

# Connecticut Post

## **\$1b Bridgeport project in works**

140-acre river plan would recast downtown

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### BRIDGEPORT

Two founders of the Bridgeport Bluefish, a developer and a former Bridgeport mayoral candidate have teamed up to propose a 140-acre "Gateway to a New Downtown" along the Pequonnock River, the Connecticut Post has learned.

The group is working on a massive, 10-year, \$1 billion urban renewal project for the heart of downtown Bridgeport that could eventually stretch along the river from Interstate 95 north to Lindley Street in a development similar to what San Antonio, Texas, has done along its river.

Plans include unspecified anchor attractions on both the north and south ends of a 40-acre area on the west side of the river. Longer-term goals include walking paths and even water taxis running up and down the river.

The shorter-term plan would include about \$200 million in construction, plus \$40 million to fix the long-broken Congress Street Bridge.

Mayor John M. Fabrizi said Thursday that he was unaware of the group or its plans. But he said he'd support anything that can help the city.

The group, Urban Strategies/Bridgeport LLC, includes Rick Torres, former GOP candidate for mayor; Edward Piquette, a local attorney; and Charles Brilvitch, a city historian.

They're joining Jack McGregor and his wife, Mary-Jane Foster, who helped found the Bluefish, and developer Sal DiNardo, whose nearly 14-acre parcel on Housatonic Avenue would be part of the long-term plan.

"It's pretty aggressive," McGregor said in a Thursday interview, adding that an unidentified development group from outside the city is being recruited for the project. "Until that's done, it's way too early to talk about specifics."

The overall plan would include retail, housing and offices on block after block along the river and west toward Main Street.

Although he sent a letter this week to Gov. M. Jodi Rell asking her to reconsider the state's planned construction of a juvenile courthouse and detention center, McGregor said that the group plans to move forward whether or not the court project stays on that site.

"The development we envision could work with a juvenile detention center," said McGregor, 70, a former chief executive officer of the Bridgeport Hydraulic Co., who started the Bluefish minor league baseball team eight years ago.

"This should not be viewed as an attempted blockage of that project, but the juvenile detention center makes it more difficult to do what we envision."

McGregor said the outside company the group is trying to commit to the project has "lots of experience in urban-

renewal efforts," adding that his consortium has begun discussions with owners of several parcels of property in the target area.

"We're tossing back and forth ideas about different conceptual anchors, but if you look at the teardrop of downtown, there would be one anchor on the northern end, by the Cardinal Shehan Center, and one on the southern end toward I-95," McGregor said.

"This project is very embryonic," McGregor said. "I don't mind talking with you about it, but we could be literally months away before we have anything formal to announce."

McGregor and Foster, the Connecticut Post's 2003 "Woman of the Year," are also attempting to bring a minor league baseball team to Yonkers, N.Y., near the Hudson River.

Torres said Thursday that his interest in stopping the planned \$50 million juvenile courthouse from being erected on the site of the city's old public works garage led him to walk up and down the Pequonnock River. That's when he realized the potential for a development similar to the renaissance of the San Antonio River.

"I had not even looked at the Pequonnock River as if it were there," said Torres, who lost to Fabrizi in 2003. "It's open land in so many spots, especially on the west side of the river. I thought: this could be exciting."

After talking with McGregor and Foster, Torres, who owns a small business in Black Rock, approached DiNardo. "I went on a fishing expedition and Sal was delighted," Torres said. DiNardo did not return calls for comment Thursday.

"You can look all the way up the river to Lindley Street and almost North Avenue, so you can have a water link from downtown to nearly Route 1," Torres said, adding that the proposal would have a better chance if the juvenile detention center were relocated upstream somewhere.

But Torres agreed that if the detention center is still constructed there, there's plenty the group can still accomplish, included building upscale housing on the east bank of the Pequonnock.

"The fact is that there are so many properties that are underutilized," Torres said.

He said the plan was not being sprung on Fabrizi as a surprise from a former rival.

"This has leaked out sooner than we'd like and I'd hate to make the mayor feel that I'm working behind his back," Torres said. "This cannot move along without Mayor Fabrizi jumping on enthusiastically. I'm a businessman looking to make money and looking to clean up a river that deserves it."

Piquette said Thursday night that the redevelopment projects in San Antonio and Providence, R.I., as well as a Cleveland gentrification of its shipping port area called The Flats, are the models Urban Strategies/Bridgeport is using.

James T. Fleming, state public works commissioner, said Thursday night that McGregor's letter to the governor seems to have arrived too late in the process of locating the courthouse and detention center.

"This facility will in no way detract from any development downtown," Fleming said. "It will look like a high school campus."

Fabrizi, contacted late Thursday afternoon, said he respected Torres' political sensitivity on the issue.

"If it's good for Bridgeport and it comes from my former opponent, or anyone else, regardless of their political principles, if it's good for Bridgeport, it's going to happen," Fabrizi said.

State Sen. Bill Finch, D-Bridgeport, who is president of the Bridgeport Economic Development Corp., said Thursday that DiNardo is a respected property owner.

"The tie-in to the Pequonnock River has potential," Finch said. "I'm excited about anyone who wants to do that."

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