

# MIDDLETOWN TRANSCRIPT

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## The monumental task of redeveloping Fort DuPont

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Restoration and redevelopment of Fort DuPont to take years. Some 23 historic buildings in the 325-acre complex sit vacant, many more in need of repairs. Fort DuPont State Park currently least visited park in Delaware.

October 16 marked the start of something new for the 151-year-old Fort DuPont – the decaying former Civil War and World War I & II military base in Delaware City.

After years of discussions, a newly created board tasked with the rehabilitation of the 325-acre complex will hold its first meeting on Thursday.

The Fort DuPont Redevelopment and Preservation Corporation will start by creating a public-private partnership that will be in charge of transforming the base into a magnet of commerce and tourism in the region.

“The state doesn’t have the money to redevelop it, that’s why we need private investors to make this vision a reality,” said Rep. Valerie Longhurst (D-Delaware City, Bear).

The restoration of Fort DuPont lacks a price tag yet, but it’s expected to take several years.

“This won’t be a sprint, it’ll be a marathon. It’s not going to happen overnight,” added Longhurst.

A similar restoration effort using public and private funds is currently underway in the town of Yorklyn, north of Hockessin, where the old National Vulcanized Fiber (NVF) Plant is being rehabilitated by the state as a park and conservation area.

Currently, Fort DuPont is the least visited historical site in the entire state, with at least 23 boarded up abandoned buildings; two buildings that have been condemned, and about 14 others which are threatened and in need of repairs, according to a state commissioned assessment.

In addition, the roads and sidewalks in the complex are cracked and in disrepair, and the parade grounds used for Delaware City Day and other events, flood every time it rains.

The campus is occupied by a few tenants, including Governor Bacon Health Center, Fort DuPont State Park, the Delaware National Guard, and several state buildings.

Rescuing Fort DuPont from further deterioration will be a major undertaking for the 11 members of the redevelopment and preservation board, which is made up of individuals from different state and municipal agencies including from the Delaware Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control (DNREC), the Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS), appointees from Delaware City, and others.

Longhurst along with State Sen. Nicole Poore (D-Delaware City, New Castle), sponsored a bill earlier this year to create the redevelopment and preservation corporation after three community meetings where dozens of stakeholders helped give shape to the final master plan.

The bill received the approval of Governor Jack Markell and signed it into law on July 23.

“We have two choices. We can abandon our history or we can restore it. And we’re here because we have chosen to do everything we can to restore it,” said Markell at the bill’s signing ceremony. “Today we take the next major step in helping Fort DuPont reach its great potential.”

The bill also includes a provision for the creation of a 13-member advisory council which will work with the redevelopment board through areas such as historic preservation, parks and recreation, and real estate.

## **The master plan**

Fort DuPont's redevelopment master plan was put together by Sasaki Associates, a well-known Massachusetts-based urban planning company. Sasaki has helped design over 260 projects across the country and the world, including the principal venue for the 2008 Beijing Olympics, and The Chicago Riverwalk.

Architects at the firm have also undertaken projects of revitalizing decommissioned military installations, most notably The Presidio of San Francisco in California which is visited by over five million people every year, according to the National Park Service.

In 2012 and 2013, Sasaki representatives had the chance to hear from the community and different stakeholders at three public meetings about their vision for a rehabilitated Fort DuPont.

"The community meetings were very innovative and were more than just hand-raising. People who attended worked in small groups and took an active part in sharing their ideas, and they were well-received," said Laura Lee, DNREC's program manager and park historian for Fort Delaware and Fort DuPont. "It's so important to make the community feel a part of the planning process because they know the area more than anyone. Between the meetings and the interactive website everyone was a part of the planning process."

The master plan was finalized in April and calls for renovating historic structures, connecting downtown Delaware City to the Fort, building residential facilities, restaurants, retail space, biking and hiking trails, and transforming the Fort's waterfront into a "Marina Village," which will be the highlight of the project.

"The master plan was very well thought-out, and I felt it took into consideration historic preservation, sea level rise issues, and a solid real estate valuation. Some players at the table are more enthusiastic about development while others are focused on preserving the history, and that's always been a concern," said Lee.

"The master plan truly balanced all interests and gave us a great road map for moving forward in a way that will foster success."

## **The challenges**

Addressing flooding, sea level rise, and eyesores such as the onsite waste water treatment plant, and a nearby Army landfill, are challenges that officials are confident can be overcome.

Matthew P. Chesser, DNREC's environmental program administrator of parks and recreation, said that the state will look for the best engineering minds to help mitigate the flooding and sea level rise concerns.

"With the state in the driver's seat, we'll show new innovation, best practices, technologies, and ideas to mitigate the site," said Chesser. "It'll be a living laboratory where we'll all learn."

As far as the landfill the EPA is already tackling clean-up efforts, but the waste water treatment plant will be, "a necessary evil," Chesser said.

"With the proper landscaping and proper design we can have people not see that," he added.

Though the bulk of the money for other major repairs and improved infrastructure will have to come from private money, there are some things that the state can begin doing now.

One of DNREC's first tasks will be to solve the drainage problems of the open lawn, which is used for the Delaware City parade grounds. Pedestrian amenities, such as sidewalks will also be added, Chesser said.

## **Economic benefits**

Those involved in the long-term redevelopment project said that a rehabilitated Fort DuPont will bring economic benefits and jobs to surrounding communities, especially to Delaware City, which hopes to annex Fort DuPont through a referendum.

Business owner and president of Delaware City Main Street, Kevin Whittaker, said that the economic benefits will be great for business and the city.

"There is going to be a large influx of people once it's developed and commerce will follow that," said Whittaker. "It's going to expand the tax base. Everyone is very excited; it'll be a win-win for the city."

The Marina Village will be a highlight of the project, according to Longhurst. She expects that the waterfront will attract more boats to the area and people who'll want to eat at the city's restaurants.

"We are surrounded by this beautiful water which lends itself to a little more economic development here in Delaware City...It's a key selling point to the Fort DuPont project," Longhurst said. "I'm very excited that there are so many key elements with the historic preservation of it, the waterfront, the open space where children can play, it brings us a whole host of ideas and great development opportunity in Delaware City."

Longhurst also said that the state will allocate the money to hire an executive director for the new redevelopment and preservation board. The executive director will assure that all pieces for the project are moving forward as well as look for ways to bring the private investment.

The best estimate for when the project will be completed is somewhere between 10 to 20 years, according to Whittaker. "It depends on the market and how much public investment it gets," he added.

For Delaware City Mayor Stanley Green, Fort DuPont's rehabilitation will be a legacy for future generations and an example of what can be accomplished when community, municipal, and state government come together to save a piece of Delaware's history.

"For Delaware City this is a tremendous opportunity," said Green. "Our children will one day thank us and all the people that help make this possible. We are doing this for them."