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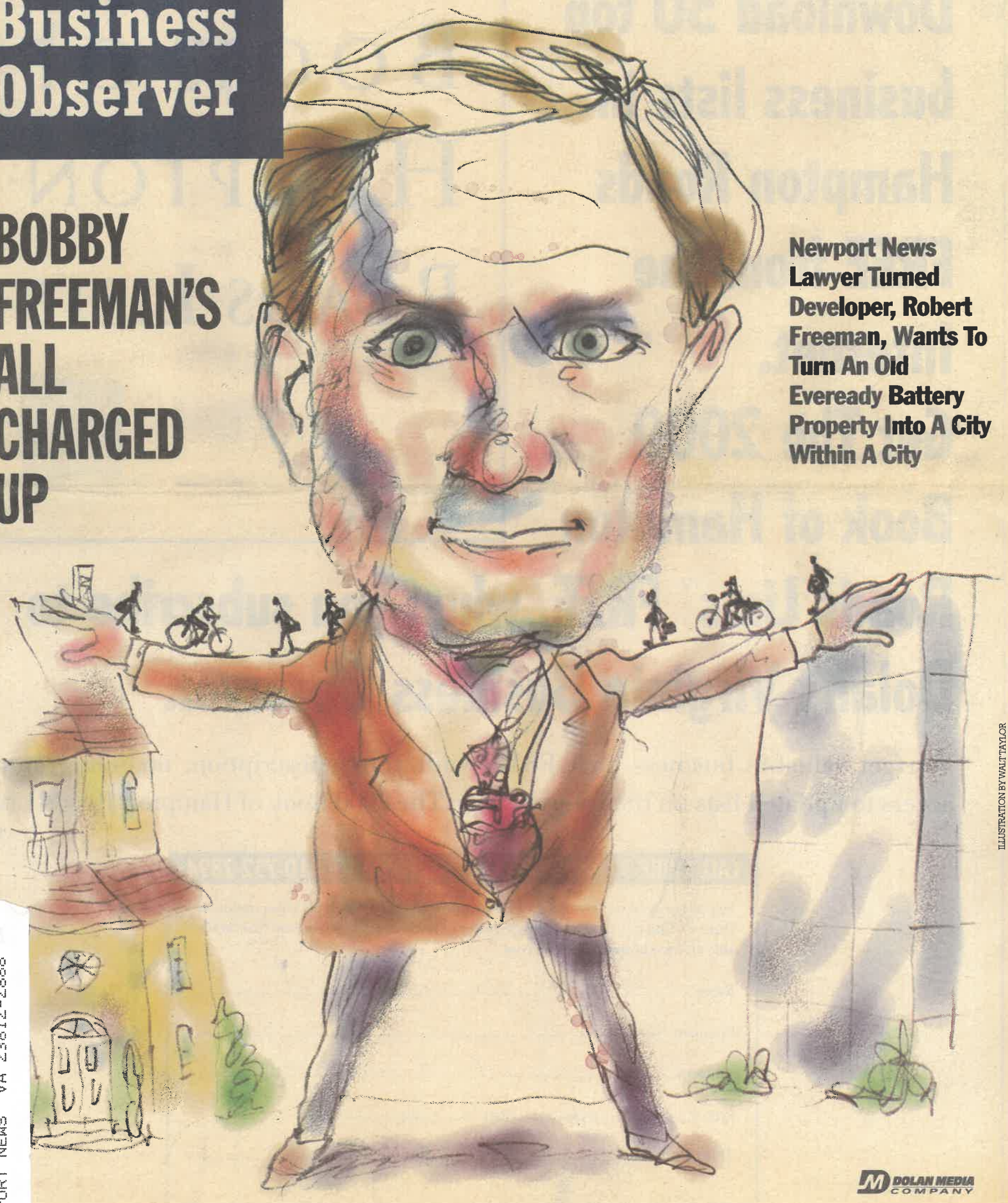

Newport News Lawyer Turned Developer, Robert Freeman, Wants To Turn An Old Eveready Battery Property Into A City Within A City

