DRAFT December 3, 2014

1. Introduction

The Thames River estuary is a place of living history. From the deck of a boat, in one sweeping view, a visitor can survey a dynamic urban landscape developed through a continuous and ongoing engagement with the River over the course of centuries.

The cities of New London and Groton, perched opposite each other on the banks of the Thames River, were founded and developed as a result of a powerful relationship with the water: their distinct urban forms, architecture, culture and industry emerged over time as a result of access to the deep waters of the Thames estuary, Long Island Sound, and connections to the sea beyond. Today, Groton and New London, with their vibrant maritime industries and coastal defense installations, continue to define themselves in relation to the river and sea.

The concept for a **Thames River Heritage Park** to celebrate the rich and continuous engagement between Groton, New London and the Thames River has been around for more than 50 years. As early as the 1960’s, planners at the Southeastern Connecticut Regional Planning Agency saw the potential in such a park to highlight the unique culture of the area, encourage heritage tourism, and produce economic development in the region.

In 1987, Connecticut put in place legislation to establish a statewide heritage park system, identifying the Thames Estuary as the most promising area in the state to test the concept, designating it as a model state heritage park site. In the ensuing 20+ years, with more than $2 million in state funds invested in the park project, much was accomplished, but full implementation was not achieved. By 2010 the effort faded away.

Today, much of the original rationale for developing the park remains compelling, and major impediments to completion have disappeared. In fact, with the scheduled arrival of the National Coast Guard Museum to downtown New London in 2018 projected to bring as many as 500,000 visitors per year to the Thames region, now is a perfect time to reactivate and complete the park project.

Unlike a conventional state park with a fixed boundary and finite resources, the Thames River Heritage Park will draw together historical and contemporary sites, communities and institutions on both sides of the Thames, providing a unified framework within which visitors may experience the Thames region’s excellent existing heritage attractions. Four anchors—Fort Trumbull State Park, Fort Griswold Battlefield State Park, the Submarine Force Museum, and soon the National Coast Guard Museum—will provide the necessary visitor services for the park. The anchors will be tied together by new physical connections, including a water taxi system that will allow visitors to experience the Thames River itself as the heart of the region while moving between sites.

At each anchor site, strengthened pedestrian and bicycle linkages and clear signage will direct and connect the visitor to additional heritage attractions like the Avery-Copp House or Shaw Mansion, and to restaurants, shopping and historic districts in Groton and New London. Mobile technology will increase the availability of information and interpretation throughout the park and allow for the coordination of schedules and events between participating institutions.

The Thames River Heritage Park will not only be a place, it will also be a platform upon which partner organizations can collaborate, seek funding, develop programming, and build capacity.

The Thames River Heritage Park has the potential to make the region as a whole greater than the sum of its individual parts. While enriching each local partner by making it part of a larger network, the park will help define the region’s cultural identity, encourage sustainable tourism, and with minimal investment produce a substantial regional economic impact.

Revising the Heritage Park Plan

The first plan for the heritage park is now more than 25 years old, and while the rationale outlined in the original study remains compelling, many of the strategies for implementation require revision. For instance, new technology like the internet and mobile devices make the large capital investment needed to build a bricks-and-mortar visitor center unnecessary. And it may be that a non-profit entity is better equipped than the State to perform many of the roles required to sustain the Heritage Park, especially in an era of uncertain state budgets.

Perhaps the biggest and most positive change on the horizon is the commitment of the US Coast Guard to build the National Coast Guard Museum in downtown New London, to open in 2018. With as many as 500,000 new visitors projected each year, the museum could provide the critical mass needed to finally cement the Thames River Heritage Park project.

With dwindling state and federal funding for small, individual non-profit entities, and increased funding for coalitions and collaborations, the Heritage Park offers another important opportunity to heritage sites and groups in the region: the possibility of pooling resources for marketing and publicity, and of requesting funding for collaborative projects.

This new plan for the Thames River Heritage Park was developed in 2013 and 2014 in deep consultation with stakeholders, citizens, local and state elected officials, representatives (and officers?), and funded by the Avery-Copp House in Groton, Connecticut. While it builds on the extensive planning work done for the original heritage park, it presents a new, streamlined strategy for the completion and ongoing functioning of the Park.

Following this introductory chapter, this plan is divided into six sections:

Section 2, *Project Background*, describes the current planning effort and rationale for restarting the park development process, and also provides a history of the heritage park project to date.

Section 3, *Park Experience*, details the way visitors will experience the park, as a clear, attractive framework within which diverse local sites are situated and coordinated. Arrival, orientation, way-finding and interpretation are discussed.

Section 4, *Areas, Anchors and Sites*, provides guidance on the kinds of improvements that are recommended at the component sites of the park, including specific comments on each of the anchors, as well as guidance for smaller institutional partners, using the Avery-Copp House in Groton as a case study. The park’s relationship to sites further afield is also described.

Section 5, *Park Organization and Administration*, focuses on organizational aspects of the park: responsibilities and relationships between the various partner organizations and the State, funding, and coordination.

Section 6, *Economic Development*, includes a discussion of the role the park can play within the region as an attractor for both tourists and investors.

Section 7, *Education*, discusses how the park can become an educational resource far beyond the once-a-year elementary school field trip, and how cross-disciplinary educational curricula can be built around the park at multiple education levels.

Finally, Section 8, *Next Steps*, provides guidance on how this project can be moved forward.

