

Importance of Norwalk Harbor, a mid-sized harbor, for economic growth and development

Presented by:

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Norwalk Harbor is one of the most important centers of recreational boating, commercial shellfishing, and other water-dependent activities in the Southwestern Long Island Sound. Norwalk's interesting maritime history and attractive position on the Sound make it one of Connecticut's most popular destinations for shoreline travelers. It is a major mixed-use harbor displaying the largest portion of CT's coastline that includes the shorelines of its 16-natural barrier Islands. These Archipelagic Islands serve to protect Norwalk Harbor (as witnessed during Hurricanes Sandy and Irene).

The waters of Norwalk Harbor are shared by barges carrying sand and gravel, Oyster (shellfishing) boats from the State's (*or perhaps the nation's*) largest producers of oysters, and over 3,000 recreational power and sail boats that call Norwalk their home port. There are over 2,700 commercial vessel trips to and from the Harbor's port facilities each year. These include barges, excursion and chartered vessels, and commercial oyster (shellfish) and fishing boats. Water-dependent facilities include 15 marinas and 13 private clubs with boating/mooring facilities.

The federal navigation channel extends from the Wall Street area approximately 4.7 miles Southwest towards Green's Ledge Light House and serves waterfront commerce and recreational marinas. Considerable effort within the past 20 years has been directed toward community enhancement and economic development along the 4.7 mile stretch of Norwalk's waterfront. This includes establishment of Norwalk's Maritime Aquarium, Re-development of the historic South Norwalk (SoNo) area with its rich shellfishing heritage (lower harbor), Re-development plans recently initiated for Wall Street-Smith Street (upper harbor) and Re-vitalization efforts ongoing in the Mid-harbor region (which include Norwalk's Heritage Waterfront Park).

Just offshore are the sixteen Norwalk Islands, including Sheffield, Goose, and Chimon Islands, which provide habitat for colonial nesting waterbirds as well as migrating neotropical birds. These islands are protected units of the Stewart B. McKinney National Wildlife Refuge. Chimon Island is the most productive heron rookery in the state, supporting large populations of *dozens-or-more* kinds of wading birds.

The Norwalk Seaport Association and The Norwalk Maritime Aquarium are well-recognized for their distinctive efforts to preservation and enhancement of Long Island Sound. The mission of both organizations focuses on preserving the rich maritime heritage of Norwalk, its harbor, its Islands as well as long Island Sound through advancing public awareness and cultivating educational programs.

The Seaport Association operates the Sheffield Island Ferry Tours that are top attractions not just in Fairfield County but throughout Connecticut and Long Island Sound. They provide access for an annually estimated 6000 people to interact and experience Norwalk Harbor, its Lighthouses, and the center of attraction entering Norwalk Harbor, the Sheffield Island Lighthouse (*Built in 1868 and retired in 1902 now a museum for visitors to experience a glimpse of Norwalk's rich maritime history*). Visitors board the Seaport's 45-foot catamaran for a cruise through Norwalk Harbor ending at Sheffield Island and then tour the lighthouse. The Seaport Association continues to offer a wide array of special events and community projects that focus on the history of Norwalk Harbor and Long Island Sound.

As noted earlier, Norwalk Harbor is home to the Stewart B. McKinney National Wildlife Refuge which is controlled by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The Seaport Association has partnered with the Fish and Wildlife Service to ferry passengers from the mainland to enjoy sightseeing, wildlife and bird watching activities. The Seaport association runs its Ferry service May through September. Tourism is usually restricted to areas around the Sheffield Island Light House, which is maintained by the Norwalk Seaport Associations. A 2,000-yard trail has been created to allow the public controlled access. In the summer, the association arranges tours for people to visit the lighthouse and picnic there. They also provide clambakes and sunset cruises.

In addition to Sheffield Island lighthouse Park and Island excursions, The Seaport Association sponsors the Norwalk Oyster Festival. 1978 was the maiden voyage of the Oyster Festival and this year will mark its 37th consecutive production. Funds raised by the festival help the Seaport Association maintain the Sheffield Island Lighthouse as well as develop education programs.

Numerous excursion vessels and hundreds of visiting boaters are also drawn annually to Norwalk's Maritime Aquarium. The Maritime Aquarium's \$2.5 million dollar research vessel cruises Long Island Sound more than 300 times per year, all year round, with public and student groups. Educators on board introduce participants to the marine life of Long Island Sound and collect scientific data on water and air conditions as well as on aquatic life in the Sound. Norwalk's Cove Marina is also host to one of the largest In-water Boat Shows.

I'd like to focus on the Dunavan Boating Center, Visitor's Docks and Launch ramps. This facility is a federally mandated structure that provides public access and landing facility in exchange for the federal government maintaining a navigation channel through Norwalk Harbor. The visitor's dock and launch ramp facility was recently dredged (funding for that project is on the DOT's Grants-in-aid agenda for port and marina improvements). Redevelopment plans for upgrading this facility are underway with the goal to serve as a multi-nodal transportation hub. The location of this facility is ideally suited for that purpose due to its close proximity to MetroNorth rail service, bus depot, and its convenience as a water ferry terminal all within walking distance of dining and shopping attractions that include the Norwalk Maritime Aquarium and museum. This facility could also serve to connect the upper harbor (Wall Street area) with the Historic SoNo district with use of water taxi facility.

Norwalk was also reviewed as a stop/and drop-off location for a high speed ferry service between New York City and Martha's Vineyard. The deactivation of the 124 acre Norwalk Power Plant on Manresa Island (NRG property) provides many interesting possibilities for a number of water-dependent projects and easy public access to the outer harbor region.

At the "helm" to help oversee and direct Norwalk's efforts to provide and improve infrastructure, maintain safe and beneficial use of its harbor and conserve its vital resources is the Norwalk Harbor Management Commission which has a State, ACOE, and City approved Harbor Management Plan.

In conclusion, The Maritime Aquarium was created to spur development in SoNo; To date more than \$200 million in private condos, retail and business space have been invested. Maritime Aquarium alone contributes ~\$42 million annually into Connecticut's economy serving ~500,000 visitors a year. The Norwalk Oyster festival helps local non-profit organizations and helps contribute over \$3.5 million to the local economy. Helping municipalities improve their maritime-related activities whether they involve boating, commercial ventures, or water-dependent attractions will greatly enhance the local and state economy.

Moving forward from 2014, Norwalk Harbor will continue to be a source of significant economic, environmental, recreational, and cultural benefits for the general public. To sustain and reap these benefits, continued long-range planning and active participation from all stakeholders (City, State, and Federal agencies, private organizations, waterfront property owners) will be required.

It is critical that our small and mid-sized harbors **NOT BE** judged solely by their barge and freight traffic **BUT RATHER** for the economic value of their land masses and their water-dependent recreational and tourist activities and capabilities. These activities are sustainable through financial assistance and investments as well as represent major revenue streams which benefit the entire State.