

Grand Vision for National Harbor Takes Form

Moving 'The Awakening' Sculpture Is Just the Start for \$2 Billion Venture

By ANITA HUSLIN
Washington Post Staff Writer

Milt Peterson looks upon the artist renderings of National Harbor with the critical eye of a general. It's like nothing Washington has ever seen.

Sail-shaped banners line the Potomac waterfront, with moving images projected on the fabric. A retractable, 42-foot video screen stretches between two masts for outdoor movies. Stonehenge-like boulders alternate with larger-than-life bronze statues along the promenade leading to the water. In his mind's eye, Peterson sees concerts, sailboat races, sunset cruises, fire-

works, maybe even water ballet. Until now, the piece of real estate of his National Harbor project has been a carefully guarded secret. In the coming months, the outdoor sculpture "The Awakening" will be dug up from Hains Point, its home for the past 27 years, then barged and trucked to an undisclosed location where it will be cleaned and restored. Then, the 70-foot work, which depicts a giant struggling to emerge from the earth, will be planted in a new sandy beach on the other side of the Potomac River. "There'll be steps going down, and

See HARBOR, A14, Col. 1



Developer Milt Peterson bought "The Awakening" sculpture at Hains Point in the District and plans to transfer it to National Harbor for his project there.



BY BILL COOPER — THE WASHINGTON POST

Looking to Build a Legacy Where Others Failed

HARBOR, From A1

There'll be Charlie, on the beach," Peterson says, sweeping his arms open wide like Vanna White, and tiling his 6-foot-2, lanky frame back in his office chair. "That's what I call putting the fat chicken on the front hook."

After a lifetime of building suburban subdivisions, office parks and shopping centers and malls, Peterson, 71, is about to make his biggest and perhaps most indelible mark on the suburban Washington landscape. A year from now, he will unveil the first phase of a \$2 billion streetscape of white-tablecloth dining, retail, executive offices and luxury waterfront homes at the southern tip of Prince George's County. There'll be water taxis to and from Alexandria and the District, sightseeing tours and a public marina.

On a recent spring morning, Peterson flies in his personal jet up to Rochester to meet with the artist who is creating the 85-foot steel sculpture for National Harbor's entrance. It will set the tone for the place, like the Statue of Liberty, he says. People will see it coming off the Wilson Bridge, curled and rippling steel rising skyward, like a Technicolor beacon to the harbor.

"We're putting something fabulous on the river that says it's special," he says. "It's going to be POW! It's going to be explosive! We're going to change Washington."

Building a Reputation

Peterson, who lives in Fairfax, began making a name for himself almost as soon as he moved to Northern Virginia after college with his childhood sweetheart and wife, Carolyn. As a lieutenant in the Army Corps of Engineers, he worked for Stephen Yeonans, one of the biggest developers in the growing region. In a short time, Peterson became the first salesman to surpass the \$1-million-a-year mark. By 23, he was running the entire sales force.

Striking out on his own, he began building small townhouse developments, eventually partnering with a young attorney, John T. "Hil" Hazel, who remembers Peterson's insistence on carving out sites for churches, raising construction money and developing the sites when local congregations formed.

Peterson's gregarious, folksy personality charmed skeptics, recalls Hazel, now a prominent Northern Virginia real estate developer, and enabled him to reach accommodations with opponents. He made a name building communities with shopping and office parks such as Fair Lakes and Burke Center in Virginia. His company also redeveloped downtown Silver

Spring. Peterson has spent millions in more than a decade since he bought the National Harbor site to build a legacy where others have tried and failed. The footings of developer James T. Lewis's PortAmerica, which was thwarted by permit troubles, federal and local opposition and ultimately, financial problems, lie beneath the earth under National Harbor. Lewis had bought the property from developer James H. Burch, who in the early 1980s had proposed but failed to produce Bay of America, a mix of townhouses and offices that he said at the time would be "more visible than even Tysons Corner."

To circumvent the opposition the earlier projects attracted from environmentalists and regulatory agencies, Peterson lobbied in the late 1990s to have jurisdiction over the project shifted to Prince George's County from the Maryland-National Capital Parks and Planning Commission. It took three years and tens of thousands of dollars in lobbying costs, but Congress complied. The state also kicked in nearly \$300 million in aid. The justification, according to county documents, was the estimated \$1.8 billion in tax benefits from National Harbor.

Peterson had built more than 40,000 homes and 18 million square feet of commercial space in Northern Virginia, but interest in National Harbor has been greater than anything he has done in his 50 years as a developer. Pressured by Prince George's officials, he established a 30 percent minority business participation in the project. Peterson also agreed to spend \$3.5 million over 10 years on community initiatives, a commitment that caused him headaches when The Post reported this month that money was given to groups that hadn't applied for it.

Nevertheless, Peterson is closer to making this project a reality than any developer before him. Four hotels, three office buildings, three residential buildings, five restaurants and 4,500 parking spaces are well underway. The flagship Gaylord hotel, a critical anchor to the development, has already booked nearly 900,000 room nights and next week will top off its 10-story building.

To make all this happen, Peterson jumped through every hoop he saw. Even then, he hasn't always gotten his way.

Earlier this spring, his company requested a state liquor permit that would allow National Harbor guests to stroll parts of the grounds with cocktails in hand. A Prince George's County official expressed unhappiness that he heard about the measure indirectly. His office summoned Peterson to provide de-

Grand Plans for National Harbor

After years of secrecy, details of Milt Peterson's National Harbor development project are being revealed.



