



THIS STORY HAS BEEN FORMATTED FOR EASY PRINTING

## Board backs incorporating former Fort Devens Residents will vote on Nov. 7

The Boston Globe

By Davis Bushnell, Globe Correspondent | January 19, 2006

A big push has begun to fine-tune plans for the former Fort Devens to become the state's 352d incorporated community in 2010.

That goal was endorsed last Thursday by the 15-member Devens Disposition Executive Board, which for the last 14 months has been looking into housing and other issues tied to Devens evolving into a town.

The executive board's 13-2 vote last week in favor of incorporation was not a surprise, because MassDevelopment, the quasi-state agency that is redeveloping the former Army base, has been beating the drums for some time to put Devens on the map as a town.

However, the vote for the first time lays out a detailed chronology of events leading up to a Nov. 7 vote on incorporation by residents of Ayer, Harvard, and Shirley. Portions of the three towns' land fall into Devens.

"Our vote was a very important step because it is aimed at meeting various deadlines to get to the November ballot," said William Marshall, chairman of the executive board, which consists of officials from the three towns and Devens residents.

Input to the board indicated, Marshall said, that a decision to proceed with incorporation plans was "the least contentious path to take." The other scenario, he said, would have been to forge ahead with plans to turn over to the three towns their land at Devens.

Patricia Walsh and William Ashe, who are Planning Board members in Ayer and Harvard, respectively, were dissenters in last week's vote. Both said they needed more information.

"I was looking for much more financial information, for example, on the operating costs" of running Devens as a town, Walsh said.

Also, there should be a provision for another roadway to and from Devens that would not interfere with Ayer traffic, she said.

Ashe, a former Harvard selectman, added, "I think we're rushing to judgment here because the two options weren't considered in sufficient detail. I would prefer to do things right rather than quickly."

The next step is for the various stakeholders to review the framework of the incorporation plan and to submit their views to the disposition executive board at its Feb. 16 meeting.

Stakeholders are MassDevelopment, whose board of directors is expected to vote on the plan on Feb. 9; selectmen in the three towns; the Devens Enterprise Commission, the regulatory and permitting authority for the former base; and the 108 homeowners at Devens.

Following the executive board's Feb. 16 meeting, a memorandum of understanding will be drawn up to address "matters that are still pending such as environmental issues," Marshall said.

Then, if the proposed timetable of events is followed closely, a draft of incorporation legislation will be reviewed by all stakeholders by early July, with formal language of a Nov. 7 ballot question to be filed with the secretary of state's office in early August for approval. Town Meeting voters in the three towns will have their say in October.

Meantime, selectmen and other local officials will be focusing on the Devens housing plans, which call for 1,300 housing units to be built over 20 years on the former base.

Under current plans, Ayer would also be permitted to build up to 1.75 million square feet of commercial-industrial

space on 20 acres of the former Army airfield. A waste-water treatment plant and water system off Barnum Road would serve Harvard's commercial district. Also, there would be reciprocal recreation agreements between Harvard and Devens.

If voters approve the incorporation plan in November, the first houses probably will be constructed in the Grant Road area of Devens in 2008, said Meg Delorier, MassDevelopment's chief spokeswoman for Devens.

It is expected that several developers will be involved, building single- and multifamily dwellings, "at least 10 percent" of which would be affordable by state standards, Delorier said, adding that housing prices have yet to be determined.

The agency is forecasting, she said, that Devens could have between 3,000 and 3,500 residents in 2027.

According to the secretary of state's office, the last communities to be established as towns in Massachusetts were East Brookfield in 1920 and Plainville in 1905. ■



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