transportation and utility infrastructure would need to be improved. And the core of the property—surrounded by water on three sides—sits within FEMA's 100-year floodplain. Hence the criticism from some environmentalists, who believe Markell, concerned about sea-level rise and increasing coastal flooding, is contradicting his own efforts to discourage development in other flood-prone areas.

Markell says that's not the case. Development, if possible, will be required to meet strict flood-plain management standards. "The science will drive the development. The further we get into the analysis, the more we'll figure out," he says. "Our eyes have to be wide open going into it." That means acknowledging the possibility that the cost of adapting to sea-level rise may ultimately preclude redevelopment. Concerns about flooding have in the past discouraged private investment. "The alternative was to just let it fall apart," the governor says. "We thought this just made sense."