

Liberty Station is a San Diego success story

By Wayne Rafflesberger 4 p.m. July 27, 2013 Updated 5:02 p.m. July 26, 2013

Twenty years ago this month, the sky was falling economically in San Diego. After a nasty recession in the early 1990s that was particularly devastating to local industries, along came the BRAC (Base Realignment and Closure) process.

BRAC was a congressional effort designed to close military bases deemed unnecessary by the Department of Defense. Rumors swirled around town early that year that the Naval Training Center (NTC), the core of the Navy's presence in San Diego, could be on the list for closure. When the BRAC Commission held hearings in San Diego, every politician in the state, from Gov. Pete Wilson down to local San Diego City Council members, testified and urged the commission not to close the base. They detailed economic losses that would occur, losses of jobs, the danger to national defense readiness, and numerous other arguments. No one seriously believed that an integral part of the largest naval port in the world like NTC would actually be closed.

But in July 1993, the BRAC Commission stunned everyone, recommending closure of NTC. President Clinton agreed, virtually assuring congressional assent, which occurred a few weeks later. Seventy years of naval history at NTC began winding down, leading to the base's ultimate closure in 1997.

In August of that year, the city formed the NTC Reuse Committee, according to BRAC law. As a member of the Peninsula Community Planning Board, I was immediately designated to represent the Point Loma community on the Reuse Committee. Ultimately, 26 of us, representing environmental, business, cultural, nonprofit, and community groups from across the city, met for nearly three years to craft the Reuse Plan. The city adopted the final plan in 1998, creating the basic road map for all that has occurred since.

From inception, the committee was besieged with suggestions for reuse and demands for parts of the base. Often misunderstood then, and even today, was the BRAC requirement that we create a plan with an economic dimension, necessitating uses that would replace the jobs lost from closure. We did not have the option of simply starting with a blank canvas, certainly not if we wanted to preserve any of the history and appearance of the base.

Still, the suggestions came pouring in, from turning the entire base over to local Native Americans, to a giant amusement park, to a high-density town center development, to a massive homeless village for thousands, and almost everything in between.

The committee decided early on that it wanted to recognize the Navy's history at the site, preserve the historic buildings, open up the entire base to the public, and create open space as well as recreational, educational, retail, cultural, and arts opportunities. In short, the committee wanted a plan that would create the finest mixed-use project ever attempted in San Diego.

The Navy's importance was recognized with an agreement to reconvey a portion of the base back to them for enlisted personnel housing. The agreement came with the proviso that the housing blend into what was planned for the rest of base, and not present a walled-off, military barracks look.

The result, today, is the Village at NTC, 500 units of the finest enlisted housing in the country that integrates seamlessly into the remainder of NTC.

The city itself had no viable way to implement the Reuse Plan, so a partnership with a private entity was always envisioned. A request for proposals (RFP) to select the master developer ended in June 1999 with the selection of the Corky McMillin Companies. A contract between the city and McMillin was executed in 2000, and a Citizens' Oversight Committee was formed to monitor McMillin's implementation of the Reuse Plan, on which I served as vice chair.

The selection of McMillin and the terms of the contract were not without controversy. While opposition, including litigation, existed earlier in the process, opponents now injected a new level of vitriol. They began an aggressive disinformation campaign, lasting for years. Specious litigation, regulatory delays, and endless hearings added enormously to the project's costs.

The central point of opposition was the allegation that the city bargained away some of the land at NTC for nothing. In fact, the city

drove an extraordinarily hard bargain. The master developer did receive some land for almost no direct cost, but was required to completely rebuild the entire infrastructure of the base in exchange, and to do so before starting on any construction that would offset that expenditure. The reality became clear — the roads, sewers, utilities, etc. on the base were, frankly, worthless, and all of it was replaced. What was once estimated to cost approximately \$100 million turned out to be significantly higher, and all of it was absorbed upfront by McMillin, at great risk.

McMillin was selected as master developer because its proposal was simply better for the city. Its concept of creating the NTC Foundation as a nonprofit to rehabilitate and manage the 26 buildings of the Arts and Culture District was unique. The city required McMillin to not only create the foundation, but also to seed it with millions of initial capital. All 26 buildings remain as city property, and 16 of those are already renovated, at a cost of \$63 million. That number is several times higher than original estimates, because, frankly, the Navy left decrepit buildings.

The foundation has rehabilitated those buildings to a standard that will last the arts, culture, and nonprofit community for many decades. They already have 75 tenants and an incredible synergy of activities and events. The final 10 buildings will be a significant challenge to finance, especially with California eliminating all redevelopment areas, including the NTC redevelopment district. Dedicated staff and foundation board volunteers are motivated to make it happen, though.

Beyond those buildings, NTC, now known as Liberty Station, has few remaining pieces to complete. The business hotel at Camp Nimitz will begin soon; the second gymnasium may be transferred to one of the educational entities on site; the channel shoreline restoration is still being debated by various regulatory entities. Liberty Station is that close to completion, a remarkable journey.

Compare Liberty Station to the El Toro Marine Corps Air Station, which BRAC closed the same day. El Toro's "Great Park" project has to date completed almost nothing, after already squandering what the Los Angeles Times recently reported as \$200 million.

Liberty Station is one of the most successful base reuse projects in the country. It has received numerous awards, including a recent International Prix d'Excellence for Best Master Planned Community. Go and enjoy the 125 acres of greenbelt, park and open space. Marvel at the Spanish Colonial colonnades and appreciate the renowned educational district. Shop at the fine stores; take in an art show or cultural performance; and finish with an excellent meal and glass of wine or microbrewed beer. Or both, because it's worth celebrating how closely Liberty Station now reflects the vision of the original Reuse Plan.

The anguish of 20 years ago has become today's singular achievement.

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