

Brunswick hires legal team to defend town control of former Navy base

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The former site of the Brunswick Naval Air Station.

By Dylan Martin, The Forecaster •

BRUNSWICK, Maine — The town has enlisted a top legal firm to fight legislation [officials say will supersede local control of economic redevelopment at Brunswick Landing](#).

Town Manager Gary Brown on Monday announced the town hired a team of lobbyists from the Preti Flaherty law firm to work at the statehouse in Augusta.

The team will be coordinated by lobbyist Andy Cashman, who has served as chairman of the Brunswick Democratic Town Committee. The team also will include Severin Beliveau and Ann Robinson, who worked on Gov. Paul LePage's transition team.

“We felt given the significance of the issue we’re anticipating to deal with, we felt Preti Flaherty would be the firm to use,” Brown said.

Brown estimated the costs of Preti Flaherty's services will land somewhere between \$50,000 and \$75,000. He said the expense will be justified if the firm successfully defends the town against legislation that has alarmed local officials.

“We’re confident once the legislators hear the facts, that we will prevail,” Brown said.

One of the bills the town of faces is L.R. 492, a bill submitted by Maine's Department of Economic and Community Development that seeks to clarify property tax exemptions at municipal airports.

In a statement issued Monday, Brown said the bill “would effectively remove facilities used for aircraft design, material testing and development of aircraft to

be built in other states from local control.” He noted the implications for Kestrel Aeroworks, whose property is being taxed at Brunswick Landing.

The Midcoast Regional Redevelopment Authority, which manages the property and includes Department of Economic and Community Development Commissioner George Gervais as a board member, already has made it clear it believes the property is tax-exempt.

Gervais said earlier in January the bill was spurred by the tax dispute between Brunswick and the redevelopment authority.

“We have a statute that is being interpreted differently by municipalities throughout the state,” Gervais said, “and it needs to be resolved because we need to have certainty in determining [tax-exempt] status.”

Kestrel’s tax bill for this fiscal year is \$114,000, which represents 25 percent of property tax revenues coming from Brunswick Landing.

Brown said the Town Council is “fully committed to fighting this bill.”

“If it were to pass, it would overturn centuries of established local control, hinder economic development and deny Brunswick desperately needed resources to backfill the loss of State funding for education and other critical needs of the Town of Brunswick,” he said.

Given the governor’s recent budget proposal, which could cost the town about \$4.3 million in state subsidies over the next two years, he said a tax exemption for Kestrel could put further strain on local finances.

“If the Legislature is going to push for more costs at the local level and more [tax] exemptions at the local level, that’s ridiculous,” Brown said.

The town also is getting ready to face a bill from Sen. Stan Gerzofsky, D-Brunswick, which would prevent towns from blocking redevelopment efforts.

But Preti Flaherty’s involvement with Brunswick’s affairs “may not all be about an adversarial relationship” between the town and state, Brown said. He said

there may be some bills that affect Brunswick Landing that the town may end up supporting.

To keep the town briefed on Preti Flaherty's activities, Brown said Town Council Chairwoman Suzan Wilson has appointed Councilors Ben Tucker and John G. Richardson to serve as intermediaries between the town and law firm. Brown said the councilors also will help develop strategies with the law firm.

Richardson is a former Department of Economic and Community Development commissioner and House speaker. While he served in the House of Representatives he sponsored legislation that led to the creation of Midcoast Regional Redevelopment Authority.