



An uncertain future for shuttered Fort Monroe

By David Macaulay - The (Newport News, Va.) Daily Press via AP
Posted : Monday Dec 7, 2009 9:02:45 EST (ArmyTimes.com)

HAMPTON, Va. — Abraham Lincoln planned the attack on Norfolk while staying in Old Quarters 1 within the walls of Fort Monroe during the Civil War.

Today, it is the base of operations for another daunting, albeit less bloody task for Bill Armbruster, a former military man who is overseeing the departure of the Army from Fort Monroe and planning for an uncertain future.

Armbruster is the executive director of the Fort Monroe Federal Area Development Authority, the body created in 2007 to find a new use for the post when the Army leaves.

Last month, the authority made a landmark decision when it voted to create a national park out of historic parts of Fort Monroe.

But the National Park Service would only take over a small portion of the site, assuming the move is backed by Congress.

Armbruster, who traveled to Washington, D.C., at the end of last week to talk to lawmakers, estimates the National Park Service will take over about 60 acres of the 564-acre site, but the size of the park is yet to be finalized.

That's not to say large tracts will be opened up to developers.

"About 40 percent is open green space and wetlands, the natural areas that we want to protect," he said.

Armbruster, a 74-year-old former Pentagon official with a Navy background, is pleased that the future of Fort Monroe is now clearer.

"There's been a lot of misinformation out there," he said. "There were those that felt the property was going to be sold to developers and that the choice was either a national park or high-rise condos. I've even heard casinos. I've heard all sorts of stories out there. It's simply not true," he said.

He said it is part of the development authority's plan for the land at Fort Monroe to belong to the commonwealth of Virginia.

However, Armbruster and his team have a duty to make the future Fort Monroe viable and the authority will have to work with a large number of private sector partners to successfully run what he describes as a "small city."

"Economic sustainability is crucial. We've got to make this place pay for itself."

Under the plan backed by the development authority's board last month, the National Park Service would take over Old Quarters 1, the historic stone fort that is the largest of its kind in the United States, the moat, the outer works, Irwin and Parrot batteries that were built just after the Spanish-American War of 1898, and a radar station on the parapets.

The radar station, used for anti-submarine monitoring in World War II, is an example of the famous Bauhaus school of architecture, Armbruster said.

Old Quarters 1 is also famous.

“This is the oldest building on Fort Monroe other than the lighthouse. In 1819, Lafayette entertained there. Lincoln spent four nights there,” Armbruster said.

“So much of the planning for the campaign on the Peninsula and the attack on Norfolk was planned from here.”

Armbruster hopes tax credits can be used to “adaptively reuse” historic buildings on the site, with no new building proposed within the moat of the historic fort.

“We can’t tear them down. We don’t want to,” he said. “We are bound to preserve them, but we do need to make them useful to 21st-century occupancy.”

He proposes “limited development” compatible with the historic fabric of the existing buildings. Although the private sector will be brought in, developers won’t own any land.

“There will be no high rises,” Armbruster said. Building heights will be limited to three stories.

The new structures are likely to be office space and new homes. Armbruster said the development authority is talking to a number of potential tenants, nonprofit organizations, museums, and state and federal agencies. They include the Hampton History Museum, the Virginia Museum of Natural History and the Museum of the Confederacy.

“This has more of an academic campus feel than it does a military feel,” he said.

He wants the future Fort Monroe to be a “living, vibrant community” rather than a park that opens in the morning and closes in the evening.

“We see some opportunities for tourism-related hospitality type facilities, maybe some small tea rooms or restaurants that will support a growing tourism base. FMFADA project tourism numbers of up to 250,000 a year.

“There already is a surprising number of tourists who come here and go to the Casemate Museum,” he said.

Armbruster said that in the future Fort Monroe would link to the Historic Triangle of Williamsburg, Yorktown and Jamestown to expand tourism.

Steve Corneliusen, of Citizens for Fort Monroe National Park, said the group is pressing for as large an area as possible to be included in the national park.

“It’s all a national historic landmark and all an environmental treasure, so we hope Virginia’s congressional delegation seeks as large a national park as makes practical sense,” he said Saturday

(Warrant Officers Heritage Foundation Note: Fort Monroe was the birthplace of the Army Warrant Officer when on July 9, 1918 the Army Mine Planter Service of the Coast Artillery was authorized a total of 40 Warrant Officers to serve as masters, mates, chief engineers, and assistant engineers on each mine planting vessel. Although only one rank of Warrant Officer was authorized by Congress, in effect, three grades were created because of the varying levels of pay authorized for masters, 1st mates, 2nd mates, and corresponding levels of marine engineer personnel. The Hampton Roads Chapter of the U. S. Army Warrant Officers Association is in the process of attempting to place items of Mine Planter Warrant Officer historical value in the Casemate Museum in the old Fort.)

(For more Army Warrant Officer History visit www.usawoa.org/WOHERITAGE/Hist_of_Army_WO.htm.)