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Coast Guard museum agreement signed in ceremony at Union Station

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New London — The major players in the project to build a National Coast Guard Museum downtown said the new agreement they signed Wednesday should make it crystal clear that this museum will become a reality.

Mayor Daryl Justin Finizio said that when the site for the museum was announced in April, skeptics asked, "Is it actually going to happen?"

"If today's ceremony speaks to anything, it says loudly and clearly this is happening," Finizio said.

Adm. Robert J. Papp Jr. said Coast Guard men and women have done great things for the country, and their story deserves to be told.

"What better place than down by the water here in New London, Connecticut?" Papp, the commandant of the Coast Guard, said. "It will be done."

In the ceremony at Union Station Wednesday, as trains rumbled by, Papp, Finizio, Gov. Dannel P. Malloy and James Coleman, chairman of the National Coast Guard Museum Association Inc., signed a memorandum of agreement that outlines how the Coast Guard, city, state and museum association will cooperate and what their responsibilities will be.

Museum supporters filled the station for the ceremony. The site of the museum is a 0.37-acre lot behind the station. It could also jut out over the Thames River.

"We are finally doing what we should have done as a nation a long time ago to honor the men and women of the Coast Guard," Malloy said.

In formal language, the agreement explains why the public entities and the museum association believe it is important to build a museum to educate the public about the Coast Guard's maritime heritage.

The agreement describes how the city will give the land for the museum to the Coast Guard as a gift, the state will spend up to \$20 million to build a pedestrian bridge across the railroad tracks for access to the museum and the Cross Sound Ferry terminal, and the parties to the agreement will work to ensure the barque Eagle can dock near the museum.

It also says the service may locate a Heritage and History Center there, which would be a hub for managing artifacts and a site for scholarly research. Plans call for building a four-story, 54,300-square-foot museum with four floors of interactive exhibits, event space, lecture rooms and a reception area with a gift shop and cafe, to be opened in late 2017.

Coleman said after the ceremony that the agreement charts the way forward. And with it in hand, he said, he can approach the large companies that have shown interest in supporting the project financially.

"It gives us credibility," he said. "... It's not only key to fundraising, but also to moving the museum forward."

U.S. Rep. Joe Courtney, D-2nd District, said the Coast Guard deserves a museum, especially since there are more than 90 Defense Department museums, two-thirds of which are Army-related. The Coast Guard is the only branch of the armed forces without a national museum.

"With the execution of this document, we are going to change that," he said. "It's going to be a good day for this region. It's going to be a good day for our country."

The Coast Guard cannot accept the land for the museum, however, until it finishes assessing the site, the agreement states. The Coast Guard is currently conducting an environmental review and a valuation and property survey for its financial records and to determine the legal parameters of the proposed property. The Coast Guard also has to follow the process for accepting the gift into its real property inventory, said Rear Adm. Steven D. Poulin, the service's director of governmental and public affairs.

Poulin said the hope is to complete the required reviews and surveys in time for a ceremonial groundbreaking in May.

The agreement is not a binding legal document. Bob Ross, executive director of the Office of Military Affairs and the state's point person for the museum project, said the agreement is a "high-level framework" that will help ensure everyone understands the major parts of the project and the relationships that have to be in place.

U.S. Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., said in an interview that even without the force of contract law, the document is important because "handshakes still matter," and the memorandum is a handshake between parties that "respect each other's word and whose word is their bond." Blumenthal also pledged to fight for federal funding to support the museum.

Two important stakeholders, Union Station and Cross Sound Ferry, did not sign the memorandum because the focus for this agreement was the public entities involved, Ross said. But he does expect the station and the ferry service to be a part of future agreements that will be binding.

Todd O'Donnell, who served as the master of ceremonies, said he and Barbara Timken, the station owners, are "ready to start talking as soon as they want to."

"We think the Coast Guard Museum is the biggest thing in this region," he said after the ceremony. "We will work with them to make that happen."

As the next step in the process, Ross said, the state will sign an assistance agreement with the museum association so state funding can be used to design the pedestrian bridge.

A consultant hired by the state is exploring seven options for the bridge, the most promising of which is for a bridge to be built over the station platforms, leading into the museum and ferry terminal, Ross said.

The consultant, Milone & MacBroom Inc., is also looking at whether the bridge should be built across Water Street, which Ross said would not be ideal because it would divert pedestrian traffic away from local businesses downtown, and is considering different locations for the bridge and whether the bridge should be a tunnel instead.

The state has not ruled out any of the alternatives, and the consultant's report should be available in about a month, Ross said.

In early May, the museum association is planning a ceremonial groundbreaking so Papp, who made the museum a top priority, can take part before he is relieved as commandant May 30.

Papp told the group in the train station that he was thinking about New London last November when he was in another train station on a beautiful waterfront, drinking coffee in a Starbucks.

There were historic buildings that had been restored, mixed among modern architecture, Papp said, and buses, ferries and trains full of people arriving in Malmo, Sweden. He visited an industrial museum where families were spending the day, and a restored fort.

Papp said he saw many similarities between Malmo and New London. What New London needs, he said, is "one central attraction, that museum, a modern building built within all that New London has to offer."

"All those things that I saw in Malmo, that I've seen in a dozen other seaport locations across the world as I've traveled, why not New London?" he said. "Well, it's going to be New London. I'm confident of that."

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