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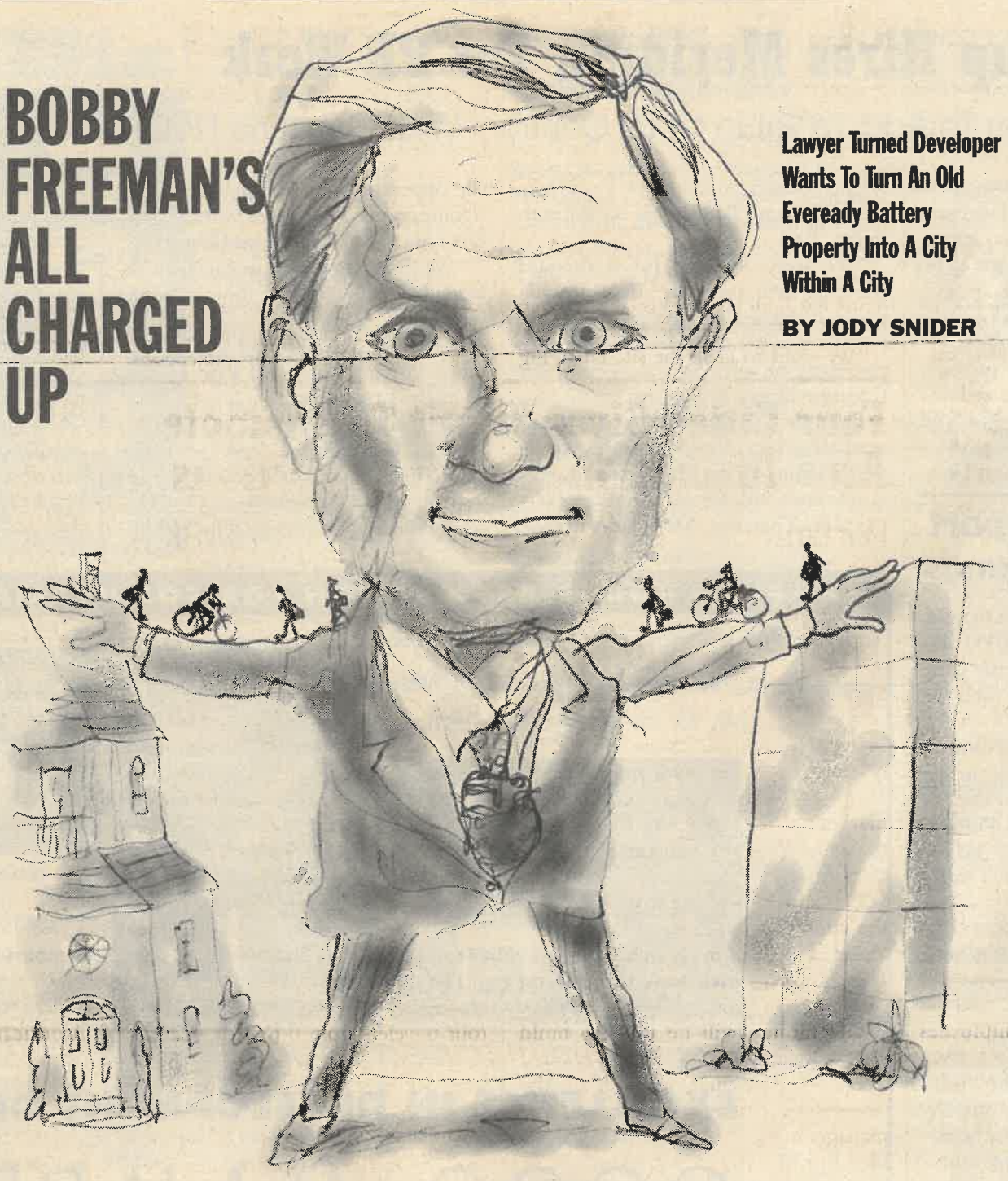

Lawyer Turned Developer Wants To Turn An Old Eveready Battery Property Into A City Within A City

BY JODY SNIDER

NEWPORT NEWS

NEWPORT News developer Bobby Freeman wants to build a city within a city.

