

## Thames River Heritage Park

### PARK ORGANIZATION and ADMINISTRATION

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**The Thames River Heritage Park will exist as two things: a PLACE, consisting of existing sites, areas, and parks, with an overall identity defined through the physical interventions described in Chapters 2 & 3; and as a PLATFORM upon which partners, governments, businesses and stakeholders can collaborate, seek funding, develop programming, market themselves, and build capacity.**

Achieving this dual function will require an organizational and administrative strategy different from that of a conventional park. Whereas the management of a conventional park involves improvement and maintenance of specific publically-owned property assets, the heritage park is not itself a property owned by the public - instead it is a collection of private and public physical sites, events, programming and education. Development of the heritage park requires investing in the shared physical resources described in Chapters 2 & 3, but also supporting privately owned sites, and investing in, nurturing and supporting other collaborative aspects of the park.

The administrative entity for the park will be a crucial piece of park infrastructure, capable of taking on diverse and evolving roles. These include **First**, the strategic role of developing, with partners, long range planning for the park and coordinating with other municipal and state planning agencies; **Second**, the operational & managerial role of deploying and maintaining physical infrastructure for the park including signage, boat docks, water taxi contracts, etc; and finally the support, development and advocacy roles of being a platform for heritage site development, collaboration, programming, and capacity building.

In the initial development of the Thames River Maritime Heritage Park beginning in the late 1980's, the state took on the first two of these roles. The State of Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) was understood to be the park's primary developer, and was to eventually manage all park infrastructure and provide all operational staffing and carry out long range planning. The Heritage Park Advisory Board, established through legislation, was the local partner tasked with representing municipal interests, reviewing plans for park development, and recommending sites for inclusion in the park.<sup>1</sup> Since the park never became operational, it is not clear how it would ultimately have been administered. QL Consulting's 1994 implementation plan called for the advisory board to become a management commission and the park manager to be hired as soon as a visitor center was constructed. But the state never fully deployed the physical infrastructure for the project (visitor center, boat landings, water taxi) and the Heritage Park Advisory Board remained advisory, never evolving into an operational agent or a platform for park development. We believe a new, fresh structure must be established which responds to current conditions and realities, realigns the partners, and precisely specifies their roles, relationships and objectives.

In the National Heritage Area (NHA) system of the National Park Service (NPS) and the state heritage area systems in New York and Pennsylvania, rarely does the state (in the form of NPS or a state park service) provide for the direct ongoing administration of the heritage area. In most cases, the state, through an established **heritage park program** provides support to a local entity in the form of technical assistance, manpower, funding and credibility. In some

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<sup>1</sup> Paraphrased from QL Consulting, Inc. *Thames Maritime Heritage Park Implementation Plan*, 1994. p. 7-4.

cases that local entity might be a government appointed commission, while in other cases it might be an incorporated 501(c)3 non-profit. In the case of National Heritage Areas, the local entity might begin as an appointed commission and transition at some point into a non-profit, as federal funding tapers.

It is worth noting that the Thames River Maritime Heritage Park, as originally proposed by the State of Connecticut, should have become a model project which demonstrated how the state could cooperate with a multi-municipality region to develop its heritage resources, tourism and economy, while the state built its own internal capacity and technical expertise, internal processes and procedures that could be deployed in other heritage parks. As the establishment of the heritage park program at the state level never matured, in considering how to complete the implementation of the Thames River Heritage Park, we are left without the guidance of the state.

### ***Organizational Models***

We examined three possible organizational models for the Thames River Heritage Park. The first model returns to a conventional structure, where the state parks department takes a leading role in administering the park, with the assistance of a local advisory panel. In the second model, a state appointed local commission is vested with the powers and responsibilities necessary to establish and run the park. In the third model, a public-private partnership is established, with roles split between the state and a local non-profit entity.

Whatever the organizational model, in order for the park to be successful, it will be critical that it is legitimized by the partner organizations and local municipalities. Today, the sites and institutions that will become part of the Thames River Heritage Park are understood to belong only to the town or city they are located in. Being part of the park will change that, making them part of something which is a regional, even national attraction. But the only way this shift can occur is if each partner site and each municipality begins to treat the Heritage Park entity as governing framework. In practice this means that the municipalities should endeavor to support the larger work of the park and not work at cross-purposes by circumventing that framework through direct dealings with individual sites. It also means that the individual sites must consider their role within the Park when making changes (such as hours, programming, etc.) and make sure that the park entity is involved and kept abreast of these changes.