Artist's rendition of National Harbor



BY GENE THOMP, LAUREN KANIKUS AND KAREN YOSHIDA — THE WASHINGTON POST

tails of the proposal — personally.

Peterson recalls the moment with a furrowed brow, pauses, then slaps his thigh and draws, "Come on, boy, giddyup!" lamponing the official.

He laughs now at the memory. "I said, 'Certainly, sir. Right away, sir.'" Then he sits back in his leather chair and takes a long slug of scotch. A low growl rumbles from his throat. "That's business."

A Changing Landscape

"The Awakening" has been part of the Washington landscape for so long that it is widely considered public property. Artist J. Seward Johnson installed it at Hains Point

in 1980 as part of an international sculpture conference. He had wanted to donate it, but the National Park Service could not accept site-specific art gifts, according to Paula Stoeck, director of the Sculpture Foundation, which ultimately took title to the piece and maintained it.

"The piece has enjoyed such an affectionate relationship with the community and visitors to Washington over the years," she said.

Peterson is among its many admirers. Several years ago, he saw an item in the paper about the sculpture being for sale. He bought it recently for about \$750,000, signing a confidentiality agreement with the foundation not to disclose the purchase. It is unclear what, if

anything, may take its place on Hains Point, but Johnson recently wrote in a letter to Peterson: "I have reviewed the plans made for the location and I think it will be perfect... Charlie, as I understand he is now dubbed, should be very happy in his new home."

Moving the sculpture away from the District could create a stir, Peterson realizes. That's exactly what he's looking for.

You want it to be controversial, he says. Provocative. The worst thing would be no reaction at all. Peterson wants to throw in some history at National Harbor, too, and is talking to an artist about making a trio of sculptures that tell how surveyor Benjamin Bancker, George Washington and Thomas Jefferson helped design the District. Though plans change daily, he's thinking the pieces will look good gazing beyond the two, 750-foot piers and the party tent toward the District. Bob Weis, senior vice president at Walt Disney Imagineering, is advising on the sculptures.

"We need to be emotional and patriotic and family-oriented," Weis said. "It's not going to be Disneyland, but it's not Williamsburg either."

Peterson is clearly pleased by models of the two stainless-steel eagles that will soar from 65-foot poles at the top of a long flight of steps leading to the water. (He's dubbed the pair, which cost \$700,000 apiece, Martha and George, for the American bald eagles that once nested on National Harbor property.)

Sculptor Stuart Paley shows him the mock-up of the beacon to be erected amidst a stand of birch trees at the National Harbor entrance. It's a modern sculpture shaped vaguely like a torch flame, with tendrils of intertwined steel

Above, children scale the knee of "The Awakening" sculpture at Hains Point. Milt Peterson, below, bought the piece for about \$750,000.



"It's going to be explosive! We're going to change Washington."

Milt Peterson
Developer of National Harbor project

reaching toward the sky. It is intended to evoke patriotism, freedom, energy, light and creative potential.

Peterson folds his arms, puts one hand on his chin and cocks his head. He asks Paley what colors it will be. Yellow and red, Paley answers, blending into orange and rust below. Peterson says, "It's great, it's going to be great," then he pauses.

"I have a 35 percent feeling that I'm looking at the back. The other side looks more front-y, this looks more back-y," Peterson says. "This is a gestural piece," Paley explains. "Like with the Statue of Liberty, there's a front and a back."

"Is this the back?" Peterson asks, peering around the model. "If people look at it and they don't get it, they feel stupid," he mutters.

Paley agrees to add some swooping strands of steel to make the back of the sculpture look less like a rear view.

'Stay With What You Know'

National Harbor is the biggest gamble Peterson has taken, but it is hardly the first. When he was 14, his father bought a mango crop and drove the family to Florida to live there while the fruit ripened. At harvest time, young Milt — not even old enough for a driver's license — would pick up day laborers in his father's beat-up station wagon and drive them to the orchard.

Sixteen years ago, he bought a shrimp farm in Belize at the suggestion of an enthusiastic friend, ultimately producing 14.8 million pounds of shrimp each year. But he ended up dumping it at a loss two years ago as shrimp prices plummeted under pressure from the cheap, abundant Southeast Asian seafood market.

"The big-picture message from that was like Robert Frost said, the woodcutter cuts wood. Stay with what you know," Peterson says. "But sometimes that can be boring. You need to try different things."

At the end of the day, he has been known to take a front-end loader for a spin around the National Harbor construction site to check on things, maybe move a little dirt. At least twice, he has driven his SUV into the Potomac, engrossed in watching the giant earth-movers, concrete mixers and pile drivers building his project.

"There are people who suffer through making widgets all day and they never find happiness," Peterson says. "Real estate is the greatest thing in the world because you're building something that's going to stay."

He pauses a moment. "I just don't want to screw it up," he says, "because I'm going to have to look at it for the rest of the time I'm here."

Staff researcher Madonna Lebling contributed to this report.



Milt Peterson, above left, and sculptor Stuart Paley inspect a mock-up of an 85-foot steel sculpture for the entrance to the National Harbor. Stonehenge-like boulders, such as those shown above at right, will alternate with the sculptures, lining the promenade leading down to the water.



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