

First-time federal grant to provide boost to Liberty shipyard plans

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L+R Northpoint, a holding company of PK Realty Management, owns 30 acres of former shipyard property in South Portland. In this 2014 photo, a portion of the property appears just above and to the right of the oil tanks. Bug Light Park is at the top. *FILE*

SOUTH PORTLAND — City officials are optimistic that a \$300,000 grant from the federal government will help encourage future development of a 30-acre parcel that was once part of the Liberty Shipyard.

The soil at the parcel, once included in a massive shipbuilding operation during World War II, may have been contaminated with oil and other chemicals, according to South Portland Assistant City Manager Joshua Reny. The money will go toward a survey to assess what, if any, contamination there is on site.

“Do we or do we not have a problem? Let’s put it to bed,” said Reny, adding that local officials worked for more than five years to get the grant funding.

Bill Mann, the city’s economic development coordinator, said the shipyard in its heyday was enormous: some 13 slipways were in operation and it employed about 30,000 people, a workforce larger than the city’s entire population today.

Since the war ended, portions of the shipyard were taken over and redeveloped into several uses, including the creation of Bug Light Park. The remaining 30-acre portion made headlines in 1999, when developer John Cacoulidis purchased the land and presented a 2001 proposal for a \$900 million convention center, which was to include a 300-foot-high cable car system connecting the center to Portland across the harbor.

The project never got very far, and Cacoulidis died in 2018. That same year, L+R Northpoint, a holding company of PK Realty Management, purchased the land for an undisclosed amount of money.



Jennifer Packard, president of PK Realty, said her family bought the property even though they did not have a concrete idea for developing it because its unique location on the waterfront overlooking Portland Harbor came with a lot of potential.

“The vision is, it could be something really special,” she said. “We don’t know yet what that will be.”

Packard said they are also fortunate to have tenants on the property, including the industrial storage container company PODS, the Portland Barrell Co., and axe-making company Brant and Cochran, along with a number of other tenants leasing office and warehouse space. Since those tenants generate income, Packard said developers have the luxury of taking their time to decide how to proceed.

“It just takes the pressure off,” she said.

With the tenants there, Packard said developers can concentrate on the open areas, which are covered by the grant.

“The cleanup process is what we’re focusing on now,” she said.

Mann said it's hard to say for sure what use would best fit the property. In addition to Bug Light Park, the property is also bordered by a petroleum storage tank facility, along with residential property and Southern Maine Community College to the south.

"There's a pretty eclectic mix of uses," he said.

The grant, issued by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, is part of the agency's Brownfields Program, a special federal fund earmarked for cleanup and related work at places where hazardous materials might be present from previous development. Reny said the city has done work paid for by the program's funds before, but usually those were regional projects. This grant, he said, marks the first time the city of South Portland has received federal funds to do this type of work.

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