

Lookout Column for 1-17

Now that the Democratic leadership on Smith Hill no longer has a dubious casino venture to push along, thanks to the wisdom of Rhode Island voters last November, attention has returned to the subject of real economic development possibilities for our state. In answer to the question this column posed after the election, “If not a casino, what else?” House Speaker Bill Murphy has turned his attention to Quonset Point and specifically to the port there.

Murphy wants to reexamine the port at Quonset Point and the issue of a developing a deep-water container facility. He is of the opinion that the port, with its two piers and a total of 40 acres of adjacent land, is a major asset that’s “underutilized.” With that pronouncement Murphy, incontestably the most powerful politician in the state, will soon set in motion hearings to examine what more can be done at the port and whether or not a deep-water container facility is the way to go.

The state of Rhode Island has already been down this path before, and not so long ago. During the 1990s when Lincoln Almond was governor the issue of a container port at Quonset turned into a battle royal between the Governor and local officials and area residents. The state spent millions studying the issue but couldn’t find a private port developer that was interested in working with the state. More decisively, vociferous local NIMBY opposition all but sunk the initiative, and with the election of Don Carcieri from neighboring East Greenwich in 2003, the container port idea became history.

Now it’s back. In calling the port underutilized Murphy is also casting a light on the greater Quonset entity itself, which consists not only of the port but a sizeable industrial park and an 8,000’ runway.

It’s a bit ironic that politicians like Bill Murphy want to take a fresh look at Quonset, which they see as not living up to its potential, because exactly the opposite is happening within the park right now. That’s principally because a revitalized management team at the Quonset Development Corporation (QDC) – a subsidiary of the RI Economic Development Corporation – has a plan and a vision for advancing Quonset Point that is beginning to show real progress.

Evidence of that progress begins with a drive down the new Route 403 in North Kingstown. For those of you who can remember crawling into Quonset for the annual summer air show in years past, today’s Route 403 is the difference between a wide and sleek highway connector and a rural road.

That’s just the beginning: If QDC’s current effort to win town approval for a \$120 million mixed use retail development project within the park gets the go ahead – and indications are that it will – ground will be broken this year for the Quonset Gateway. The Gateway, which sits on the Davisville side of the park and faces Post Road, will bring a Lowe’s home center and a Kohl’s department store as anchors to the retail

project, which will also include smaller retail tenants, a supermarket, restaurants and office space. QDC has also an agreement in hand for a Hampton Inn to be situated across from the Gateway center, providing the area's first hotel.

Taken together, a hotel and retail center with restaurants will be a boon not only for Quonset itself but for the revitalization of Post Road. Gateway will also provide the park's 153 existing businesses with "amenities" that employees within the park desperately need. Gateway will also make the Quonset Point industrial park a more attractive place to locate a business, so marketing the park to future prospective businesses will be that much easier.

It's a smart move on the part of QDC, and better still it doesn't require taxpayer support because it comes with a private developer to do the heavy lifting, New Boston Development Partners. There has been some criticism of the Gateway project because of the inclusion of a "big box" outlet like Lowe's, but, according to QDC officials, the project was first marketed as a retail "village boutique" development and didn't get very far in terms of commitments from retailers. Once the big boxes were in place, however, prospective tenants began to show an active interest.

The industrial park continues to add business tenants. One of reasons for the park's emerging success – and this pertains to the port as well – is that Quonset's infrastructure is now in place. Infrastructure in relation to Quonset means roads, bridges and rail. The new Route 403 speeds traffic in and out of the park and rail improvements in the form of a third rail just come on line last October.

The truth is, Quonset Point's potential as a platform for economic development couldn't reach its full potential until these infrastructure improvements were realized. Perhaps they took too long to be achieved but they are now in place and they will play their part in taking Quonset to the next level.

There's a lot more to report on Quonset but I'll leave that to a second column. The port is more active today than perhaps Speaker Murphy realizes, and a deep-water container facility may not be the best way to go. QDC officials we spoke to say they are open to new ideas for the port and concede that the port can do better. They have some interesting ideas in the works for utilization of the land and water close by the piers.

We'll examine the port more closely – and the adjacent airfield – in another column on today's Quonset Point.

Until next week...Lookout.