

# Navy cadets may lose longtime training facility

**BLT deal: Building sits on site of proposed boatyard**

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Tim Curtin, Sea Cadet Executive Officer Joe Latwin and volunteer Jill Ownes discuss upcoming events before drill begins and the US Navy Sea Cadet Corps meet for training in the Stamford Marine Center building at 111 Harbor View Avenue in Stamford, Conn., April 22, 2013. The cadets have used the space for many years, but the building sits on property that will be used for a proposed boatyard by BLT.

Photo: Keelin Daly

STAMFORD -- They are mainstays of city parades and patriotic celebrations -- a procession of young girls and boys marching in crisp, white uniforms, part of the pageantry that embodies national pride.

Yet during the rest of the year, Stamford's fresh-faced corps of navy cadets, one of the first units formed in the country known as the Dealey Division of the U.S. Naval Sea Cadet Corps, is largely hidden from sight. The unit trains weekly in a drab one-story aluminum-sided building tucked behind the city's animal shelter on Magee Avenue overlooking Stamford Harbor's eastern channel.

Though the site first opened to fanfare in 1949 as a U.S. Naval Reserve center, little attention has been paid to the property since the city took it over from the Navy in 1976 for the use of marine-oriented community groups like the cadets.

That is, until now.

The 2.4-acre parcel on which the building sits is now one of the key parts of a highly scrutinized land deal between Mayor Michael Pavia's administration and Harbor Point developer Building and Land Technology. Under the agreement, which is yet to be finalized, BLT would be permitted to fold the property into its plans for a boatyard in Shippan. The project is intended to pave the way for the construction of a \$750 million office headquarters for hedge fund Bridgewater Associates on a 14-acre peninsula in the South End that was formerly the home of the city's only working boatyard.

That the Magee Avenue site is part of the city's negotiations with BLT has not been a secret. During a news conference Pavia held in late March, a plan was unveiled showing the city's property used as a boat maintenance and storage area for BLT.

But city officials have notably withheld information about the presence of the cadets or that the building on the site is named the Stamford Marine Center. Instead, from the earliest reports about the deal with BLT, the only user of the property identified has been the city's Department of Operations, which occupies more than half of the building.

"I'm wondering if people don't realize we're down there," said Jennifer Stannard, the commanding officer of the Dealey Division, who said she has been perplexed by the seemingly glaring omission. "Sometimes people don't put two and two together."

In mid-April, Stannard wrote to the mayor expressing concern over newspaper reports about the property. She sought to solicit his support to have the city maintain a training facility, "preferably at the Stamford Marine Center on Magee Ave."

She has not received a reply, she said.

Pavia did not return several calls requesting comment on the issue.

Michael Handler, the city's director of administration, said the mayor and city officials were aware of the cadets' use of the property and the city intends to provide them with a home "equal or better" to the one they currently have.

He said no attempt had been made to reach out to the group because it is too early in the process.

Later, he added in an email, "There seems to be a desire to pre-empt the process, a process which is in its early stages and a process that will be inclusive of all interests and concerns at the appropriate time."

When the time comes, he said the cadets "will be engaged in a productive discussion and they will have fair input into finding equal or better accommodations."

Despite the preference expressed in her letter to the mayor to have the cadets remain at Magee Avenue, Stannard said the group is not wedded to the current location.

"The city of Stamford needs to what's best for the city of Stamford and the people of Stamford," she said. "I have no issues with any deal."

If anything, she said, the group could use more space. Over the years, the city has taken over more of the building even as the class sizes of the cadets have risen to more than 40 students. They make do by turning spaces such as a lounge and kitchen into makeshift classrooms.

The cadets, she said, are open to moving "as long as it meets our needs."

But the problem, she stressed, was that "no one has asked us what are needs are."

"That makes us a little nervous because we do need a bit of space, and it's not like you can just pop us into a building," she said.

Aside from classrooms to conduct lessons and drills, the group needs room for storage as well as an administrative office.

On a recent Monday evening, the cadets, who range in age from 11 to 17 and hail from towns and cities across Fairfield and sometimes Westchester counties, practiced their standard drills and physical training in the facility's parking lot. Dressed in Navy fatigues, the youths, some of whom stood barely 4 feet tall, stood stone-faced in the setting sun amid a backdrop of office buildings. The smell of saltwater hung in the air, the seemingly lone reminder of the ocean and the seafaring tradition.

The group's volunteers are quick to cite stories of the shy or troubled youths that undergo dramatic transformations under their tutelage. Since 1974, more than 20 cadets have gone on to attend national service academies. Many more have gone on to college and successful careers. The unit regularly takes home prizes in regional competitions.

Most recently, the League Cadets, a group ranging in age from 10 to 13, took first place in the New England Flagship Competition and the New England Swim Meet held at the Massachusetts Maritime Academy.

The goal, however, is not to turn young people into sailors, said Steve Gravereaux, an instructor and a former commanding officer of the unit. "It's to try to make them better men and women," he said.

As part of their military education, the cadets are required to attend training camps held at academies or naval bases across the country. A portion of the costs has traditionally been

supported by government grants. But this year, due to the federal spending cuts known as sequestration, the costs have skyrocketed from roughly \$200 a student to \$560.

For Stannard, the funding loss, along with the uncertainty of their current home, is yet another setback she and others have to worry about in ensuring the future of a more than 50-year-old organization.

"We're all volunteers, and we just want to focus on keeping the program going," she said.

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