

Devens Disposition Planning Services

Background

Under Chapter 498 of the Acts of 1993 ("the Act") which created the Devens Regional Enterprise Zone (Devens), MassDevelopment (then the Government Land Bank) was directed to work with the towns of Ayer, Harvard and Shirley to formulate a Reuse Plan and By-Laws for the redevelopment of Fort Devens. The Reuse Plan and By-Laws were approved by the Town Meetings in Ayer, Harvard and Shirley and by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and the MassDevelopment Board of Directors. Pursuant to the Act, MassDevelopment is now responsible for overseeing implementation of the Reuse Plan and providing all municipal services to Devens.

The establishment of permanent government at Devens, anticipated by the Act, first began to enter public discourse during the first Five Year Review of the redevelopment plan conducted in 2001. Then it was viewed as a long term decision and received limited attention. With the arrival and growth of the permanent residential community, questions began to arise more frequently on the matter of final disposition. Should jurisdiction return in some form to Ayer, Harvard and Shirley, or should Devens become a new town?

In October of 2003, the MassDevelopment Board of Directors, meeting with Selectmen from the three Towns, along with representatives of Devens residential and business community reached a consensus that the process of determining final disposition should be formalized and a timetable established for determining the fate of Devens.

Shortly after that meeting, the Towns and MassDevelopment met to produce an organizational document for the Devens Disposition Steering Committee (Steering Committee). The group proposed a mission statement and recommended the composition of the Steering Committee. The date for the initial meeting was set for January 14, 2004, to be held at the Shirley Town Hall. In all 10 meetings were held, concluding on May 27, 2004, culminating in the production of a Matrix of Issues and the recommendation to create the Devens Disposition Executive Board (DDEB) to continue the disposition process.

On September 9, 2004 the DDEB held its first meeting. The mission of the DDEB is to insure that all matters concerning the completion of the Devens Reuse Plan, as contained in the Matrix of Issues prepared by the Steering Committee, are addressed

in preparation for a decision on the final disposition of Devens. Further, the DDEB will prepare a recommendation on the final disposition of Devens for consideration by each of the recognized stakeholders, namely, (a) the voters of the towns of Ayer, Harvard, and Shirley, (b) the Devens Enterprise Commission, (c) MassDevelopment, and (d) the residents at Devens.

Goals of the Devens Disposition Executive Board

The goals of the Devens Disposition Executive Board are:

- Assess what has been accomplished to date under the first ten years of the Devens Reuse Plan, and revise the Devens Reuse Plan in accordance with the provisions of Chapter 498.
- Develop a plan for the successful and sustainable disposition of Devens
- Establish a Devens Disposition Planning Committee that will work to meet the mission goals and objectives
- Recommend all necessary full time / part time employment required to support the DDEB
- Initiate and implement a planning process that will involve, inform and educate all stakeholders of data gathered, issues involved, and encourage their input to reach a disposition solution
- Determine availability and feasibility of the November 2006 election ballot question, and if necessary establish action items for the November 2006 ballot question
- Compile, distill and evaluate all data and suggestions gathered and under the requirements and guidance in Section 23 Chapter 498, recommended a permanent government structure to the Selectmen (host communities) MassDevelopment and the DEC.
- Secure funding to complete the work process from the State, MassDevelopment and the Towns
- Ensure all actions and future actions conform to Chapter 498
- Identify concerns, issues and problems that must be resolved in order to develop a sound and acceptable disposition recommendation.

A Planning Framework

In April 2005, **Vanasse Hangen Brustlin, Inc** in association with **RKG Associates** and **Community Opportunities Group** (“the consultant team”) was hired to assist the Devens Disposition Executive Board Coordinating Committee and additional subcommittees to provide various consulting services in developing a framework for making decisions regarding the future of the Devens community, and to do so in a manner that reflects the goals of Devens stakeholders and the surrounding communities.

The Devens Disposition Planning Services project contains three phases of work that deal with the following seven tasks. The following tasks and general task descriptions are the foundation elements of the Devens Disposition Planning Services project conducted by the consultant team and further studied within this project task binder.



Task 1: Project Scoping (Phase I)

An integral part of this framework is a strategy based upon information dissemination and developing an understanding of comprehensive and often integrated technical considerations. To date, the consultant team has developed a Scope of Work that includes the necessary technical assessments and analyses (generally described in the tasks below) to thoroughly evaluate the various disposition scenarios that are currently being considered.



Task 2: Housing Market Study (Phase I)

The development of additional housing at Devens will be an important consideration for any of the disposition strategies. Not only will additional housing complement economic development initiatives, it will also need to address the Commonwealth's goal for housing creation. Housing needs will include the provision of a variety of housing types and densities to ensure opportunities for a wide range of income groups and household sizes. The focus will be to understand the current and future housing market conditions in the region, with a particular attention paid to understanding how anticipated absorption rates will effect future phasing of development.

