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Voila: A new state park

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If I were Dan Malloy or Tom Foley, I would have my campaign bus swing by Groton or New London this weekend and announce plans to establish a new state park, one opening as soon as next summer.

It would be an easy and inexpensive campaign promise to keep, mostly because much of the hard planning has been done. Very little construction would be needed.

It won't cost much either, maybe even less than the amount of public money the two candidates have been spending on warring television ads about a Georgia textile plant that closed more than 15 years ago.

And it won't be just any old state park.

This one will attract attention and visitors from far and wide. It's been laid out by what may be the best urban design team in the country: Yale Urban Design Workshop.

After all, how many parks are there that link, by water, 18th and 19th Century American forts, a museum featuring the world's first nuclear submarine and a collection of historic houses and museums. Better yet, it also connects it all by water with trains, high-speed ferries, parking and walkable urban settings with shops and restaurants.

It already has a name - Thames River Heritage Park - and it has been on the drawing boards for a long time, though, alas, dormant.

The planning seemed to lose steam when state funding didn't materialize for a central visitors' center.

But the notion of a park without the bricks and mortar of a central hub has been revived, with the help of some forward-thinking non-profits, generous businesses and community volunteers.

The local legislative delegation, with Groton's Rep. Elissa Wright in a lead role, has also been working to help push it along to the next step.

This weekend and next, they are going to take the concept for a test spin, running a water shuttle from 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Saturday and Sunday to and from three riverside docks: The Fort Street landing in Groton, Fort Trumbull in New London and City Pier in downtown New London.

The boat, which can carry up to 44 passengers, for free, will run a 30-minute loop. Eventually, with a real park, the route could be expanded to include other stops, such as

the Nautilus and Submarine Force Library & Museum farther north on the river. The National Coast Guard Museum will be a stop, if it is built.

Visitors also will be directed to a variety of other attractions, historic houses and museums, all within walking distance to the shuttle landings. They would all be marketed together.

Penny Parsekian of New London, working as a consultant to the Avery Copp House museum in Groton, gets a big dose of the credit for reviving the park.

Parsekian, charged by directors of the Avery Copp House with helping to develop a long-term strategy for the museum, ended up bringing the Yale designers on board, to develop the regional park plan.

Working with the outline of the original proposal, the designers developed a new report on how to bring the idea to life, to create a unified park experience.

It would take very little to now put the whole thing in motion and make the Thames River Heritage Park a reality. The state could easily have it up and running by next summer and begin marketing it to tourists.

The cost could be as little as erecting signs. The attractions and transportation infrastructure all exist.

The state might also put some seed money into the shuttle system in the beginning, leasing a vessel and paying operators. But eventually the shuttle might be run by a private operator, with passengers paying a fee, the Yale designers suggest, noting that many of the attractions have no admission fee.

The cost of launching an innovative and appealing new park and tourism destination would cost less than what falls out of the governor's pocket on the way to and from state Bond Committee meetings.

So come on down, candidates Malloy and Foley.

It could even be a bipartisan park promise, and then we voters could go back to looking at what happened to the Bibb company in Georgia all those years ago, to decide who to vote for in this year's gubernatorial race.

This is the opinion of David Collins.

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