

# NANCY ON NORWALK

## Norwalk's Ripka bullish on Calf Pasture Beach as he revolutionizes its food service

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Clyde Ripka of Bull's Head Market plans to give the Calf Pasture Beach concession stand a nautical feel as he begins a 10-year lease granted by the city of Norwalk.

NORWALK, Conn. – The weather is not inviting, but there's action expected Tuesday at Calf Pasture Beach: A crew employed by Clyde Ripka will begin tearing up the concession stand formerly operated by Stew Leonard's.

Ripka's business is moving in; Stew's is already gone. There are big changes in store. For one thing, Ripka plans to be open year round; for another, he's offering a lot more than hot dogs and hamburgers.

Hey, you may be able to send a text to Ripka's and have an employee bring you your food – no need to leave the comfort of your beach chair on the sand.

The 10-year lease for Ripka's on the Beach, an offshoot of Bull's Head Market, was authorized at the Feb. 26 Common Council meeting. Stew's did not apply, Parks and Recreation Committee Chairman

Jerry Petrini said, and Ripka's offered the most money of the three businesses competing for the space – \$16,000 in its first year, \$27,000 in its second year.

Only Councilman Matt Miklave (D-District A) voted against the lease. Miklave was concerned about the terms: 10 years initially, with two 5-year options, a 20-year commitment that he said was inappropriate and an example of how the city should not be run. Stew Leonard's ran the place for 10 years on two five-year contracts.

Ripka is also taking over the concession stand at Veterans Park as part of his lease. "It's a diamond in the rough," he said Monday. He's going to call it The Dug Out, with typical grilled foods and salads, as well as ethnic foods suitable for the clientele, such as quesadillas. He hopes to attract the boaters using the city docks by offering ice and beverages.

Ripka said he's "a little crazy," which is why he does things like pack clams, lobsters and ice cream into a boat and head for Sheffield Island, where his business does clambakes for the Norwalk Seaport Association.

"I've been dealing with food on the water for six years, so we're closing the circle a little bit (with the beach concession)," he said. "I was very, very happy when it became available; I was more passionate about it, I pushed harder than the other people because I do see the value in it."



The concession is currently gutted, with a look Ripka associates with "a '50's bathroom, with hideous colors."

The wood that is currently on the walls will come down and be replaced by wainscoting with either a nautical or New England feel, he said. The tiles will be covered with an epoxy paint. The floors will be covered with decking.

Coastal Fine Finishes is collaborating on the project, a process Ripka plans to videotape.

Ripka drafted a menu for his proposal to the city; he said he has since scaled it back a bit, on the advice of his executive chef, who has experience with high volumes of people.

“We’ll serve what Stew had here — it has to have kid food, the hot dogs and the hamburgers,” he said. “But we’ll also have healthful food, salads.” He also plans a raw bar and steamed lobsters.

Parks and Recreation Director Mike Mocciaie thinks Ripka is bringing an enthusiasm to the small stand that big businessman Stew Leonard did not have, a natural for a “ma and pa” store.

Among the things Mocciaie is excited about is the planned “blanket service.”

The plan is to develop an app on the Bull’s Head webpage so people can order and pay for their food via their smartphones. Customers can then come to the concession stand and get into an express line — or stay where they are.

“If you’re two moms with eight kids out there, you can keep them on the sand, we’ll bring the stuff out,” Ripka said.

Ripka said his wife wants to get little flags to mark different areas on the beach, to identify where people are, as part of the system to make that work.

There’s more: deliveries to the ball fields via golf carts.



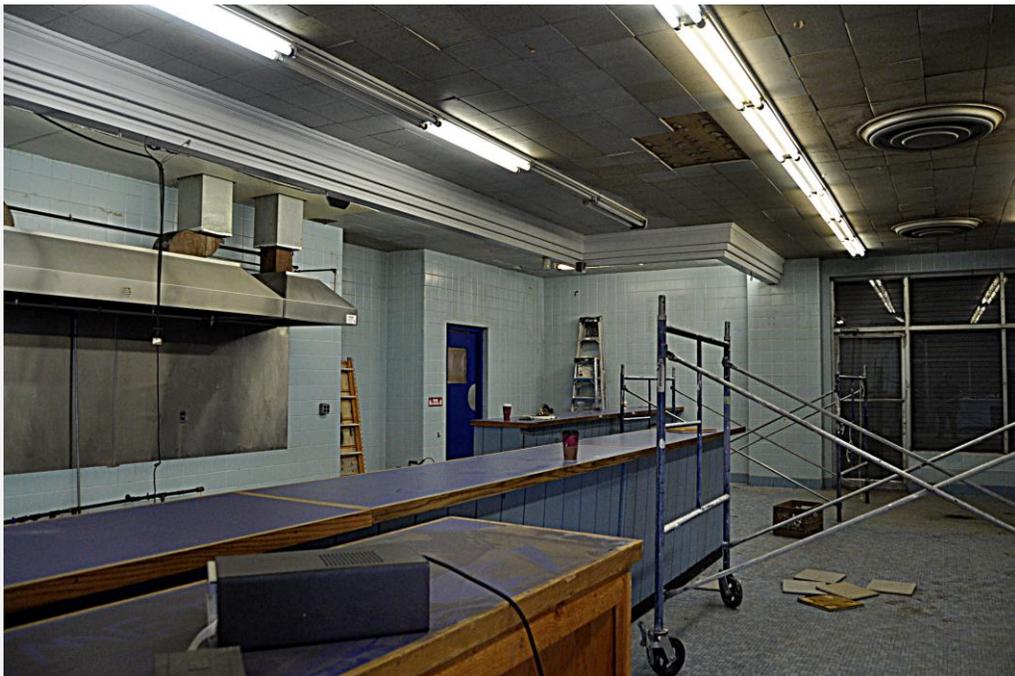
This building will be spruced up with light paint and a new stockade fence, Clyde Ripka said.

Ripka said Mocciaie wants to create a beach area next to the stand. “If he puts the sand out there we’ll finish it, I’ll get the tiki torches,” he said.

Like Stew, he will have a tent for the outdoor seating. He's looking for a corporate sponsor – it's an advertising opportunity, with "good visibility" – so he can get a better one. The city is going to paint the building the same beige color as the other buildings, and the dilapidated red stockade fence that faces the parking lot will be replaced.

"As with any park facilities that cities have, people want to use them," Ripka said. "You've got to cater to them, you've got to try to do something to get them down here. How many hot dogs are you going to eat? You bring some guests down from New Hampshire? Bring them to the beach, plan on having a nice casual dinner outside, actually have some nice crab cakes on a salad, or lobster roll, steamed mussels and clams, or a steamed lobster for those people coming from Indiana or wherever. Bring them to the water.

"Hot dogs and a hamburger doesn't spell Long Island Sound," he said. "I mean, it is good, it's good beach food, but it doesn't say New England, it doesn't say what we do. We need to certainly have a little bit of that. Rhode Island chowder. New England clam chowder. Other things available."



Clyde Ripka says he knew Stew's would take it's equipment out of the Calf Pasture Beach concession when its lease ended. The new range hoods are a nice surprise.