Freeman, president of Tower Park Corp. in Newport News and the former managing partner of Jones Blechman Woltz & Kelly, plans to purchase the former Eveready Battery Co. property, 153 acres located in the Oyster Point section of Newport News, and start construction on Port Warwick, a mixed-use development that could shift the demographics of a city once known for its blue-collar workers.

Freeman plans to close on his $5.9 million contract with Eveready Battery in November. Construction on the main road into the property could start as early as December, he says. No public funds will be used in any portion of the development. Freeman and two private banks, Resource Bank and Centura Bank, are financing the development of the property.

"The demand for this property has been so great that I'm marketing property I don't even own yet," Freeman says.

Port Warwick is envisioned to be a $100 million development with a 10-year build-out. Half of the project would be residential, 25 percent for high-end commercial development and and 25 percent for retail development.

The city council recently rezoned 100 acres for Freeman's mixed-use development. Freeman already has potential buyers for the remaining 53 acres, which includes the expansion of an existing business on 20 acres, a gas station and fast food restaurant on four acres fronting Jefferson Avenue and a contract with Sentara Health System for medical offices on 15 acres. Additional office and stores could be built on a neighboring 14-acre tract.

Freeman beat out two other developers interested in buying the property by promising Eveready Battery he would be ready to buy the land before the year ends.

"This property is unusual in the sense that it's sitting vacant in what is now the middle of Newport News. Eveready has taken off every building and they've cleaned up the property."

In the mid-1950s, when Eveready purchased the property, it was in the middle of nowhere, Freeman says. The company then built its facility, which was used until the 1990s to grind ore, for batteries. The facility closed in 1997, and the company spent two years cleaning up the property.

"All the other planned commercial developments in Hampton Roads have an office focus," Freeman says. "This is the only project where the focus is residential. There's been a number of Newport News residents who have left the city to live in Williamsburg and Gloucester.

"If we want to keep those people who are looking to move from Newport News, we need a great housing stock. And it needs to be in a place where people want to live. This development will capture those people."

City officials agree.

Paul Miller, director of planning and economic development for Newport News, says the project is a unique use of the land.

"We're growing up as a city," Miller says. "We can expect, as we run out of land, more creative uses for land. This is a wise use of that land. It's anti-sprawl."

Much of Newport News is built on the suburban scale. This is more detailed. It's more pedestrian-oriented."

Brandon Currence, a principal in Brandon Currence Architects in Williamsburg, one of two architectural firms working on the project, says the first designs of the development represent a look, rather than a design for the development.

With the help of Richmond land planners Higgins and Gerstenmaier, Freeman wants to develop the property as a true mixed-use urban village, creating a feel much like Hilton Village in Newport News.

Port Warwick will have at its center a "village square," a formal green space of more than two acres with a band shell at its center.

"You get lost in most developments because there's no sense of place, no center. The roads ramble aimlessly from nowhere to nowhere. The square adds a sense of place."

Surrounding the square will be three- to four-story mixed-use buildings. The first floor will be used for retail and commercial space and the second and third floors will be high-end residential apartments. Further out from the center will be townhouses, duplexes and single family detached housing.

"I won't develop each component in this project," Freeman says. "I'm the quarterback for the development. I'll find the experts who can develop, for example, apartments or assisted living facilities. I'll sell the land to local, regional or national builders.

"The more people involved, the more successful the development will be. The roads, parks and infrastructure to the development, I'll develop. I could also do some office or retail development.

"We're looking for retailers who aren't here yet. I'm going to have to hear a lot of 'no's' before we start signing retailers who are already here."

Edward Salyers, assistant director of retail properties for Advantis in Newport News, says the marketing of 12 acres for retail – three acres of outparcels and nine acres of grouped tenants, has already begun. He expects the development will hold 90,000 square feet of retail space once that portion of the property is built out.

"We are hoping to go under contract for users of the outparcels by the end of the year," Salyers says. "We're hoping to start development of the retail land behind the outparcels by early next year."

"We've received a ton of interest from users not in the market, some that aren't in Hampton Roads at all. Others have Southside locations and they're looking for a Peninsula address."

