

January 23, 2013

Committee Overview

From 1898 to 1974, Fort Hancock guarded New York Harbor. Its yellow brick buildings, dating from the early 1900s, were meant to rival the Presidio in San Francisco in their beauty, and they still do. The view alone is priceless.

Fort Hancock is a beautiful resource, steeped in rich history, a treasure waiting to be recast for a new future. Unfortunately, tax dollars, through the federal budget, will never be enough to restore and maintain these buildings, nor is that the best answer for these historic structures. Historic buildings are best preserved when they are used.

Gateway is in the final phases of a General Management Plan – a long range planning document that describes what a visitor will experience when they visit the park. The “visitor experience” includes what people are able to do in various parts of the park; what amenities are available; the ability to be able to experience the park’s natural and cultural resources; how they get around within the park; what areas are crowded, what areas are serene.

Unfortunately, I don’t think that many of the buildings at Fort Hancock will be around much longer if we don’t find a use for them and someone to take care of them. We have mothballed the buildings to make them weather tight, but that only goes so far. For some of the beautiful buildings, including my personal favorite, the Officer’s Club, it may already be too late.

Super storm Sandy hit Sandy Hook hard. We learned a lot about how sea level rise and storms will affect Sandy Hook and its infrastructure and we will continue to learn more as we analyze the wealth of information from the storm. Later this afternoon I will be presenting a PowerPoint on some of what we learned so far.

So, some of you may be asking, “Given the current circumstances is there a need for this Committee?”, “Will anyone want to reuse these historic structures?”, “Should we be having these meetings now or should we wait?”

The basements of many buildings had flooding but there was surprisingly little damage to anything besides the things stored in the basements and the systems in those basements, and the water receded quickly. So, if the HVAC and electrical systems were placed on an upper floor or in the basement off the floor could they be reused and someone want to reuse them?

Congress has not yet appropriated any storm damage recovery money for Gateway but we are planning for how we can do things differently, more sustainably and better, if or

when we get this money. As we move forward it will be important to know what we want to do with Fort Hancock so we can incorporate that into the GMP and other plans.

I feel strongly that we have to do this now, if we don't move quickly, make decisions quickly and act quickly, it may be too late for Fort Hancock and our children's children will only see the outline of the foundations of these breathtaking buildings. I am so glad that this Committee was already formed; and that so many skilled, knowledgeable and talented people had agreed to serve. You represent many parts of our key constituents – our neighbors, the people who use and love Sandy Hook, the professionals who work on these issues every day. If anything, Super storm Sandy has emphasized the need for this Committee and the need for this Committee to reach consensus and make some hard decisions quickly.

So, your charge is to look at the full range of possibilities for Fort Hancock – options that range from leaving the buildings boarded up and moldering; to using them for a single shared vision; to a unique blend of uses that will preserve the buildings and maybe augment visitor services but will preserve these structures for posterity. Okay, I may have hinted at the direction I hope you go but as I said before and can't say strongly enough, there will be little or no NPS money available for the long term preservation of these structures so there would have to be partners, private individuals, outside money to restore and maintain them. So, the solution doesn't lie with us, it lies with a group of committed individuals and groups who are willing to work together.

The National Park Service has a long history of public private partnerships – from the hotels, gift shops and restaurants at Grand Canyon and Yellowstone; to more creative partnerships to preserve groups of historic structures at Golden Gate and Hot Springs, Arkansas – like we have here.

In the past this has been a contentious conversation because we never took the time to discuss what was objectionable about commercial uses of Fort Hancock, and to figure out alternatives that mitigate those concerns. In a place that already has a restaurant, gift shop and bike rentals, we didn't discuss what part of commercialization is bad.

Why will this time be different? For one, the buildings are running out of time. This is our last, best chance to save Fort Hancock. But the best reason is that in this room we have the talents and expertise of a wide variety experts including mayors of local communities, business leaders, experts in education, science and preservation and recreation; and behind them we have the input and knowledge of the millions of people who love Sandy Hook.

Fort Hancock can survive, even flourish, but only if we keep talking to each other.

It is important for you to understand what options, alternatives or ways of operating the National Park Service cannot live with:

First, we will not compromise the peace and serenity of Sandy Hook itself. Fort Hancock can flourish without disturbing Sandy Hook's beaches and wildlife habitats.

Second, we do not need to build new buildings. Gateway wants to preserve the historic buildings that we already have, not to add to the list of buildings that need to be fixed and maintained.

Third, ongoing dialogue with the local community is essential. We may not always agree on the details, but we need to at least agree on the goals.

Fourth, it is important that Fort Hancock and Sandy Hook have something for everyone. One of our goals at Gateway is to have a range of experiences and opportunities, for all people, with all levels of income – if there is lodging there should be a range of lodging from camping to higher end hotels.

I hope this Committee is able to reach consensus on a future for Fort Hancock – from preservation of the structures, new options for learning, new business opportunities, or a priority list for which buildings should be focused on first.

I don't envy you this task. It is difficult but I think the Committee has the right people to provide us with good direction and advice. Fort Hancock deserves a new lease on life, and its future is in our collective hands. How can Fort Hancock be preserved, serve the needs of the local community and park visitors, and not be a burden on taxpayers? To do this we will need to talk and listen, learn and grow.