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Developers of former South Portland Shipyard focus on sustainability

Owners of the prime 30-acre coastal site have hired a world-renowned sustainability expert to help them shape its redevelopment.

BY [KELLEY BOUCHARD](#) STAFF WRITER



Jennifer Packard, principal of PK Realty Management, and her brother David Packard, chief counsel of the company, stand in the former shipyard property in South Portland on Monday. They plan to develop the property with assistance from a world-renowned sustainability expert. Challenges in developing the property include planning for rising sea levels and dealing with contaminated soils. *Gregory Rec/Staff Photographer*

SOUTH PORTLAND — Within 30 years, the sea level in Portland Harbor is projected to rise 1.5 to 3.4 feet, threatening to submerge some of the shoreline that rims a 30-acre site in this city where workers built Liberty Ships during World War II.



Pooran Desai, a world-renowned sustainability expert, is working with PK Realty Management in its redevelopment of the former South Portland Shipyard property. *Tracy Howl, courtesy of Pooran Desai*

It's unclear exactly how the rising ocean anticipated in South Portland's climate action plan will affect redevelopment of one of the most important and challenging sites on the Maine coast. But the latest owners of the former industrial property, who have yet to say what they will put on the site, [aren't waiting to make climate action](#) and sustainable living central to their efforts.

PK Realty Management says it has engaged OnePlanet.com to help seek community input on the Yard South project and design plans that are transparent, sustainable and supported by various groups in the city. Online meetings organized by the 2-year-old United Kingdom-based company are scheduled for Dec. 1 and 8.

OnePlanet's founder is Pooran Desai. A longtime environmental entrepreneur and proponent of zero-carbon communities, he co-hosted an [expert panel discussion Monday](#) at the COP26 U.N. Climate Change Conference in Glasgow, Scotland, on the accelerating climate crisis. Carbon-neutral development is a tall order for the South Portland Shipyard property, a former marine industrial complex that requires further brownfield cleanup and is on a densely populated peninsula fed by Broadway, an often-congested, mostly two-lane arterial that snakes through the city.

But the site also is in the heart of some of the most desirable real estate in Maine, where waterfront property values have skyrocketed in recent years. And it's in a place that's striving to be [one of the "greenest" cities in Maine](#), where it just makes sense to redevelop the shipyard property in a way that's socially, economically and environmentally sustainable, the developers say.



STAFF GRAPHIC | MICHAEL FISHER

“There are no heroics going on here,” said Jennifer Packard, principal of the family-owned firm. “We don’t expect a red carpet to be rolled out because we’re doing the right thing, but we can at least have a conversation about it. We’re going to do things that makes sense.”

In 2018, PK Realty [paid \\$7.7 million for the former shipyard land](#) where in 2001 the late John Cacoulidis proposed building a \$900 million hotel and convention center with a cable-car system across Portland Harbor.

The current owners say they have no firm plans for the property, between the Ferry Village neighborhood and sprawling Bug Light Park, but they say they likely will seek zoning changes so they can add housing to the commercial and light industrial uses currently allowed on it. PK Realty plans to use OnePlanet’s software and consulting services to make sustainability part of every aspect of redeveloping the site, from choosing building materials to designing places where people can live, work and play. The developers already have [helped fund a transportation study](#) meant to address residents’ concerns about increased traffic congestion that have hampered previous proposed projects in the area.

Desai, One Planet’s CEO, also co-founded the firm Bioregional in 1994, establishing sustainability strategies that have been used in real estate development projects totaling \$30 billion in more than 30 countries, according to the group’s website.

That firm created a comprehensive design process, called One Planet Living, “to pursue sustainability and resilience in a comprehensive, coordinated and continuous fashion,” said H. Pike Oliver, master planner on the Yard South project.

“We have an opportunity to do something really exciting with this site,” Oliver said. “It’s small enough to get your arms around, but big enough to do something significant.”



Two 10,100-ton freighters float up to ocean level in docks at the Todd bath Shipyard in South Portland during launching ceremonies on Dec. 20, 1941. The ships, Ocean Liberty and Ocean Freedom, right, were the first of a fleet of 30 built for the British government. *Associated Press*

Desai helped to develop the U.K.’s first large-scale, mixed-use, zero-carbon community, the Beddington Zero Energy Development, an eco-village in South London that was completed in 2002. BedZED includes 82 homes, office space, a college, community facilities and green space, and it has served as a model for similar projects.

Desai says many people feel a growing “climate anxiety” about increasing temperatures, melting glaciers, rising sea levels and other impacts of burning fossil fuels and living in a consumer-oriented society.

“People realize we have to live differently,” he said in a Zoom interview last week. “But there’s cognitive dissonance between how we live and how we know we need to live.”



A pier at the former shipyard in South Portland is now crumbling into Portland Harbor. *Gregory Rec/Staff Photographer*

Milan Nevajda, South Portland’s planning director, said PK Realty has been keeping him and his staff in the loop, including on their plan to work with OnePlanet. Nevajda said it’s a plus that the developers plan to meet sustainability goals laid out in the city’s One Climate Future Plan, which was developed in partnership with Portland, as well as the state’s climate action plan, Maine Won’t Wait.

Nevajda said the OnePlanet approach to sustainability should help PK Realty create a master plan tailored to the site, which could become a model for future development in the Northeast. “We’re excited to see where they go with it,” Nevajda said. “It could be precedent-setting. It’s a massively consequential property to South Portland and the region.”

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