Although Freeman says he is concerned with the uses in the development, he's more concerned with how the development looks.

"The diversity in this development will be what makes it successful," Freeman says. "It returns us to the traditional ways of developing real estate, when property was more oriented toward pedestrians vs. cars. We will not be able to build roads fast enough for people to make a hassle-proof commute to work. This is a response to that."

Port Warwick is within a two-minute car ride and a five-minute walk to the Oyster Point business park, where more than 7,000 people work.

In addition to those numbers, Newport News Town Center L.L.C., consisting of four local investors, wants to develop the Oyster Point Town Center on 42 acres in Oyster Point business park. This development will have 1 million square feet of office space, but it will also host a retail and residential component, says Harvey Lindsay, of NAI Harvey Lindsay Commercial Real Estate Services Worldwide, also one of the individuals in the development's partnership.

Lindsay says his development could create between 4,000 to 5,000 jobs on the Peninsula.

Freeman says when he began considering the development of the project, he studied the plans for the Newport News Town Center, which focuses on office development.

"I wanted to create something that would compliment that project," Freeman says.

"This is an opportunity to work where you live on the Peninsula. A retailer could rent a space on the first floor of a building and live on the third floor of the same building. A young nurse could live in an apartment and walk to the medical center."

A baseball stadium is also in the plans for 22 acres of the development. The

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were among eight statewide who were honored recently by the Hotel/Motel Association component of the Virginia Hospitality & Travel Association. The following are the winners, the awards and the categories: **Howard Saunders**, Lodging Employee of the Year, large property; **Tonya Cody**, Manager of the Year, small property; **Mary Ellen Conyer**, Guest Relations Award, corporate lodging chain; and **Kenneth P. Giedd**; Environmental Management Award, individual property....**Michael Rice** has taken over as general manager of the Oceanfront Sheraton at 36th Street in Virginia Beach. Rice, who replaced **Weylan Rhame**, was general manager of the 184-room Ft. Lee Holiday Inn in New Jersey, right outside New York City, and general manager of the 180-room North Miami Beach Holiday Inn in Miami, Fla....Renovation work to turn the old Governor Dinwiddie Hotel in Portsmouth into a Hawthorne property is progressing to a point where owner **Raj Randeria** now is looking for a general manager with experience to run the 57-room hotel and to handle its banquet business. He also is looking for a restaurateur to run the hotel's restaurant. With demolition in progress – Deviotor from Tampa, Fla., is handling the renovation work — Randeria says he is finalizing the hotel's design along with Hawthorne and city officials. An opening is expected late next spring....More than 150 food vendors participated in the Farm Fresh Extravaganza at the Hampton Coliseum last week, said to be the largest consumer food and entertainment show of its kind in the country. The fund-raising event benefited primarily Children's Hospital of The King's Daughters and other non-profits, including the USS Wisconsin Foundation. Farm Fresh, which has more than 44,000 employees and 36 stores, most of them in Hampton Roads, is a SUPERVALU company, the nation's largest food distributor to supermarkets and the 10th largest supermarket retailer....**Karin A. Strickland** and **Andrew L. Montero**, both graduates of the Johnson & Wales University's College of Culinary Arts in Norfolk, recently were married in Elizabeth City, N.C., where the couple plans to open their own restaurant, Montero's, next spring....The Hampton Public Piers will be the point of departure Nov. 5 for the 11th running of the West Marine 1500. The rally of sailboats is expected to bring more than 200 sailing enthusiasts to the city for a week. Organizers hope that the event will place Hampton on the map as the sailing capital of the Southern Bay.

awareness of Hampton Roads' cultural assets of particular interest to the

increase the number of African-American visitors to Virginia by 1 percent in

month reflected some of t
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Technology

Buildings

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stadium shares land with a train station that will accommodate light rail. Although the Eveready Battery property is the first choice for a baseball stadium, Freeman says if the property is not used as a stadium, the land will be used for retail or commercial development.

The train station is in all the plans, however.

"If these two projects (Port Warwick and the Newport News Town Center) are successful, every project for the next 20 years will be planned just like them."

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