

**Testimony before the  
Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife and Oceans  
Of the House Committee on Natural Resources  
On H.R. 5350**

**By  
Rod Woolard, City of Norfolk, VA, Director of Development**

**April 24, 2008**

Madam Chairwoman and members of the Subcommittee, I am Rod Woolard, Director of Development for the City of Norfolk, Virginia. I testify before you today in support of H.R. 5350, and seek your support for the passage of this legislation. This bill, as introduced, will authorize the City of Norfolk to re-purchase a parcel of property located near the Elizabeth River in the southern portion of Norfolk, as depicted in slides numbered 2 and 3 of our handout.

Under a blight reduction program in the early 1970s, the Norfolk Redevelopment and Housing Authority sold the 3.78 acre parcel, located at 538 Front Street, to the United States for \$47,300. The purchase was for the specific purpose of constructing "a Federal office building, with parking." At the time of the sale, it was the City's understanding that a NOAA Regional Headquarters would be developed on this property. However, no funds were ever appropriated and the Headquarters was never built.

The property currently houses a warehouse building converted to offices for a NOAA Geodetic Survey Team and the yard is used for storage of boat trailers and miscellaneous bulk storage. The current use and condition is depicted on slide number 4.

In the late 1990s, Norfolk officials recognized the strategic location of the Fort Norfolk District and rezoned the district for "waterfront mixed use". The District holds significant value as the City's last major Downtown waterfront development opportunity, and redevelopment is already underway. If Congress approves H.R. 5350, Norfolk intends to negotiate for the purchase this property with the Secretary of Commerce at its fair market value as authorized in the bill.

### **History**

Prior to annexation in 1890, the Fort Norfolk District of our city was known as the Village of Atlantic City. The approximately 50 acre district originally developed as a commerce-driven community around Fort Norfolk. The Fort was commissioned by President George Washington in 1794 as part of a series of coastal forts built to protect our fledgling country from the invasion of European forces. Fort Norfolk is thought to be the most original and best-preserved War of 1812 battlement site in the United States.

After annexation, Atlantic City continued as a vibrant, mixed-use community for many decades. It was a thriving neighborhood comprised mostly of citizens who worked in the nearby industrial facilities located immediately proximate to the Elizabeth River and the Hampton Roads harbor. In the 1960s, much of the 'original' Atlantic City was redeveloped into what is now a large regional medical complex. This complex includes the Eastern Virginia Medical School, Sentara Healthcare System, the Children's Hospital of The King's Daughters, as well as, the Strelitz Diabetes Center, and the American Red Cross regional headquarters.

As you will see in slide number 5, the 50 acre district is a peninsula bounded on the north by Brambleton Avenue and the regional medical complex, by Smith Creek on the East, and the Elizabeth River on the West and to the South. To the North, and across the tributary known as The Hague, lies the Ghent Historic District, also annexed in 1890, which became and remains one of Norfolk's most fashionable suburbs. This upscale neighborhood has experienced a significant renaissance over the past several years with residential improvements and the addition of retail services and restaurants. Across Smith Creek to the East lies the Historic Freemason District and our Downtown, both of which have been heavily redeveloped over the past two decades.

### **City Planning Efforts**

The City is committed to building upon the trend toward urban living. It is desired that the District become a signature residential and commercial address in an exciting waterfront setting. The City believes that redevelopment can capitalize on the district's significant locational advantage. In 2001, the City requested the assistance of the Urban Land Institute (ULI). We have used the ULI in planning for the successful redevelopment other areas of the City including the Freemason and Downtown Districts. The ULI, established in 1936, has long been recognized as one of America's most respected and widely known, and often quoted, sources of objective information on urban planning, growth, and development. In March 2002, the ULI Advisory Services Panel conducted an intensive, week-long study of the Fort Norfolk District. In October of 2002, the Panel's Report concluded that the 30-acre District (east of the Fort) was the last major developable waterfront site close to downtown Norfolk and they presented a conceptual plan for redevelopment of the area, as shown on slide number 6. It includes land use linkages, a massing of buildings that promote maximum views of the water, and open space considerations. The plan, also, includes traffic circulation patterns and identifies two other, potential access points, in addition to the primary gateway at Colley Avenue. The conceptual vision is depicted in renderings on slide number 7.

### **City Efforts to Stimulate Development**

In May 2002 the City announced the development of a new continuing care retirement community ("CCRC") to be built on land adjoining the Fort with

expectations that it would be a catalyst for the redevelopment of the area. These plans came to fruition when Harbor's Edge opened in February 2007, as home to many of Norfolk's prominent older citizens who might have, otherwise, left the City seeking such a facility. This 16-story complex includes 163-independent living units, as well as 33 assisted living units, 17 memory support units, and 33 skilled nursing beds.

In 2004 Plum Point Park was funded by the Virginia Port Authority (VPA) as a part of their wetlands mitigation program. This 5-acre tract of unused, overgrown land along the westernmost boundary of the Fort Norfolk District had an eroding shoreline with low valued vegetation. The adjacent waterway was littered with debris and old piles, and the area was generally an eyesore to the adjacent neighborhoods. This project created 1-acre of new wetlands, removed approximately 500 old piles, restored the shoreline, and landscaped the area with native plant species, to create a park that ties into the City's adjacent Elizabeth River Trail, a pedestrian and bike path along the river.

In 2005, Dr. Keith Newby came to the City with an idea for a medical office tower for the Fort Norfolk District. After many iterations, Fort Norfolk Plaza is scheduled to begin construction this fall. This ~\$60 million project will contain ~200,000 sf medical office space with associated retail and an integrated garage.

### **City Effort to Re-acquire NOAA Property**

Due to the prominent location and underutilization of the NOAA property in the Fort Norfolk District, the City initiated discussions with NOAA staff in 2002 and in 2004 made an official request to re-purchase the property from the Secretary of Commerce, Donald Evans. Over the course of the next couple of years, we worked with the NOAA Administrator, Vice Admiral Lautenbacher, to see what options were available for the City to re-purchase this property. While the deed conveying the land to NOAA in the 1970's contains a covenant providing that construction would be completed within 42 months of purchase, to the extent that funds continued to be available, it does not provide any reversionary clause (in the event funds were not appropriated). I have provided a copy of the deed and sale agreement for the record.

Ultimately, after some study and understanding of relocation requirements, both parties agreed that we should seek Congressional authorization for this transaction. At our request, Representative Scott introduced H.R. 5350 this session and Representative Drake signed as a co-patron.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of H.R. 5350, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.