

Yard South developer files for rezoning of South Portland waterfront property

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Jennifer Packard, president of PK Realty Management and her brother David Packard, chief counsel of the company, stand in the former shipyard property in South Portland in November 2021. *Gregory Rec/Staff Photographer*

After years of discussion – and some pushback – about the transformation of a former shipyard next to South Portland’s Bug Light Park, a developer is seeking a zone change to allow the property to become a “vibrant” waterfront community.

The concept of the Yard South development has been circulating for several years, since the developer first went public with its plans to transform the 30-acre parcel into a mixed-use neighborhood with up to 1,000 residential units – including 100 affordable apartments – as well as restaurants and cafes, offices and other small businesses.

But the proposal has drawn criticism from some residents, including a group that believes the development is too big, out of character for the area and would add to traffic congestion on Broadway.

PK Realty, the developer, on Wednesday submitted an application for a zone change to allow for multifamily housing, which is not currently an allowed use. The application kicks off a long review process that includes determining if the development fits the city's comprehensive plan, which identifies an opportunity to turn industrial land into "mixed-use areas that attract people to live and work in the area and to enjoy the waterfront."

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Jennifer Packard, president of PK Realty, said she envisions Yard South as a sustainable neighborhood where people can live, work and shop without needing to get in their cars.

"I think we're putting something forward that could be an amazing benefit to South Portland and to the region," she said. "We're aware of the fact that this is a very big project for a city like South Portland. It's a very big ask to have people trust that we will follow through and do a positive project."

Although designs have not yet been finalized, Packard said a full build-out of the project could take 20 years and cost in the range of \$800 million to \$1.2 billion. If the project is approved, construction would likely start in about three years.

PK Realty bought the property for \$7.7 million from the Cacoulidis family in 2018. It's the same spot where the late John Cacoulidis once proposed building a \$900 million hotel and convention center that would have included a cable-car system across Portland Harbor.

It was once used by workers who built Liberty Ships during World War II, but has been underutilized in the years since, Packard said. Parts of it are currently used for boat storage repair, a woodworking shop and an ax forge.



Now that the zoning application has been submitted, city staff will spend the next few weeks reviewing it, said city planner Milan Nevadja. There will then be a series of public meetings before the application eventually goes to the City Council for approval.

If the zone change is approved, the developer would then come back for subdivision or site plan reviews.

City spokesperson Shara Dee said the city recognizes “many members of the community are passionate about the proposed Yard South development” and is encouraging residents to participate in the public meetings.

OPPONENTS QUESTION SIZE

Cathy Chapman, who lives in South Portland and frequently walks her dog at Bug Light, formed the No Yard South citizen group after first hearing that the development could include four 18-story buildings, which would be among the tallest in Maine. That idea was “shocking” and she was immediately concerned that it didn’t fit the location.

“It boggles my mind that they would consider this,” Chapman said. “People are really afraid of losing what we hold so dear here in South Portland.”



Cathy Chapman with one of her “No Yard South” signs at Bug Light Park on Tuesday. “We don’t think it’s a safe location for residential area. There are more appropriate places in South Portland to put housing, in fact in my neighborhood there are places that would be better. I want more housing to be sure,” she said.

Brianna Soukup/Staff Photographer

After a series of meetings with residents in the east side of the city, the height of the buildings was scaled back to a maximum height of 140 feet, which is about 13 stories and the tallest ones will be away from the edge of the property, Packard said.

Building heights on most of the parcel would be capped at 86 feet, which is already allowed in that part of the city and is the same height as the Breakwater Condos.

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Packard said the waterfront areas will be publicly accessible and could potentially connect to Bug Light Park and trail networks in the area.

Chapman is also concerned that a development as large as Yard South could affect people’s enjoyment of the park and the events held there throughout the year.

“It would change the experience in the park dramatically,” she said. “It’s basically the jewel in South Portland.”

A ‘SUSTAINABLE’ COASTAL COMMUNITY

Chapman said members of the group aren’t opposed to building housing in other parts of the city that are not as densely developed. They worry that Yard South will add too much traffic to Broadway, which already is congested, and that the area is too vulnerable to sea rise and coastal storms.

Packard said Yard South “is a blueprint for a sustainable coastal community.” It is designed to be compatible with projected sea-level rise and to protect property from storm induced damage, she said.

“Our planning addresses two major crises confronting our community and our nation – housing and climate change,” she said. “We are actively designing to address both the immediate and long-term impacts of our changing climate and rising sea levels.”

The developers are also working with the South Portland Housing Authority to set aside 60 of the affordable units for their clients, said Executive Director Mike Halsey. He said it is too soon to say if the affordable units will be targeted to families or seniors or what the income qualifying caps will be.

The housing authority has long ties to the shipyard area, where it was formed in 1943 to develop more than 3,000 units of housing.

“It’s exciting it’s going to come full circle for us,” Halsey said.

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