### **Scenario A: State Management**

The State of Connecticut could simply resume its role as primary developer. It could establish and fund a local Thames River Heritage Park management office somewhere in the Thames Region, with a dedicated park superintendent or program manager and staff as required. This office might piggyback on facilities and staff available at Fort Trumbull, or be a wholly separate management unit with office space in Groton or New London. The state would likely need to re-convene an advisory panel or board to provide the local knowledge and relationships, but the assumption is that the state would fund and perform the “work” required for each of these roles.

There are a number of compelling arguments that favor this strategy:

- Simplicity of the organization: all matters relating to the park are carried out by a single state-funded office under advisement from the advisory panel

- Legislation continues to be in place that, with funding, would allow the state to move forward quickly
- Two of the main anchor sites of the heritage park are in and of themselves state park sites administered by DEEP, with existing dedicated space and staff resident at Fort Trumbull. With added staff, the heritage park could be administered as part of its existing structure
- In theory, the parks division already has much of the expertise, processes and structure in place to run such a park (this may or may not be true)
- Funding could come through the state parks budget, potentially giving access to state bond funds. The Governor's office authorized \$60 million in bond funds in FY 2013, the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the park system, to be spent on park infrastructure projects throughout the state

But there are challenges in this scenario. Bringing together the various roles and responsibilities needed to operate the park under a single state-run office could be difficult. But we believe the foremost challenge to this model is the implied requirement for consistent, ongoing single-source funding from the state. According to a recent study from the General Assembly's Office of Program Review and Investigations, funding for Connecticut's state parks has been on the decline since 2010 and now is below 2006 funding levels in adjusted dollars.<sup>2</sup> Continuing uncertainty in the state budget following the 2008 recession could mean that the heritage park could find itself defunded or severely underfunded, as the parks department is in general. A further finding of the report is that administration within the parks division has been reduced to a "crisis management" model. Especially in the initial years of the heritage park, the park administrator will need to work aggressively to establish relationships and lines of communication, and to demonstrate value for stakeholders, the community and the state. Given current circumstances, it is unclear whether the state parks department is equipped or willing to take on this role without specific new resources and a mandate from the top.

### **Scenario B: Public Commission**

A second, all-public management option would expand the power of the advisory group, transforming it into an official state-appointed Thames River Heritage Park Commission, mandated under law and with the powers to work with and provide direction for state agencies to develop the park. In this option, the local role of DEEP might be reduced to administering capital projects, maintaining physical infrastructure, and perhaps project management support for the commission. The commission could be structured to coordinate with state agencies including DEEP, DECD and DOT at a high level, perhaps at the commissioner's level or through the governor's office, and could take up some of the community organizing and outreach functions of the project. They might also contract with consultants for specific aspects of the work like marketing and websites. They might be provided with a technical advisor funded by the state. Elected officials and representatives could be made members of the commission, including the Mayors and the Governor.

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<sup>2</sup> Legislative Program Review and Investigations Committee, Connecticut General Assembly. *Staff Findings and Recommendations. State Parks and Forests: Funding*. Hartford, CT: January 23, 2014. Accessed online at <http://www.cga.ct.gov/pri/docs/2013/State%20Parks%20and%20Forests%20Funding%20Staff%20Findings%20and%20Recommendations%20.pdf>

### **Scenario C: Public-Private Partnership (PPP)**

A third option would be to transfer some of the core roles of the park to a new, local non-profit corporation. In surveying many national and state heritage areas and parks, it is common to find a local non-profit in a key position within the organizational structure, collaborating with the official state or national manager of the park to carry out specific tasks. In general, like the Heritage Park itself, the non-profit's role is to be a resource to the partner organizations, not to compete with them. These organizations are often designated by the state in some official way to legitimize their role.

At most, a non-profit might be the primary administrative and development entity for the heritage area, with continuing state funding and technical support. Certainly a non-profit with the right director, staff and an action-oriented board could take on many of the community organizing, outreach, collaboration, and development goals of the park. At its least, a non-profit might just be a conduit for fund raising.

