

PAUL MCMORROW

## The Navy's mess in Weymouth

Fourteen years after shutting South Weymouth down, the Navy still holds title to two-thirds of the former base.

By Paul McMorrow    OCTOBER 11, 2011

CLEAN Up your own mess. It's a message about fairness and basic accountability that any 5-year-old can understand. Even so, these concepts are having a tough time registering inside the US Navy's real estate bureaucracy. And because the Navy doesn't want to clean up its own mess, a \$1.5 billion redevelopment project with a history of unnecessary delays is once again, needlessly, in danger.

The Navy shut down the former South Weymouth Naval Air Base in 1997. It turned over the first chunk of the 1,400-acre base for redevelopment back in 2003.

Bureaucratic infighting has made the base's redevelopment a slow and tortuous process, though. Construction crews broke ground at the old base only last summer. Work is now underway on the first phase of what will be a massive development, with 2,800 housing units and 2 million square feet of commercial space spread through Weymouth, Rockland, and Abington. Several hurdles remain, though.

Most importantly, 14 years after shutting South Weymouth down, the Navy still holds title to two-thirds of the real estate at the former air base. They've fought feverishly to keep it that way.

It's not that the Navy wants to maintain an 800-acre footprint on the South Shore forever. It's just that it seems committed to leaving on its own timeline and its own terms, and regional economic development be damned.

Before 2005, federal law allowed the Pentagon to transfer decommissioned military bases to local authorities at no cost. This policy recognized that the free real estate wasn't really free: Former bases need extensive infrastructure work before a single new

building can go up. The public infrastructure bill at South Weymouth — including new roads and water and sewer lines — stands around \$200 million. If the military held out for hefty real estate payments, old bases would never get put into productive reuse. They'd just languish.

The feds changed the math behind base redevelopment in 2005, at the height of the real estate bubble, and began insisting that they get paid market value for decommissioned bases. Developers could swallow this extra cost in a runaway bubble market, but housing math conceived in 2005 doesn't come close to

working in 2011. That's why, in 2009, former US Representative Bill Delahunt pushed a bill in Congress to reinstitute no-cost transfers. The Navy fought that bill, and the agency wasn't happy with the eventual compromise legislation, which allowed the military branches to accept below-market rates for their real estate.

The Navy held on to its acreage at South Weymouth for years while it haggled over pricing. Early last year, Governor Deval Patrick said a deal was weeks away. But the Navy's haggling pushed an agreement on pricing out until this past July. For a while, the Navy insisted on a pre-crash valuation of \$43 million for the two-thirds of the site it still owns. It dragged its feet on establishing a new price, and then insisted on getting paid \$25 million for its remaining holdings — an inflated price that the base's redeveloper, the LNR Property Corp., agreed to swallow as the cost of keeping the entire \$1.5 billion project alive.

Now, after extracting an inflated price for its South Weymouth holdings, the Navy wants to more than double the cost of acquiring the old base. It's doing this by selling its real estate without fully cleaning up pollution on the old base.

It's common for pollution to cover former military installations. Groundwater and soil contamination remains at 78 of South Weymouth's 1,400 acres. Much of it comes from a chemical cocktail the Navy used to shower its planes with. The July sale agreement that set the Navy's \$25 million sale price also allowed the Navy to walk away from the base by just cleaning it to a level consistent with its current use (an abandoned base), rather than a standard safe for its future commercial and residential zoning, as state law normally requires.

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The Navy's bid to walk away with the cleanup job leaves the base's developer with two choices: Either wrap the polluted areas with fencing covered in skulls and crossbones, or foot the cleanup bill without the Navy's help. That's not really a choice at all, since there are few prospective homebuyers clamoring to live near a chemical dump. But the \$35 million cleanup tab is a significant, and unexpected, hurdle in a redevelopment that's already taken years too long. And it's all because the Navy refuses to clean up the mess it made.

*Paul McMorrow is an associate editor at CommonWealth magazine. His column appears regularly in the Globe.*

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