

Opinion: South Portland needs Yard South

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As a 30-year South Portland resident and a neighbor to the proposed Yard South project, I'm looking forward to the transformation of a decades-old contaminated industrial site into a vibrant mixed-use neighborhood. I am grateful that a family with generational ties to Maine, a commitment to sustainability and environmental stewardship, a proven track record of breathing new life into buildings and properties in Greater Portland and a pro-active approach to community engagement is leading this undertaking.

Over the years, I've worried about what would be built on the 30-acre former Liberty Shipyard. Current zoning allows for oil tank storage farms and other industrial uses. Either would be detrimental to the Ferry Village and Breakwater neighborhoods, Bug Light Park and the Greater Portland community in general. Leaving the site as is is also problematic. The Liberty Shipyard, constructed in the 1940s entirely of urban fill, is an environmental hazard. Leaving the site as is will result in further deterioration and shoreline erosion, as well as contamination of the Fore River.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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After years of planning and soliciting feedback from the community, Yard South recently submitted to South Portland an application for a zone change to include housing and exclude oil tanks. It will be reviewed first by the Planning Board and then by City Council and includes several opportunities for community input.

The zone change would allow for much-needed housing and is in keeping with the current South Portland Comprehensive Plan. Expanding the supply of housing can make a significant impact in addressing the City's housing shortage across the spectrum. Yard South will have 100 affordable housing units, and at least 60 will be built in partnership with the South Portland Housing Authority.

The entire project is designed through the lens of the holistic Bioregional One Planet Living sustainability framework, which centers development plans around protecting and restoring land, equitable access to resources such as housing, open green spaces and shorelines and sustainability. The Yard South vision of publicly accessible outdoor recreational areas, neighborhood small businesses, biking and walking paths and multi-modal transportation options all support healthy living principles.

That is not to say that there aren't challenges in building a development of this scale.

Traffic congestion in general is a problem waiting to be solved. And there are solutions. As a member of the South Portland Economic Development Committee, I have been advocating for smart-city initiatives that use advanced technology to improve the management of city services and the quality of life for citizens. Smart traffic lights can dynamically respond to real-time conditions and help move traffic through the city more efficiently to reduce commute times, reduce congestion, minimize carbon emissions and improve safety for drivers, pedestrians and bicyclists.

Last year, we witnessed first-hand the devastation of storm surge. With the exception of the immediate shoreline, the Yard South property is above FEMA flood zones, as well as the anticipated sea level rise outlined by the Maine Climate Council's findings. That, however, does not allow for complacency. It is imperative that any development be aligned with climate resilience strategies. The coastal community of the future requires water management approaches and infrastructure that respond to both current and future risk. The proposed project invests in climate mitigation and adaptation strategies, including increasing site elevation, designed to accommodate future storm surge and sea level rise. Coastal resilience strategies have been successfully implemented in communities like Norfolk, Virginia whose neighborhood character, homeownership challenges and topology is strikingly similar to South Portland.

Submission of the zone change application is just the first step in a lengthy process. I encourage South Portland residents to be involved. Change can be unsettling. Do not be dissuaded by the myriads of disinformation that has been spread. Keep an open mind and be imaginative; this is an exciting opportunity for our community.

Together, let us honor the legacy of the women and men who toiled at the shipyards with the promise of the American dream. Yard South will provide more housing stock, including affordable housing, so that more South Portland families will be afforded the opportunity to live, work and play on this beautiful waterfront property.

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