Background & Update

Thames Maritime Heritage Park/Thames River Heritage Park

In the 1987, the State of Connecticut passed legislation to create a number of heritage parks throughout the state to bring attention to the state’s rich historical and cultural heritage and to foster revitalization by encouraging private sector investment and tourism.

The model for this network of parks was to be the Thames Maritime Heritage Park in the Thames estuary. This model park was described as “a heritage based educational and recreational attraction, which, similar to Boston's Freedom trail, links together existing cultural and historic resources in New London and Groton. The basic concept of this project is to provide and promote a comprehensive and cohesive linkage of current historic maritime visitor attractions. By providing another major attraction in the region, tourists will be encouraged to extend their stay, creating additional economic opportunities for regional businesses.”

The park was to cater to the heritage tourist, described as the fastest growing segment of the tourism market. The intention was to “develop the Thames Maritime Heritage Park into a product that can be easily marketed by Thames Maritime Heritage park sites and regional and state Tourism groups.” In addition to the water-related sites, such as the Nautilus Museum and Fort Trumbull, then under development, many “land-based attractions for the visitor to enjoy as part of the Thames Maritime Heritage Park experience” were listed, including, in Groton, Fort Griswold State Park, the Ebenezer Avery House and the Bill Memorial Library. In New London, the Custom House, Shaw Mansion, Union Station, Garde Arts Center, Hempstead Houses, and the Historic Waterfront District were listed.

In 2005, after accomplishing a number of goals toward the park’s creation, the effort ended without full implementation of the plan.

The Copp family and the Avery-Copp Board of Directors have provided an opportunity to complete the park and create a new collaboration among heritage and cultural sites in the Thames Estuary. In 2012, the family agreed and the Board approved funding a study by the Yale Urban Design Workshop to “develop a conceptual plan for the future role of the Museum as part of a network of cultural and heritage sites and institutions around the Thames River Estuary and eastern Long Island Sound. … [and] build upon the important work of the 1987-88 Connecticut Heritage Park System study, specifically the case study for a Thames Estuary Heritage Park, [to] update and extend the database, technical information and concept from that study.”

The park is still a compelling concept for a number of reasons:

* The state has already invested over $2 million in infrastructure and soft costs to create the park. Costly components, such as water taxi docks, have been installed.
* Regional and city plans call for more linkages among sites.
* With Fort Trumbull State Park and the Avery-Copp Museum now open to the public and the US Coast Guard Museum slated to open in New London’s Historic Waterfront District, the timing seems right to renew the effort to move forward with the park.

* Visitation at key neighborhood attractions has dropped, in some cases significantly, resulting in vandalism and providing the impetus to act.

**Recent Developments**

The SE CT legislative delegation has voted to support the effort to explore the feasibility of the park, and the enabling legislation to establish the park was recently updated and passed in the General Assembly.

Under the Yale Urban Design Workshop’s guidance, a steering committee of Avery-Copp House board members and area stakeholders was formed and a new name and mission/vision statement for the park were created. Research was conducted in both discovery and feasibility phases. Yale’s final report is due in the fall of 2014.

The leadership of the Steering Committee has met with a group of legislators and commissioners in Hartford who encouraged the Steering Committee to proceed. Under the leadership of members of the legislative delegation, a pilot project to showcase the water taxi connecting the two sides of the Thames River, which is a key component of the heritage park, is being planned for this fall. (One of the discoveries of Yale’s research was how difficult it is to get from one site to another by car. Shuttles crossing the river solve this problem and allow people to experience the river itself, a prime public space.)

Seventeen letters of support have been written to the President of the Board of the Avery-Copp House and submitted to Governor Malloy. Over 30 regional stakeholders have met with members of the committee and Yale and indicated their endorsement. The Commander of the sub base has indicated an interest in advancing the park project, as have spokespeople for the US Coast Guard Academy. A letter of support is working its way through the Navy chain of command.

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