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Maryland Port Administration greening an old harbor dumping ground

Agency restoring Baltimore's Masonville Cove as urban park, bird preserve

By Timothy B. Wheeler, The Baltimore Sun

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On Baltimore's industrial southern waterfront, there's a green oasis of sorts, squeezed between a sand-and-gravel plant and a busy shipping terminal. Deer, foxes and rabbits lurk in the scrubby woods along the shore, songbirds flit among the trees, and ducks and geese ply quiet water with a distant view of the downtown skyline.

Masonville Cove, long a dumping ground for building debris and scrapped ships, is being reclaimed and converted into an urban nature park and bird sanctuary. Already, hundreds of students from nearby schools are learning about wetlands and wildlife at a "green" environmental education center there. By year's end, visitors should be able to stroll down to the water and fish and kayak from a new wooden pier.

In what many see as a promising development for Baltimore's degraded harbor, the Maryland Port Administration is underwriting this \$22 million makeover of one of its most contaminated spots. Part of the environmental restoration work in the cove is being done as legally required mitigation for the 130-acre impoundment created nearby to hold muck dredged from the harbor bottom. But the education center and much of the construction under way now are part of a deal the state struck with neighborhood leaders.

In return for the port's promise to clean up the cove and make it usable to the public again, leaders of the Brooklyn, Cherry Hill and Curtis Bay communities went along with something residents elsewhere have bitterly fought in the past — the disposal beside the cove of millions of tons of noxious smelling and sometimes contaminated mud dredged from the harbor bottom.

Rob Catlin, executive director of the Brooklyn and Curtis Bay Coalition, a nonprofit community development corporation, says it's a classic "win-win."

The port, one of the state's major economic engines, needs someplace to put the stuff dredged to keep the shipping channels open. Urban neighborhoods, meanwhile, get waterfront access that they haven't had in decades, plus a community center that Catlin hopes can anchor green education and job-training efforts.

And besides, he concludes, "Anytime any part of the harbor gets cleaned up, that's good for all of us."

Some see Masonville Cove's reclamation as a model for restoring Baltimore's degraded harbor, tackling both ongoing water pollution and the toxic legacy of past industrial activities buried in the soil and sediments.

"This is a first step in the direction of getting the harbor ... fishable and swimmable," said Beth McGee, senior scientist with the Chesapeake Bay Foundation. "It'd be great to see more of those types of projects."

Masonville was once a modest waterfront hamlet, hemmed in by the Middle Branch of the Patapsco and by the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad. Black-and-white photos from the 1930s or '40s show people on the shore in bathing suits. Around 1952, though, the railroad bought and demolished the homes there so it could expand its rail yard.

Even before that, records indicate, the waterfront had become a dumping ground for demolition rubble, dredge material and just plain trash. Neighborhood lore has it that some debris from the Great Baltimore Fire of 1904 wound up in Masonville. Burned timbers found among the debris appear to predate the fire, and a paving brick on display at the education center that was found amid the rubble evidently was produced years before the blaze.

More recently, Masonville had been the site of a shipyard and a shipbreaking and industrial demolition business. Oil and toxic chemicals were dumped into the water and sediments during the demolition of a Navy aircraft carrier and several other ships in the 1990s.

The port latched onto the old scrap yard in 2000 and cleaned it up to provide more parking for Mercedes and other imported vehicles arriving at the neighboring marine terminal. Meanwhile, officials proposed to put a half-million tons of harbor dredge material there when its longtime disposal site at Hart-Miller Island filled up. Recalling the state's 14-year legal battle with opponents of the Hart-Miller site, port agency officials opted to try for a more cooperative approach.

By meeting with civic leaders and pledging to restore the cove as a "community enhancement" project, the port agency was able to skip a contentious court fight and get the dredge disposal site ready in six years. The first shipment of sediment was placed there last fall, shortly after Hart-Miller Island closed.

