

# Willoughby ferry site awaits development

By JANET LANGSTON  
Compass staff writer

It's just a postage-stamped parcel of land, with pilings leaning forward as if to touch the sturdy and straight ones there, but at least three groups want to be part of its future.

It's the ferry land of developers' dreams, one of the few city waterfront properties open for development.

The land is in Willoughby Bay, across the water from the Norfolk waterfront, on the Willoughby Bay side of the peninsula jutting up. It is the site of the old Norfolk to Hampton ferry, which carried passengers across Hampton Roads until the bridge-tunnel shouldered the load approximately 20 years ago.

Construction materials used to repair the old bridge-tunnel are stored and transported from the ferry property now, but the state is expected to put the land up for sale when construction is completed.

Bidders are waiting.

Richard Harrison, partner in Willoughby Bay Marina, and Lane Briggs, owner of Rebel Marine Services, are interested in the land, but have generally agreed the property will be offered first to the city of Norfolk.

There are many of us to the deal.

If the city does buy the land, both Briggs and Harrison will submit proposals for its development as a marina.

If the city doesn't buy it, Briggs has said he will try to buy it.

Even if the city buys the land, it doesn't know what it will do with it, but both men think developers will be invited to submit plans.

"The last I heard, the city didn't have the money to buy it," Briggs said. "They had the first option last year and turned it down."

"I don't think the taxpayers are willing to let the city spend that kind of money for recreational use and hope to get it back in the long run," Harrison said.

Ronald W. Mauie, assistant to the city manager, agrees.

"We're not going to buy it unless we can get it developed as soon as we can. We wouldn't buy it and let it sit there vacuous for several years."

"We don't have a firm, preferred appraiser. We're just interested in getting the land into private development and on the tax rolls," Mauie said.

The city wants a visitor's center for travelers coming off the Hampton Roads bridge-tunnel, but opinions on an ideal location vary.

One suggestion has been the ferry property, but more recent negotiations have pinpointed one acre of a 10-acre Navy tract off 4th View Street for the center, leaving the ferry property still open to speculation.

"The Navy has expressed willingness to go along with the idea, but that verbal commitment has to be transferred into legal documents," Mauie said.

But back to the ferry property.

"A marina would be ideal but I think we would be open to other ideas, too," Mauie said. "If somebody was interested in building a motel, we'd be interested in talking with them."

"I've heard that the state has other people interested in the land. If that's true and they make an attractive offer, we'd step out of the way."

"We're interested in getting it into productive use," he repeated. "If the state can find somebody without us getting involved as the middle man, that's fine with us."

Harrison and Briggs, who both want to expand their

businesses, both feel even more strongly that the city needs another marina in Willoughby.

"Regardless of who gets it, I would like to see a marina built, because we need one," Briggs said.

"The old ferry property is small, but it does have possibilities," Harrison said. "This area, to many, carries tremendous potential with its unused land and water space. There's room for 500 slips there."

Even if the state acted today, sold the land to Norfolk and the city leased it out immediately, it would be about two years before a marina, port or slips were open. The land needs landfill, dredging and breakwater construction as well as a raft of environmental use permits.

The thought of the dubious process almost discouraged Harrison, but after looking into the Navy land for himself and at some waterfront property at Little Creek, he's still interested in the ferry property.

The contrast between the two marinas looks like a rich-man-poor-man example. Harrison's Willoughby business is one of the few with warehouse storage for 50 boats. Briggs, on the other hand, has 22 slips but says, "I have good a chance as anyone."

Whether either one will have the opportunity to bid on the property remains in the city's hands, that is, if the state allows it to buy the land.

Your move, Virginia.



Courtesy photo by Janet Langston

Lane Briggs of Rebel Marine Services

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