Principal recommendations

Principal recommendations of this report include the following:

Park Organization

* **Establish an organizational structure** capable of taking on the diverse roles required to administer the Thames River Heritage Park. Consider developing a public-private partnership between the State of Connecticut, the City and Town of Groton, the City of New London, and an independent, local, not-for-profit corporation, with a clear mandate from the state and municipalities to work on behalf of the heritage park.
* **Establish an action-oriented steering committee** consisting of local stakeholders, civic leaders, and citizens to steward the park process at the local level. Consider making the steering committee the board of directors of the non-profit entity.
* **Identify a local leader** who can take on the role of moving the park project forward.
* **Develop a detailed, long-range implementation plan** to guide the next 10 years of park development. Identify specific goals and projects to be accomplished, costs and potential funding streams.
* **Assign clear, concrete roles** to all members of the park organization, including the state, municipalities, and the non-profit corporation.
* **Identify and secure state funding to support core capital projects** of the park, including the deployment of physical infrastructure such as signage and the water taxi system.
* **Develop new funding streams** outside of state funding, to support the work of the park, through grants, foundation funding, and tax-deductible contributions.
* **Build a platform for collaboration** that will allow partner heritage institutions to develop group programming, events, and coordinate schedules.
* **Build capacity of partner heritage organizations** by providing support in the form of volunteer recruitment, educational program development, grant-writing, schedule coordination, etc.
* **Support, don’t compete** with partner heritage institutions.

Park Experience

* **Establish a comprehensive and coordinated park framework**, including marketing, way-finding, parking, visitor services, transportation, signage and interpretation, to provide visitors to the Thames River Heritage Park with a clear, comfortable and unified, but thematically diverse experience within the park.
* **Develop a high quality, comprehensive brand and communications design** for the heritage park, including graphic logos, colors, signage, pennants, banners and standardized marketing text. Develop a park website to introduce potential visitors to what the park and region have to offer, and implement a regional and/or national marketing campaign.
* **Develop a comprehensive traffic and parking strategy** utilizing both existing parking reservoirs in Groton and New London and developing new satellite parking reservoirs connected to the water taxi system for high season usage.
* **Develop coordinated directional signage** at gateways to the park region, including Interstate 95, directing visitors to arrival points and parking facilities from which they can get orientation information, walk to park attractions, or board the water taxi system. Include signage at multi-modal arrival points like Union Station and the ferry landings.
* **Establish a coordinated transportation framework**, tying together the dispersed attractions of the heritage park in a cohesive and interesting way, and implementing a “park once” strategy for the whole park.
* **Implement a water taxi system** to connect the major anchor sites of the park, including Fort Trumbull State Park, Fort Griswold Battlefield State Park, the Submarine Force Museum, and the New London Waterfront District / Coast Guard Museum, which will allow visitors to experience the Thames River itself as an attraction. Integrate the water taxi into the branding of the park, and if possible utilize a historic military vessel for transportation.
* **Develop better linkages between downtown New London and Fort Trumbull** through better pedestrian and bicycle links, and a water taxi.
* **Improve Fort Griswold Battlefield State Park** to make it more accessible and more vivid and making it a premier heritage destination in New England.
* **Improve access to and use of the Thames River waterfront**, including new access and improved circulation and transportation options for pedestrians, bicycles, and especially a water taxi linking New London, Groton, and the Submarine Force Museum
* **Implement an early-action water taxi pilot project** to demonstrate the potential of such a system to connect sites and get visitors out on the water.
* **Develop a web site and GPS enabled mobile app** providing general visitor information (including specific information for each site) as well as detailed interpretative material. Allow visitors to create customized itineraries through the app based on their interests and use of geotagging and/or QR codes to allow visitors to access information on sites through their mobile devices.
* **Encourage partner attractions to co-brand**, utilizing Heritage Park branding and graphics while maintaining their own diverse identities as independent organizations.
* **Develop park-wide events and programming** with partner heritage organizations.
* **Support the completion of the Coast Guard Museum** as the fourth anchor of the park, to add critical mass to the number of regional attractions.
* **Support the revitalization of Thames Street, Groton** as a lively mixed-use, pedestrian oriented corridor, linking historic sites and properties with businesses, parking, the waterfront and the neighborhood.
* **Explore mutually beneficial collaborative relationships**, projects and marketing with attractions in the extended Southeastern Connecticut region, including Mystic Seaport, the Connecticut River Museum in Essex, the Henry Ferguson Museum on Fishers Island, and Foxwoods and Mohegan Sun Casinos.

Education

* **Develop a specific cross-disciplinary area based education curricula** for primary and secondary school students in the region, and encourage and facilitate partnerships between schools and park attractions. Include not only history, but also science, technology, math, economics, civics and other subjects, with emphasis on relationships and influences between subjects. Consider implementing project based learning.
* **Establish collaborations and connections between park attractions and area faculty and students** at University of Connecticut Avery Point, Mitchell College, Connecticut College, and the United States Coast Guard Academy.

Economic Development

* **Establish mutually beneficial working collaborations with regional and state tourism agencies, Chambers of Commerce, and economic development groups** to market the park and the region to tourists, visitors, investors and entrepreneurs considering moving to the region. Highlight the recreational and quality of life aspects that the park may offer residents.
* **Explore and establish mutually beneficial relationships with businesses in New London and Groton** that may cater to tourists and visitors, such as restaurants, hotels and boutique shopping.