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In the Region/Connecticut

A Late Step in Norwalk's Renewal

By ELEANOR CHARLES

THE 20-year conversion of South Norwalk's once decaying and dangerous waterfront into SoNo, a lively district of condos, shops and restaurants, is in its final stage. Only two projects remain to be built under the city's urban renewal plan.

The first, which is to break ground in May, is a condominium and rental complex called Maritime Yards. It will overlook the Norwalk River and a linear waterfront park. It sits just north of the Maritime Aquarium and three blocks from Washington Street and the heart of SoNo.

The second project is much further from construction, however. It involves a 12.5-acre site on West Avenue, owned since 1984 by Fred F. French Investments L.L.C., where work is stalled in a lawsuit over the acquisition of the last 1.6 acres.

The lawsuit does not prevent French from erecting one of four buildings that are zoned to allow 1.15 million square feet of offices on the site, but it has been unable to attract a tenant committed to taking 100,000 square feet of space. Timon Malloy, president of Fred F. French in Stamford, said, "We will not build without a tenant."

In a surprise action, the Spinnaker Companies of Stamford, the city-designated developer of the entire urban renewal project, has moved to take a stake in the site. "Spinnaker has made a joint venture with French and has submitted a request to the city for approval," Norwalk's mayor, Alex A. Knopp, said. The companies themselves have not yet announced the deal.

Mr. Knopp said the city is hoping the site will have Class A office space for 95 percent of the project and retailing for 5 percent, "to improve the commercial grand list," he said, adding that Norwalk has worked for many years helping French to ac-



Beinfeld Architecture P.C.

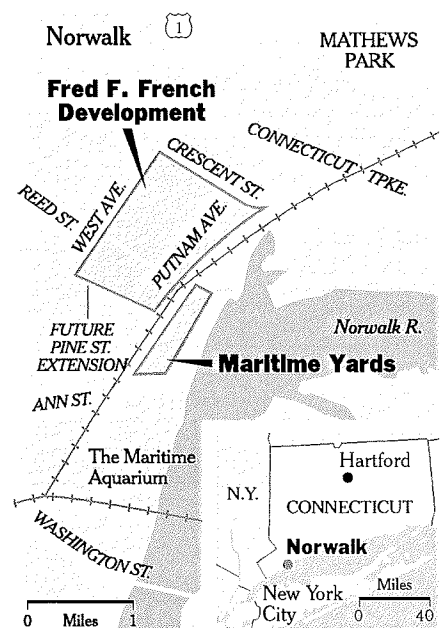
NEAR THE RIVER

Maritime Yards is to have 61 condominium units and 136 rental apartments, including 20 categorized as "affordable" under a state formula.

quire 27 parcels by eminent domain. "In the view of commercial real estate brokers," he said, "the tract is a premier office site in the New York metro region based on its size and location 50 feet from Interstate 95 and 200 feet from Route 7."

The lawsuit was brought by Maritime Motors, a Chevrolet dealership at 51 West Avenue, which bought the property two years ago from the former operator for \$1.765 million, knowing that it was a candidate for acquisition by eminent domain. Rather than accept a city offer of \$2.05 million, it sued the city and the Redevelopment Agency in Superior Court, arguing that it should have been integrated into the 12.5-acre tract and that it could find no other location as profitable. The court upheld the city, and Maritime Motors lost again on an appeal from the court's ruling.

Now it is suing in State Supreme Court. "They never asked for integra-



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tion," said Lou Cicarello, corporation counsel for the city. "When they didn't get their price of \$6.4 million, they sued."

Mayor Knopp said that "until the court comes to a decision, there's not much point to putting a shovel in the ground."

On a happier note, the Spinnaker Companies, in partnership with Greenfield Partners and the Summit Corporation, will complete the purchase of the city-owned 3.7-acre Maritime Yards site this month for an undisclosed sum. Remediation and construction are to begin in May and June for an eight-story building with 61 condominium units; two five-story buildings with a total of 136 rental apartments, ground floor shops and restaurants; and a total of 343 indoor and outdoor parking spaces. Twenty units — both condos and rentals — priced according to a state "affordable" formula will be distributed throughout the complex.

Construction costs alone will be around \$60 million, said Bruce Beinfield, head of Beinfield Architects of Norwalk, designers of new construction and adaptive reuse of 19th-century brick factories throughout the urban renewal area.

The condo units range from 872 to

2,498 square feet in 14 floor plans of one to three bedrooms. Five penthouse units have terraces measuring 30 to 50 feet long. Smaller units with balconies will be priced from the \$300,000's; others will range up to nearly \$1 million. Gas fireplaces are to be installed in the penthouses and in 14 other condo units. All units will have laundry rooms, some with storage space, or use of storage cubicles and bicycle racks in the basement.

The two rental buildings offer 10 plans for one- and two-bedroom apartments of 765 to 1,200 square feet, and priced around \$1,700 to \$2,600 a month. Half the units will have balconies. One building will have a community or party room.

A 50-foot-long outdoor lap pool will be screened by landscaping and a fence. The pool and a changing room will be free to renters and available to condo owners for a fee.

The entire complex will have gas cooking and heating/cooling, fitness centers and business centers.

According to Mr. Beinfield, everything will be "as 'green' as possible," referring to a 64-item checklist drawn up by the United States Green Building Council, a coalition that promotes the development of buildings that are environmentally responsi-

ble. The council has created a set of standards involving building materials, energy use and other factors that can lead to the certification of a project as attaining gold, silver or bronze status. "Some municipalities give tax rebates for certified projects," said Fritz Morris, a lead architect at the Beinfield firm.

Constantly on the lookout for new materials, Mr. Beinfield noted that the floors will be bamboo, whose use environmentalists encourage. "It grows quickly," he said. "It's very hard and does not use up natural resources like oak, which is getting scarcer and takes a long time to grow." The flooring is installed on rubber pads that insulate and sound-proof between floors.

Another "green" component is window glass that keeps heat out in summer, traps it inside in winter and is slightly tinted to reduce glare.

The marketing of the condos, Mr. Fowler said, is to begin in late May in a storefront on Marshall Street. "People will choose and make deposits from floor plans and finishes," he said. The units are to be ready in August 2006, and although the rental apartments will be completed at the same time, "we will not lease until 90 days before occupancy," he said.

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