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A Charleston group studying whether to build a visitor center/public agency offices is considering the U. S. Coast Guard housing in Charleston as a possible site. - World Photo by Madeline Steege

Small town dreams big for project

By [Jessica Musicar](#), Staff Writer

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CHARLESTON — Think bigger.

That's what a state representative told a number of agency officials last week when discussing a proposed visitor and office facility in Charleston.

Steve Bryant, an Oregon Solutions Project Manager, spent several days in Charleston tramping through its streets and beside its waterways, thinking about the group's plan to build a complex that would house like-minded agencies in one facility. The project would include display space across from the Oregon Institute of Marine Biology. But Bryant said that might just be too narrow of a vision.

"This is a spectacular space with incredible potential," Bryant said of the area. "I've been asking the question, 'Is that vision big enough?'"

Quoting famous planner Lewis Mumford, Bryant told the gathering: "Are you good enough to have this land in your possession?"

While the goal is still the same, Bryant said the agencies should work together to make it a hub for other attractions in Coos County. The community has no central place, he said, to bring visitors and then direct them to different attractions. These could include the South Slough National Estuarine Research Reserve, the Bandon Dunes and state parks.

"It seems to me (there is an) opportunity to interconnect all of these pieces," Bryant said.

One way to do that would be to develop a location that relates to the property around it via trails and viewing points.

The specifics

A program of the National Policy Consensus Center at Portland State University, Oregon Solutions is intended to bring government, business and civic organizations together to address community problems or opportunities in Oregon.

The first phase of the two-part project would be to improve OIMB's existing display pavilion directly across from the campus. To be known as the Charleston Marine Life Center, it would incorporate the pavilion and OIMB's neighboring dock house, to form a two-story, nearly 3,500 square-foot structure dedicated to marine displays and education. OIMB Director Craig Young said it would feature a full-size orca skeleton, a sperm whale skull, and direct views of Charleston fishing operations. He added that most of the funds for the center have been raised and he hopes to see construction completed by next summer. But, the site doesn't have a big enough footprint for both structures.

The second phase would be to build the office facility, which could include room for ODFW, the South Slough, and the Coos Watershed Association, among others.

South Slough Manager Mike Graybill said his organization — based about 4 miles from Charleston — wants offices in the community. The group should consider tying an ecotourism aspect to the project as that will bring money to the area, he said. Others in the group agreed, stating it could also include businesses.

Bryant said both phases should go ahead, but planners now need to consider how to merge the two projects to connect with other visitor attractions.

“We shouldn't lose sight in phase II in how it can connect to surrounding lands,” he said.

Where to put it?

After rewording the vision statement, reviewing potential resources of participating entities and quickly considering potential names for the project, the group discussed locations, including port property and a Coast Guard housing parcel on Boat Basin Road.

Bryant said the Coast Guard land has potential but could come with a number of complications. One main concern would be relocating the housing.

On Wednesday, Capt. Lance Benton, who oversees all of the Coast Guard's motorized boat stations from the California border to Pacific City, said if an agency wanted to use that property, it would have to provide in-kind property with equivalent housing. He added such a process would have to be done legislatively.

“We have to maintain our housing capacities, we have to maintain operational capacities and access to our operational (facilities),” Benton said.

Lt. Jason Reeder, an assistant housing officer with the Coast Guard’s local housing authority, said 10 families live in the housing on Boat Basin Road. The parcel is about two acres, he said.

Despite the group’s interest in Coast Guard land, Sen. Joanne Verger, D-Coos Bay, shot down the idea. She doesn’t think it’s a visible enough location for Oregon Solutions project. Also, because such an effort requires federal approval, she feared the bureaucratic process could delay efforts to obtain the site.

“I think it’s troubling that it would depend on moving the Coast Guard and ... on that legislation to move through,” Verger said.

Oregon International Port of Coos Bay Executive Director Jeff Bishop said port property also could be problematic. Some potential sites for the project — such as the port’s RV park — are revenue producers that would need to be replaced immediately if removed.

The group plans to meet again from 9 a.m. to noon on May 27 at the OIMB campus.

The idea

What: Oregon Solutions project

Where: Charleston

Proposals: Participants, which include officials from several major agencies, would like to see a tourism/office complex built in the area. The complex would offer information and educational displays on the marine environment, along with linking visitors to different attractions in Coos County.