

Applying Place-based Coastal Management Tools to the Redevelopment of Rhode Island's Urban "Metro Bay" Shoreline

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Introduction

As with many coastal urban communities, Rhode Island's "Metro Bay" region – the cities of Cranston, Providence, Providence, and East Providence – is experiencing rapid redevelopment which is impacting the future of water-dependent uses along the waterfront. The Metro Bay region, surrounding the northern reaches of Narragansett Bay, has earned national recognition for its river-based renaissance that has promoted new public access and tourism opportunities. Yet, the region is also dependent on a working waterfront which supports energy distribution and maritime industries that are critical to New England and beyond. To ensure that all uses – new and traditional, economic and recreational – are able to share this urban waterfront, the University of Rhode Island Coastal Resources Center/Rhode Island Sea Grant College Program (CRC/SG) is coordinating with the state's Coastal Resources Management Council (CRMC) to replace a dated waterfront plan with a creative policy tool – the Metro Bay Special Area Management Plan (SAMP).

The Need for a SAMP: An Historic Urban Waterfront Prepares for Change

To understand the need to manage Metro Bay urban coastal resources with new SAMP tools and policies, it is important to understand the strengths, challenges, character, and needs of a region recognized since the colonial era as a place with a regionally important urban waterfront. Although its role in the distribution of goods and fuel sources has always underpinned its value to the New England economy, and is projected to hold steady, this waterfront is nonetheless poised for change. Planning efforts and development are already underway in Providence and East Providence that promise millions of dollars of tax revenue and a whole new look for the waterfront. These plans call for the phase-out or relocation of certain maritime industries in favor of mixed-use residential, office, and retail developments. In considering the future of this harbor, however, it is critical to recognize that it is a multi-faceted resource. Rivers and seaways offer not just great views, but also serve as transportation routes that alleviate roadway congestion and move products cheaply and efficiently.

Deep-water ports like the Port of Providence are gateways to the global economy, linking inland markets to supply and demand centers around the world. Indeed, almost all of the energy needs of Rhode Island and eastern Connecticut and Massachusetts are supplied via

marine transportation through the Port of Providence. Over 2,000 ships per year offload asphalt, salt, cement, and petroleum products and load up with scrap metal bound for international markets—over 9 million tons of cargo move through the port each year.¹

Working waterfronts perform a vital function in both the nation's economy and in the local tapestry of the urban seaport. They provide jobs, energy distribution, and critical supplies to the region and connect the city directly with the global economy. In the United States, over 2.2 billion tons of domestic and international cargo is moved by water every year. Twenty-four percent of domestic cargo is carried by water, and over 124,000 Americans are employed on U.S. vessels. These numbers are expected to increase—by 2010, 1.3 billion tons of domestic cargo alone will be moved by water each year.²

Despite the projections for an expanding ocean economy, other new uses such as tourism, recreation, and land conversion for housing are quickly displacing the more traditional uses of urban waterfronts in port cities around the country. Water-dependent uses, such as fishing, cargo, and energy facilities, that provide jobs for skilled workers and economic growth for a city have long vied for space at the water's edge. But now, water views and rising property values are creating additional demand for waterfront land, putting traditional uses at risk of being shut out by condominiums and office spaces. The potential loss affects not only owners and employees of maritime businesses, but also society as a whole as the costs of energy and its delivery rise, road congestion from trucks worsens, and elements of our maritime-cultural heritage are eroded and displaced.

The state of Rhode Island, in studies such as the *Marine Resources Development Plan*, *The Marine Cluster: An Investment Agenda for Rhode Island's Marine Related Economy*, *The Rhode Island Economic Development Policy and Plan*, and other plans and policies, seeks to strengthen its marine economy. Recently dredged at a cost to taxpayers of \$63 million, Providence Harbor is now being eyed for a number of new uses and the expansion of some existing uses. Many of the harbor's marine facilities have invested millions of dollars in infrastructure improvements in anticipation of the new businesses resulting from the dredging. In fact, Providence Harbor is one of only a very few locations on the east coast that meets all of the critical requirements for a commercial port: It has a 40-foot deep water channel, industrial zoning, a protected harbor, easy access to railways and highways, and a hub location that serves a broad market. Thus, the Metro Bay region is more than ever in need of innovative and effective planning tools that address an increasingly complex set of urban coastal water and land issues, and ultimately promote positive change that supports a vibrant urban waterfront and its dependent communities.

¹ United States Army Corps of Engineers, *Waterborne Commerce of The United States, 1996-2004*. Online at <http://www.iwr.usace.army.mil/ndc/wcsc/pdf/wcusatl04.pdf>. Retrieved 02/02/07.

² Transportation Institute Industry Profile. Online at <http://www.trans-inst.org/1.html>. Retrieved 3/06/06.

The Metro Bay SAMP Offers Tools with Teeth

The Metro Bay SAMP is one such planning tool – a regulatory document which, once approved by the state, requires the federal government to uphold plan policies within the plan area. Besides engendering government consistency, this overarching policy tool also provides citizens, businesses, and community partners a forum for working with government on practical resolutions for significant environmental, social, and economic problems particular to a region. As one of the first states to implement SAMPs, Rhode Island embraces a long and unique history of applying tailored management options to varied and complex coastal areas (See <http://www.crmc.ri.gov/samp/index.html> to review the state’s five approved SAMPs.).

