

Sears Island panel to resume efforts as factions squabble over future use

By Tom Groening

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SEARSPORT - The effort to find consensus among the polarized members of a group planning for state-owned Sears Island is expected to gear up again in coming weeks.

The 40-plus member panel was slated to finish its work by the end of 2006, but its efforts carried over into the new year. The committee, working under the oversight of the state Department of Conservation, last met in early February.

Karin Tilberg, who was deputy conservation commissioner when the planning process began early last year but is now working in the Governor's Office, expects to contact committee members later this week, she said Monday.

Tilberg hoped a meeting could be scheduled soon, probably early in April.

The last meeting ended on a sour note, as members of the group within the committee that wants to reserve the island for port development expressed consternation at the group of committee members that wants to conserve the island in its largely natural state.

Excerpts from e-mails from the conservationist group printed in an area newspaper revealed that its strategy was to ensure the island is never developed for a port.

"The last meeting was a setback," said Maria Fuentes, executive director of the Maine Better Transportation Association and spokeswoman for the port proponents. The e-mails were like "being hit over the head by a 2-by-4," she said.

Scott Dickerson, executive director of Coastal Mountains Land Trust and spokesman for the conservation group, suggested Monday the e-mails were a red herring.

A component of the draft consensus document both sides have been working from is that future marine transportation development be sought first at nearby Mack Point on the mainland, where a port already exists. Dickerson said his group has been unabashed in its hope that the entire island can be conserved, which may come to pass if Mack Point is further developed.

"That would be our ideal," he said.

At the last meeting, the conservation group offered to let port proponents identify 300 acres on the west side of the island to be reserved for possible port development. Under the offer, the state Department of Transportation would have up to a year to identify 250 acres within that area for port development.

Fuentes dismissed the offer as unrealistic, saying transportation advocates have consistently maintained a master plan for the island should be completed first.

"It's impossible to predict, to look into a crystal ball to see what the transportation needs would be," she said.

She noted the entire island was purchased by state funds for transportation uses.

Dickerson countered that the island has been extensively studied for more than 20 years, and he said DOT should be able to identify 300 acres that would work for a port.

"Sears Island is not a big mystery. The basic geology and soils and conditions are well known," he said.

Dickerson also described the offer as fair.

Another key component of the draft consensus is that the remainder of the 941-acre island be placed in a conservation easement.

Both sides have been wary of the implications of that easement; port proponents fear it could block regulatory approval, and conservationists don't want it to be used as mitigation to win port approval.

Tilberg said she has met with federal transportation officials about those concerns and believes there is a way both sides can be satisfied on the issue.



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