"All that added up to a lot of time saved," said Frank L. Hamons, the port agency's deputy director for harbor development. "It enabled us to continue to maintain Baltimore harbor, which without Masonville we couldn't have done." Some of the dredged material to be put in the impoundment contains toxic metals and chemicals, he said, but the contaminants will be contained in the impoundment and capped by clean material.

"It was already a green area," Hamons said of the cove, "But it was a dump. It was loaded with trash. It was fenced off and neighbors didn't have access to it. They hadn't had access for 70 years."

Since work began in 2007, about 61,000 tons of trash and rubble have been hauled away. The hulks of 27 derelict vessels have been removed or cleaned up, along with

hundreds of thousands of gallons of oil-tainted water and two tons of electrical equipment containing toxic chemicals.

But the cleanup was slowed because the soil contamination beneath the rubble was worse than expected, Hamons said. Sampling found poisonous metals such as arsenic, chromium and lead; pesticides; and polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs. The area was also riddled with toxic hydrocarbons, frequent byproducts of burning coal and oil.

About half of the 52-acre site is being "capped" with a 2-foot layer of clean soil, with plans to replant trees where they had to be cut down for the cleanup. A layer of clean sand will be put down over portions of the cove to cover the mucky bottom, and artificial reefs will be added to enhance fishing. The port agency has contracted with the National Aquarium in Baltimore to restore tidal marsh and other wetlands around the shore.

"It definitely took a lot of vision to see it as a desirable natural area," said David Nemerson, a conservation biologist with the aquarium who has worked with the port agency on the restoration project. "It'll obviously take a few years to settle in and green up," he said, "but I think it's going to be terrific."

Construction is expected to start soon on a pier and floating dock, with hiking paths leading to it and around the cove. One area is to be off-limits to people as a bird sanctuary.

Even before the cleanup, the cove was a favored haunt of anglers and birdwatchers. Bob Ringler, a retired chemist from Carroll County, said he's been visiting Masonville since the late 1970s.

"It was a really junky-looking place, broken glass everywhere," he recalled. But wildlife didn't seem to mind. In winter, especially, the sheltered waters of the cove drew ducks and geese by the hundreds.

"I've seen over 1,000 ducks in there at one time," Ringler said, including canvasbacks, lesser scaup and ruddy ducks. The pooled water on the old dredge dumping ground attracted sandpipers, plovers and other shorebirds.

"From a birdwatcher's point of view, this was like having a real gold mine," Ringler said. The cove sheltered birds rarely seen elsewhere around Baltimore because there were few other relatively green and uninhabited places along the water.

Kevin Graff, a 33-year-old volunteer with the Maryland Ornithological Society, said he spotted 52 species of birds, plus some butterflies, when he stopped by recently. Last week, he spied a pair of Mississippi kites, grey, long-winged hawks more commonly seen in the Southeast.

Graff, who regularly visits Masonville from his home in Harford County, said he's seen northern or Baltimore orioles around the cove, and bald eagles. He's putting together a list of the birds seen there so it can be used to educate visitors.

"People think there are no birds in the city," he said. "But there are so many here."

For now, the only publicly accessible part of the new park is the environmental education center opened two years ago. Built to showcase green construction, its features include a reflective roof, solar panels, rain barrels and no-flush urinals. In the past year, it's been a hub for nearly 1,400 elementary school students from 16 area schools, who have visited for lessons about water quality and environmental stewardship provided by the Living Classrooms Foundation, a Baltimore-based nonprofit.

The education center is "basically their only connection to the environment, and to the city beyond their schoolyard, for a lot of these students," said Lorraine Andrews Warnick, environmental programs director for Living Classrooms.

Caplan said he hopes the access to nature will open eyes and open economic doors as well for an area still mired in poverty. He sees the education center as a valuable adjunct to the community's new high school, Benjamin Franklin, which has adopted an environmental science focus.

"The whole idea is to get them to develop an interest in wanting to pursue environmental studies," he said, so more students will finish high school, go to college, and come back to Baltimore to work in an environmental capacity for the government, the port or a private firm.

If that ultimately comes from the restoration of Masonville cove, he said, "then I think we have really made a great move toward successfully improving the life and the work of the people of our community."