

Bond Commission approves significant funding for projects in region

By Daniel Drainville, Day Staff Writer

The state Bond Commission on Thursday approved millions of dollars in funding toward a variety of projects around the region, including half a million dollars to improve the Stonington town dock and \$400,000 to upgrade a pumping station on the Norwich State Hospital property in Preston.

Additional items the commission approved for the region include \$1 million to renovate a state Department of Social Services customer service center at the Uncas on Thames Campus in Norwich into a new "opportunity center," and another \$1.37 million for further upgrades to the campus, including new refrigerant and chilled water piping, updated controls and roof work. The campus is located at 401 West Thames St.

The funding for those projects represents just a portion of the hundreds of millions of dollars approved Thursday morning by the commission, which is chaired by Gov. Ned Lamont and typically meets monthly to approve the issuance of major funds for projects statewide.

State Sen. Cathy Osten, D-Sprague, in a press release, had noted that Thursday's agenda was filled with substantial investments in local projects that would otherwise have to be funded locally.

"This is nearly a billion-dollar bonding agenda, and I want everyone to notice that about half of it is being spent on cities and towns," she said in a statement. "The state is picking up the tab for projects all across Connecticut that local taxpayers would otherwise be paying higher property taxes for."

Stonington

State Sen. Heather Somers, R-Groton, in a press release, called the investment in the Stonington town dock "especially important," as the funds approved Thursday for the project will be matched by federal funds.

The ongoing project involves reinforcing and extending the town fishing dock, which is nearly two centuries old and home to the last commercial fishing fleet in the state. The pier supports more than 100 fishermen, two seafood processing companies and supplies restaurants throughout southern New England.

Somers said the improvements will "enhance safety, accessibility, and usability for residents, businesses, visitors and the local fishing fleet."

In 2022, U.S. Rep. Joe Courtney, D-2nd District, secured \$900,000 in federal funds for maintenance work and upgrades to the dock. The North Pier at the dock was in need of serious repair due to age, sea level rise, erosion and wave damage. At the time, one hundred pilings, as well as the framing system beneath the dock, were in various stages of damage.

After going out to bid twice for the project, which came back over \$2 million both times, the town scaled back the project and began work earlier this year. Former Stonington First Selectwoman Danielle Chesebrough had said in October the \$900,000 secured by Courtney should cover rehabilitation of approximately 40%, or 142 feet, of the North Pier's main structure, including replacing

65 pilings, along with the addition of stairs, a series of ladders and a catwalk system.

Selectman Bill Middleton said Thursday that work done so far has included driving piles and reinforcing the concrete dock itself.

He added that the \$500,000, and the matching funds, will be used in addition to the \$900,000 grant from 2022 and the project will still require the \$400,000 contingency approved by the Board of Finance in October.

He said the town has "the ability to sort of scale the project to available funds."

"This investment reflects the state's commitment to preserving working waterfronts that are central to our economy, our food system and our maritime heritage," State Rep. Aundré Bumgardner, D-Groton, said in a statement. "With federal funds already in place and construction underway, today's vote helps keep this project moving forward and ensures we continue protecting the infrastructure our fishing fleet depends on."

Bumgardner said the funding will allow the completion of the full 344-foot North Pier.

"Separate funding will be required to address the adjoining seawall," he added.

Preston

Somers said the \$400,000 for Preston will help facilitate the completion of the decade-long cleanup of the former Norwich State Hospital site.

Preston officials said environmental cleanup work on the site was completed in October. The town is reviewing the work with the state Department of Energy and Environmental Protection before 393 acres of the site can be conveyed to the Mohegan Tribe, which plans a major non-gaming development there known as Preston Riverwalk.

A decades-old, town-owned sewer pump station, located on the site, will need to be upgraded to accommodate increased use from the development of the Riverwalk, Preston First Selectwoman Sandra Allyn-Gauthier said Thursday.

Currently, the only user of the station is the Southeastern Connecticut Regional Resources Recovery Authority. SCRRA has an agreement with the town to send a small amount of human waste, from the nearby Reworld incinerator, to the station.

Allyn-Gauthier said the new funding will allow the town to do an assessment of mechanical aspects of the station, including the hydraulics, electrical systems and pipes, to determine the station's overall functionality.

Allyn-Gauthier said the town already knows the station needs upgrades, including a new pump, valves and motors.

"So this helps us not only with the study, but to fund some of those upgrades," she said.

Norwich

The combined \$2.37 million for the two state projects in Norwich, to upgrade facilities at the Uncas on Thames Campus, were welcomed by Norwich Mayor Swarnjit Singh.

The new opportunity center will help people find employment as well as provide a range of services, including information and help related to housing and education.

"Norwich is getting better social services delivery," Osten said of the projects.

Singh also referenced that the bond commission set money aside resources to combat homelessness and food insecurity — two issues which affect the city.

CIF grants also approved

The commission also approved Community Investment Fund 2030 grants for New London and Norwich, which will provide an additional hundreds of thousands of dollars to projects in the cities.

Earlier this year, New London and Maine-based developer High Tide Capital applied for up to \$650,000 to transform the length of Atlantic Street into a new park and help construct a two-story addition onto an existing building at 208 State St. for future use as apartments. The Day leases a portion of the State Street building for its headquarters.

Meanwhile, Norwich had applied for up to \$8.8 million from the CIF grant fund for a major project that would revitalize several properties on lower Broadway in downtown Norwich. On Thursday, the bond commission approved \$2.5 million.

Kevin Brown, the president and executive director of Norwich Community Development Corp., recently said the award will be used rehabilitate the Fairhaven and produce more than 20 units of housing, along with fixing cosmetic and code issues on buildings on lower Broadway.

Norwich will seek another \$4.2 million in the next CIF grant round to continue the project. ■