Additional focus will be given to understand the impacts that housing development has on the demand for municipal services, and the important balance that an increase in housing will create in the need for more revenue generating commercial development. The governance component of the project will help the DDEB to evaluate alternatives for the final disposition of Devens, including considerations as to whether new growth at the former military base shall evolve into a new town; whether the property should be returned to the Towns of Ayer, Harvard and Shirley using the historic town lines; or, whether some new regional municipal entity should be formed.



Task 3: Municipal Data Analysis (Phase I)

The fiscal impacts of any disposition options for Devens will be a key consideration for decision making, as the financial elements could have significant implications for the surrounding communities. The work involved with assessing the fiscal evaluations should ensure that the final plans are realistic and achievable given current and future market and fiscal conditions. Working with the model prepared by the DDEB, the analysis of fiscal impacts should ensure that the final inputs into the financial model result in a comprehensive and realistic assessment for evaluation of the disposition alternatives.

Based on the information developed in the market studies, the consultant team will present an analysis of the economic and fiscal impacts associated with each market sector, as well as projected demand at Devens for each market sector. A general fiscal impact analysis will be prepared which evaluates the potential costs associated with each property use category against the potential tax revenues to be generated. This will be based on a review of surrounding community's historic costs of providing services, augmented by additional information on the potential incremental costs associated with new municipal facilities, based on interviews with municipal department heads.



Task 4: Housing Recommendations (Phase II)

Based on the market assessment and disposition scenarios, housing recommendations should evaluate urban design and architectural principles that could be successfully employed in the future of Devens, consistent with local community character. The identification of types of housing that would appear attractive within the housing market and household characteristics of those likely to be attracted to Devens, whether as a separate town or part of the host communities should be conducted. The formulation of preliminary program recommendations addressing elements of housing development should be developed.



Task 5: Land Use and Open Space Assessment (Phase III)

Land use patterns proposed under the disposition scenarios should incorporate desired future densities and uses in a manner that is consistent with the Commonwealth's focus on smart growth and objectives for creating sustainable

communities. Efforts should be made to promote community design and mixed-use development patterns with convenient access to commuter rail and alternative modes of transportation in order to moderate automobile use. The land use assessment will review the proposed reuse scenarios in order to provide an understanding of the constraints of existing land uses, the critical mass of residential populations needed for the future success of the community, the important balance of new housing development with economic development initiatives, and regulatory frameworks to promote growth and development in a manner that is consistent with the overall goals of the planning process.

The approximately 2,100 acres of preserved open space, recreational facilities, and other natural and cultural resources at Devens will be a significant component for the reuse and disposition strategies in terms of land use planning, preservation initiatives, and overall long-term management. Additionally, coordination of current and future environmental clean-up and remediation activities, including assessments to ensure that appropriate remediation occurs at locations determined desirable for residential use will also be a significant factor for reuse of the property. Emphasis should be given to ensuring that any reuse and disposition alternatives include a thorough evaluation related to assessing the impacts to natural and cultural resources, outlining preservation and protection initiatives, and ensuring that high standards of environmental quality are maintained.



Task 6: Economic Development Assessment (Phase I)

The emphasis of assessing economic development initiatives at Devens is to ensure that there will be a sufficient balance between commercial development and additional housing, in addition to supporting existing businesses and creating job opportunities for people who live in the community and the region. The process will focus on initiatives to keep market rates fair, with a commitment to not under-cut similar economic initiatives in surrounding communities. Emphasis will be given to understanding past economic development efforts in terms of changes in market conditions in the region, projecting future conditions that may affect build-out and absorption rates, and assessing public investments needed to support business development activities. The overall goal will be to develop strategies to identify and attract potential users, including provisions for various types of additional housing needed to support economic development initiatives.

In addition, the potential employment opportunities to be generated at Devens will also be discussed. Employment opportunities will be presented in order of magnitude terms, based on published indicators for specific types of development from organizations such as the Urban Land Institute (ULI) and the Energy Information Administration. Potential wages will also be discussed, based on averages available from the Massachusetts Department of Employment and Training.

Beyond economic and employment opportunities, development impacts will be examined with respects to issues related to environmental considerations, transportation impacts, infrastructure availability, site constraints and adjacent neighborhoods/communities.



Task 7: Transportation Assessment (Phase III)

Transportation impacts with any reuse plan are a key consideration, with critical assessments to ensure that there are minimal impacts from future growth and development on the existing roadway network. It will be imperative to identify improvements that may be necessary to provide sufficient access and safety accommodations for automobiles, pedestrians and bicyclists. Emphasis should be given to ensuring that existing regional roadways are up to the standards of the surrounding communities with regard to quality and layout, and that future networks are designed to meet necessary demands and are able to accommodate multiple modes of transportation facilities.