

Camden activists join Petty's Island effort

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CAMDEN

Community leaders in Camden have joined environmentalists in their fight against development of Petty's Island in Pennsauken.

During a Tuesday news conference at Camden's Pyne Poynt Park, directly across from the densely wooded southern end of the 392-acre island, the activists announced they will file an application this week to have the island listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Pennsauken officials have been pushing for a billion-dollar revitalization project on the island. The proposed project includes homes, a hotel and golf course.

"I know that a lot of our opponents have said that Petty's Island has no historic significance, but we differ on that," said Mangaliso Davis, a Camden resident and member of the commission. Members of the African American Commission and South Jersey Environmental Justice Alliance said historic documents show that after the Native Americans who lived there sold the island to European settlers, slavers used it as a trading post.

"They would come here to buy the slaves at an auction and then transport them to Philadelphia," said Roy Jones, a Camden resident and the alliance's co-chairman. Holding copies of signs that advertised such auctions, the activists said traders avoided paying taxes by selling their slaves at Petty's Island instead of Philadelphia.

"This is the first we've heard of any historic significance to Petty's Island," Pennsauken Mayor Rick Taylor said. "I'd like to see that documented."

Richard Ochab, spokesman for developer Cherokee Pennsauken, said: "Calls to place Petty's Island on the National Historic Registry are recent and premature."

Ochab said a historical analysis of the site is under way as a standard part of the state Department of Environmental Protection's permitting process.

"Any site worthy of designation will be identified during the NJDEP's well-established redevelopment and permitting process," Ochab said.

Sharon Finlayson, chairwoman of the New Jersey Environmental Federation, said environmentalists have collected more than 3,000 signatures in a petition to preserve the island. The island's owner, CITGO Petroleum Corp., offered to donate Petty's Island to the state as a nature preserve to protect a pair of nesting bald eagles and other wildlife. But the state's Natural Lands Trust effectively rejected the offer on Sept. 30.

"These eagles are protected," said Robert Shinn, a representative of the Cooper River Watershed Association. "We're concerned that if they develop this island, it will chase these eagles away."

Last month, a U.S. District judge ordered CITGO to allow Cherokee Pennsauken, the township's redevelopment agent, access to the island to begin environmental surveys preceding either a negotiated sale or condemnation of the island to make way for the project.

Davis and Jones said houses built at Petty's Island would sell for more than \$250,000, creating an upscale community within a stone's throw from one of the nation's most impoverished cities.

"This would be basically a gated community," Jones said. "The working class people of Camden and the working class people of Pennsauken will not be able to afford to live on this island. These communities are largely Hispanic and black, so effectively, they're excluding people of color."

But Taylor said the plan includes more than just high-end housing. Developers also want to include housing there for senior citizens, low income residents and first time home-buyers, Taylor said.

"We don't even have a final game plan," Taylor said. "A lot of things must be done before we come up with a final plan, but we truly believe this will be good for the people of Pennsauken and the area."