Within the Metro Bay SAMP itself, as with previous SAMPs, targeted activities to improve, protect, and enhance bay resources (see <http://seagrant.gso.uri.edu/metrosamp/>) take place within the guiding framework of policy tools and management techniques. For example, Rhode Island’s recently adopted Urban Coastal Greenways Policy (UCG) is a key SAMP success that combined technical expertise and stakeholder experience to develop a new policy with enough flexibility to support development, public access, and habitat protection goals. Another example is a SAMP-based policy tool for rezoning Metro Bay waters which is expected to yield new design and compatibility standards for comprehensive waterfront development that addresses both land and water issues and opportunities. Thus, SAMP-based coastal management “tools with teeth” are helping shape the Metro Bay waterfront in Rhode Island while serving as practical models for solving working-waterfront challenges, especially redevelopment and changing maritime uses, in other urban coastal communities.

Tool 1 – Urban Coastal Greenways Policy: Flexible Buffer Options Foster Environmentally Sensitive Development

The Urban Coastal Greenways Policy (UCG) is already helping Rhode Island government work with private and community interests to ensure economic vitality and environmental enhancement are elements of a vibrant Metro Bay waterfront. To serve varied stakeholders and provide a more flexible permitting tool, the state now offers the UCG – a detailed buffer policy and alternative to the pre-existing, statewide 200’ buffer policy. Initially developed more than 30 years ago, the older policy is still useful for rural and suburban areas, but the state found it inadequate for urban shoreline redevelopment, given the waterfront’s hardened edge and built environment.

With CRC/SG as facilitators, and with a cadre of technical experts and public participants, CRMC drafted the new UCG Policy in an effort to customize coastal vegetative buffer regulations for the urban landscape of the Metro Bay region. The policy is intended to balance development of the Metro Bay shoreline with environmental protection, restoration, and public access through a more flexible and streamlined regulatory structure. As part of the UCG process, a Priority Lands Analysis mapping exercise helped assess the conservation, restoration, and scenic values of coastal Metro Bay properties. Buffer requirements vary and reflect the unique characteristics of each urban area. The UCG also provides compensation options for development applicants; thus a developer, depending on site location, may choose

to reduce a property's buffer width by providing new public access, using low-impact development techniques to treat stormwater, or creating new public amenities for the whole community to enjoy.

Tool 2 – Rezoning the Metro Bay Waters for a Vibrant Waterfront

While the UCG policy is a tool that expands urban coastal development choices in terms of promoting and enhancing environmental assets, another Metro Bay SAMP tool is being used to ensure that Metro Bay waters serve the needs of a growing number of varied users while still supporting environmental and social assets. As such, a water reclassification process is underway which is enabling Metro Bay stakeholders to work with the state, the private sector, and community groups to examine how urban coastal waters are now shared, and determine whether new guidelines are needed to ensure the best and most appropriate use of bay waters.

Rhode Island has for decades regulated this use through water type designations, with types ranging from Type 1 (Conservation Areas) to Type 6 (Maritime Industrial and Commercial Navigation). While the types have served a practical need of assigning coastal waters primarily to environmental, recreational, and broad commercial activities, the overall zoning policy remains insufficient to ensure compatibility between growing bay uses. For example, 30 years ago, the original water zoning policy largely existed as a reflection of adjacent land uses – such a policy is not useful today in terms of evaluating urban waterfront mixed-use plans that call, for example, for a marina to inhabit Type 6 industrial waters adjacent to a proposed office park. By revisiting its water designations for the Metro Bay region, and through the use of innovative tools such as design standards and performance zoning, CRMC expects to foster waterfront redevelopment that: 1) supports a robust marine economy for Rhode Island; 2) encourages new uses to bolster municipal tax bases; and 3) provides the public with more opportunities to appreciate, and benefit from, the unique resource of Narragansett Bay.

In addition, the designation model is increasingly recognized as an opportunity to approach waterfront development and redevelopment as a comprehensive means of creating mixed-use coastal communities that reflect regional character and support a larger array of economic, environmental, and social needs. With these goals in mind, CRMC, in partnership with CRC/SG and the National Oceanographic & Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) is offering a two-day workshop to enable participants to work together to develop recommendations for revising Metro Bay water-type designations to meet the unique needs of this diverse urban waterfront community. The workshop will feature a panel of national experts on waterfront issues who will represent a variety of perspectives, including: ports and working waterfronts; planning and development; policy creation, and design techniques. Through a series of panel discussions, presentations, and working sessions, the workshop will identify and absorb major stakeholder visions and needs; examine challenges and opportunities for realizing those visions; and collaborate on proposing innovative policy solutions that, through the water-type designation process, will help guide development along the Metro Bay's urban waterfront. Participants will make recommendations for new innovative policy solutions such as design guidelines, performance standards, economic

incentives, and new water type definitions. Workshop results will serve as key elements of new CRMC policies for enhanced management of the Metro Bay waterfront, including guidance for fostering shared use of the shoreline and waters, generating economic prosperity, and encouraging public access along the urban coast.

Both the final policy outcome and the collaborative process make the SAMP a highly effective tool to support the best urban development while protecting the area's special natural environment and cultural assets. Through innovative thinking and a creative approach, CRC/SG and CRMC are working to ensure a vibrant and diverse Metro Bay waterfront that results in win-wins for the state, municipal, private, and public interests.