A primary benefit of the non-profit form is the ability to manage funds in a more flexible way than the state can, including accepting tax-deductible contributions, conducting annual campaigns, operating concessions and gift shops, applying for public and private local, state and federal grants, and administering contracts. A non-profit might even be able to own land and develop its own projects to provide an income stream, as some preservation trusts do. These funds could in turn be donated to the state for specific projects, re-granted to support heritage park programming and capacity building projects developed by the member institutions, or used to support things like marketing campaigns, web sites, conferences, and mobile apps.

### ***Recommended Structure***

If the state was committed to restarting the heritage park development program, it might make sense to seriously consider the options outlined above under scenario A and B, where once again, the state would take up a leading role in the deployment and ongoing operations of the park, making the Thames River Heritage Park a model for other projects. However, there is a compelling argument that a partnership between a private non-profit and the state, as outlined in scenario C above, might provide the most flexible and scalable structure for moving forward whether the state wants to restart the heritage park program or not.

Given these options, at this time, we recommend that this effort be moved to public-private partnership model. We believe a local non-profit with a professional executive director and board consisting of stakeholders, elected officials, legislators, and citizens presents the best opportunity to pick up where the steering committee for this project has left off and continue to develop and move the project forward. To give the new non-profit legitimacy, the state should designate it as the official local park partner, with the right to work on behalf of the park.

In the PPP, the roles of the partners and their relationships will need to be made clear, and a new non-profit entity will either need to be created or an existing one identified to carry on the work. Below, we have provided a preliminary list of the roles each of these partners might take on.

## ***Public Private Partnership Model, Roles and Tasks***

### **Collaborative Role:**

- In deep consultation with stakeholders, develop long range plans (10 years) for the heritage park
- Share resources between local state parks and the Heritage Park non-profit.

### **State Role:**

- Manage physical park infrastructure
  - Deploy remaining pieces of water taxi infrastructure, including a new water taxi landing at the Submarine Force Museum. Maintain all infrastructure related to the water taxi system. (DEEP)
  - Fund an initial 5 year operation of the water taxi system, with the possibility of renewal (DEEP / DECD / DOT)
  - Fund, develop, construct and maintain park signage throughout the region, working with municipal and federal agencies (DEEP / DOT)
- Provide operational seed funding for the non-profit park entity for a minimum of an initial 5 year establishment period (DEEP / DECD / State budget)
- Support collaboration and programming between Fort Trumbull State Park and Fort Griswold Battlefield State Park and other Thames River Heritage Park partners (DEEP)
- Support capital improvements to Fort Griswold Battlefield State Park to improve accessibility (pedestrian and automotive), visibility and interpretation (DEEP)
- Support marketing and publicity efforts (Commission on Culture and Tourism, DECD, Eastern Regional Tourism District)
- Mandate and support a special collaborative relationship between the superintendent of parks at Fort Trumbull and the Heritage Park non-profit.
- Identify a specific project manager in the state government manage these activities and coordinate with the new non-profit entity.

### **Municipalities Role:**

- Incorporate transportation strategies of the Heritage Park plan into local infrastructure improvement projects
- Develop local economic development strategies around Heritage Park projects
- Support and participate with the Heritage Park non-profit

- Facilitate permitting and installation of Heritage Park signage and water taxi landings

**Thames River Heritage Park Non-Profit Role:**

- Manage marketing, advertising & public relations on behalf of the park and its partner organizations. Develop and deploy Thames River Heritage Park web site, maps, brochures, and mobile applications. Coordinate with local, state and national tourism agencies and companies to bring visitors to the park.
- Help build the capacity of local heritage institutions and sites by providing support in the form of shared resources: staffing, marketing, grant-writing, volunteer recruiting & training, and funding.
- Cultivate and support collaboration between partner organizations. Help develop collaborative projects and programming and facilitating collection sharing. Apply for public and private local, state and federal grants for collaborative projects on behalf of participating institutions.
- Coordinate schedules, programs and events between participating heritage institutions and other local groups.
- Facilitate communication between participating heritage institutions and other entities
- With heritage partners, develop regional thematic and interpretative resources, including websites, apps, and printed materials
- With heritage partners, develop educational materials and school programs and curricula; consider employing a shared education director; interface with local schools, colleges and universities
- Develop and fund internship opportunities
- Review, analyze and report on operations of the water taxi system; make suggestions for improvement and changes