

Reed Putnam: Underpass next

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NORWALK - With a legal battle behind and the final portion of the Reed Putnam Urban Renewal project coming into clearer focus, Redevelopment Agency officials say they are working with Metro-North Railroad and the state Department of Transportation to get construction of the Reed Street underpass started.

The city envisions the underpass becoming the primary artery into the 70-acre redevelopment area between Interstate 95 and the Norwalk River. The urban renewal plan, first drafted in 1983, so far has yielded the renovated Lock Building, the Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk and the Maritime Garage. Maritime Yards, a mixture of housing, retail and offices, is approaching completion immediately north of the Aquarium.

"This area went from very little to nothing going on to needing access," said agency Assistant Director John L. Burritt Jr. The Reed Street underpass "will give you a straight shot off Interstate 95 to the waterfront. We're working with Metro-North Railroad and ConnDOT to secure right-of-access and permanent easement."

Under the plan, Reed Street will be widened and extended beneath Metro-North Railroad's Danbury Branch Line and connect with North Water Street. Motorists will be able to leave Exit 14 off northbound Interstate 95 and drive to the Aquarium, or elsewhere within the Reed Putnam area, without dealing with West Avenue traffic and stop lights.

Although agency officials hope to see construction of the underpass begin next year, its completion will be a long way off.

"It's a two-year construction process. You're maintaining an active railroad," said Burritt Jr., noting that construction is not intended to shut down railroad service.

The Reed Street extension and underpass construction - along with a new railroad bridge - are anticipated to run \$6.5 million - a major chunk of \$20 million in infrastructure work related to the Reed Putnam project.

Common Council members recently received an overview of progress on the infrastructure work.

To date, Pine Street has been extended, road and other work related to the Maritime Garage are complete, as is design work for the railroad underpass and railroad bridge. Also, preliminary design work for the widening of West Avenue is finished, according to the Redevelopment Agency.

In 2001, the General Assembly passed legislation targeting \$20 million toward Reed Putnam infrastructure work. The Connecticut Department of Economic and Community Development is administering the grant.

"Approximately \$14.9 million remains in the special act grant for costs associated with construction of the Reed Street extension and underpass, the construction of

the West Avenue widening, and construction of Interstate 95 ramp improvements, among other items," wrote agency Executive Director Timothy T. Sheehan in a Sept. 20 memorandum to the council's Planning Committee.

The agency focused its attention on the underpass, after Maritime Motors and Spinnaker Cos.-led 95/7 Ventures LLC - the developer of the last dozen acres in the Reed Putnam area - reached a settlement precluding the seizure of the car dealership at 51 West Ave. and nearby storage lot at 31 Putnam Ave.

The storage lot lies on land through which the city plans to extend Reed Street. The settlement resolved years of litigation between Maritime Motors, the city and the Redevelopment Agency.

This month, the council approved, in principle, Redevelopment Agency-recommended square footages for the dozen acres to be developed by 95/7 Ventures. That recommendation calls for offices, housing and retail, rather than almost exclusively offices, as had been planned.