Smart-growth leaders focus on Navy land

Connecting Burma Road with Connell Highway is one goal discussed at a public forum on development issues.

By Joe Baker
Daily News staff

NEWPORT — State and local officials are meeting with Navy officials Friday to make a case for the abandonment of enough property to connect Burma Road to Connell Highway, giving Aquidneck Island a third north-south road.

The Navy announced in 2008 it would declare as “excess” 30 acres of land it owns on the west side of Aquidneck Island. That number has since been reduced to about 225 acres, and officials from all three island communities are very interested in acquiring it.

Although the surplus property included Burma Road, from Stringham Road to Access Highway, the Navy so far has refused to consider releasing land that would connect the southern end of Burma Road to Connell Highway.

But without that connecting piece, it makes no sense for the state Department of Transportation to take over the rest of Burma Road, DOT Director Michael Lewis said Tuesday during a Smart Growth Forum sponsored by GrowSmart RI. Some Navy officials are coming to Newport Friday to discuss the state’s request for that connecting piece, Lewis said. That request, formally called a Public Benefit Concession (PBC), asks for a free transfer of federal property for public use.

“We have a request in for a PBC but only if we can get that connecting land,” Lewis said. “Without that connection we’re not going to go any further (with the request).”

The state long has eyed the Burma Road corridor as another north-south travel option for Aquidneck Island. In the 1990s, the state wanted to build Interstate 86 to connect Route 86 in southern Rhode Island to Route 24 in Portsmouth, but public opposition killed that plan. In late 1998, a new DOT plan for a third north-south route utilizing Burma Road fell apart when the Middletown Town Council refused to endorse it.

Tina Dolen, executive director of the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission, speaks Tuesday during the Aquidneck Island Smart Growth Forum at the Casino Theatre.

Tina Dolen, executive director of the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission, speaks Tuesday during the Aquidneck Island Smart Growth Forum at the Casino Theatre.

Barbara van Beuren of the van Beuren Charitable Foundation asks a question Tuesday during the Aquidneck Island Smart Growth Forum at the Casino Theatre in Newport.

Jacqueline Marquis Daily News staff photos

Tina Dolen, executive director of the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission, speaks Tuesday during the Aquidneck Island Smart Growth Forum at the Casino Theatre.

Society of Newport County and Jan Eckhart, owner of Sweet Berry Farm in Middletown, discussed the challenges of planning future economic growth.

Growing the state’s tax credit next year.

Eckhart, who is chairman of the Rhode Island Agricultural Partnership Steering Committee, said the group developed a five-year strategic plan aimed at protecting more of the state’s farms. Not only do farms enhance the growing “eat local” movement and preserve open space, they are small businesses that create jobs in a stagnant economy, he said.

“Agriculture and health care are the only two growth industries in the state,” Eckhart said.

The economy also needs a healthy transportation infrastructure system to move goods and people, Lewis said. But the state historically has relied on borrowing for its 20 percent match of federal highway funds. About half the $60 million DOT gets from the state gas tax goes to pay that debt, which now is about $43 million a year, Lewis said.

Unless new sources of funding are established, the state’s transportation debt will be about $70 million in 10 years, he said.

“What we have isn’t really a budget. It’s an allowance,” Lewis said.

The General Assembly approved a proposal by Gov. Lincoln D. Chafee to increase license and registration fees beginning in 2014, with the additional revenue going to DOT. But that won’t be nearly enough to fix the state’s 800 bridges and 1,100 miles of road, Lewis said.

“We have to look at user fees — increasing registration fees or tolls — or we won’t be able to have a viable economic engine,” Wolf said.

Scott Wolf, executive director of GrowSmart RI, moderates the Aquidneck Island Smart Growth Forum at the Casino Theatre on Tuesday.