

LOCAL & STATE

New debate over Mt. P. sail center

Supporter says town backing out; councilman cites safety concerns

By PRENTISS FINDLAY
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MOUNT PLEASANT — A grass-roots campaign for a sailing center at Memorial Waterfront Park is being spearheaded by lawyer William J. Hamilton III, who lashed out at the town Friday for changing course on the project.

"I'm going all the way on this. The people of Mount Pleasant have been beat up pretty bad by town government for the past few years," Hamilton said. He has created a Web site for the effort that he calls "Against the Wind — Save Our Sailing Center."

Hamilton said that for two years the town has promised a sailing center at the park. Recently, though, it put the program on the back burner, he said. On his Web site, Hamilton singles out Town Councilman Gary Santos by posting sound bites of Santos talking about the future of the sailing center on ION Radio, a low-power AM station that serves the I'On community.

Santos said that Hamilton has unfairly characterized council's position on the park sailing center. "Nobody has said that it's not going to be there. I'm just trying to do the right thing and explore all the options," Santos said. He has concerns about the safety of a sailing program at the park pier because of a strong ebb tide and the proximity of the Arthur Ravenel Jr. Bridge. "The tide rips there. Young kids could be sucked under the bridge pilings," he said. Santos said that Hamilton has not called him to discuss the issue.

The \$14 million, 22-acre park is scheduled to open next year on Memorial Day weekend. A conceptual plan of the park includes a floating dock for sailboats near the end of the 1,200-foot pier. At a recent meeting, council decided to look into the possibility of partnering with the Hobcaw Yacht Club for a town sailing program because it was concerned about whether it was safe for youth to sail from the pier.

Hamilton says at his Web site that Charleston Community Sailing offered to design, build and operate a sailing center at the park but was turned down. However, the town said it would have its own sailing program at the pier, Hamilton said. The Charleston Community Sailing program and its high school teams have outgrown the Ashley River Marina, he said. The teenagers are skilled sailors capable of navigating typical wind and tide from the pier. If problems arise, two power boats are on hand, he said.

Hamilton said he suspects that shipping interests are behind the council's modified position on a park sailing center. Santos said State Ports Authority officials have not contacted him about the sail-

ing center.

"That's absolutely false. There's no conspiracy here. We're going to have a sailing center. It's just a matter of the best location," he said. Santos said he thought that Remley's Point would offer more shelter from tides near the pier. "I had no idea of the strength of the tides," he said.

John Cameron, who was the U.S. Coast Guard captain of the port from 2004 until last year, said that he advised Santos on potential safety issues regarding a waterfront park sailing program. The park pier, which extends 1,200 feet, is located near narrows at the confluence of the Wando and Cooper rivers, which makes the tide trickier and less suitable for beginning sailors, Cameron said.

Cameron, who is Hobcaw Yacht Club commodore, said the yacht club board of directors next meets Feb. 11 and at that time will discuss the town's proposal for an instructional youth sailing program partnership. The club is on the Wando River, which is a more protected area with less current, he said.

Hamilton noted that the Memorial Waterfront Park is the only publicly owned waterfront in town that could be used for a sailing center in the near future. His Web site, www.wjhamilton.com/againstthewind, says that he plans a dinner discussion of the issue at O'Brion's Pub at I'On Square at 6 p.m. Wednesday.

The park, which is next to the Ravenel Bridge, will have a pier, a war memorial, a visitors center, a sweetgrass pavilion and a playground. In addition to the sailing center, other undecided issues include whether to have a five-acre dog park or a performing arts center. Some have complained that council suddenly has changed course on the dog park, which was presented at public hearings. The notion of a performing arts center on the dog park property was floated this week by Mayor Harry Hallman and Mayor Pro-Tem Kruger Smith. Hallman has said that the land is too valuable for a dog park, which could be located elsewhere in town.

The state is giving the town the park land. Another plan for the dog park acreage first surfaced last week in a council discussion after an executive session regarding negotiations with the state Department of Transportation to acquire the 22 acres.

The park is in the town tax increment finance district, which is the source of about 75 percent of funds for project construction. Hospitality and accommodations taxes and a state grant cover the rest of the park cost.

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