

# **CHAPTER 10**

# **CONCLUSION**

## Introduction and Summary

Several major study objectives have been addressed in this Thames Maritime Heritage Park Implementation Plan. First, the Plan has revisited and evaluated the original heritage park Master Plan, undertaken in 1988/89. Second, the Plan has introduced many important lessons that have been learned from a number of other comparable heritage communities and heritage park systems. Third, it has provided a road map in each of the key strategic aspects of the state heritage park (visitor center and interpretive orientation, collaborations, transportation, management, attractions development, and tourism promotion). Lastly, and perhaps most important for the long term, the Implementation Plan has addressed a question that was posed at the beginning of the study process by the State of Connecticut, the City and Town of Groton and the City of New London, namely:

*“What would it take to maximize the economic impact of the Heritage Park on the region by making it a “major” attraction, beyond what we have planned so far?”*

Throughout the Implementation Plan, an answer to this question has been suggested: Position this region to be designated as a National Heritage Area. In this concluding chapter we explain this important future opportunity and suggest what needs to happen next to put this long term strategy into action.

## Immediate Steps for Action

Throughout this Implementation Plan, we have presented a variety of action steps organized along strategic lines. In this section, the most important and immediate of these strategies are highlighted.

**Proceed to complete the Visitor Center and Groton-side state boat dock.** Moving the Visitor Center development and boat-dock process forward will require: resolving a number of lingering issues; engaging an exhibit design firm to finalize the Center's interpretive approach and components; securing approvals (New London and State); and preparing construction documents.

**Prepare an Organizational Plan.** A source document should be prepared that establishes the framework for the governing body that will provide the long term stewardship of the Heritage Park by the proposed Thames Partnership Commission. The organizational plan will start with a clear mission statement, and will explicitly lay out the composition, roles and responsibilities for the Commission, for any committees that may be required (such as Executive, Education, Collaboration, Nominating, Resource Development, Marketing, etc.), as well as for other entities that will be directly involved in the Park management and operations ("Friends of...", municipal agencies, tourism district, etc.). An operating budget and program for State Parks should be prepared as part of the organizational plan in time for the 1994 legislative budget process.

**Immediate Steps for Action (continued)**

**Convene Collaborator Meetings.** There is an immediate need to bring the participating historic and cultural organizations together and facilitate consensus between and among them regarding their role and responsibility, and opportunities for the Park. These discussions should focus on interpretive resources, exhibit process for the proposed Showcase Gallery, and educational programming and grant/funding opportunities. The state legislation should be amended to authorize new method to classify site designation Prepare a detailed operational marketing strategy for promoting and advocating the park to the community .

**Begin transition of Park governance to a permanent Thames Partnership Commission.** Amend state legislation (1995-97 Biennium) to authorize creation of the new governing body. Convene community leaders to get their commitment to participate and support this effort at the board level.

## Long Term Strategy

The Implementation Plan suggests that the resources — both financial and human — are not currently in place to embark on a major attractions development effort as part of immediate heritage park implementation. Rather, the plan suggests that the park proceed to design and construct an exciting visitor center “with sizzle” on the New London side of the river, and a boat dock on the Groton side. The plan outlines other strategies to organize the leadership of the region (cultural and civic) to steward the park, and to maximize the impacts that can be accomplished at such a level of development.

For the long term, while additional in-state resources may become available to enlarge the scope and magnitude of the heritage park, a far larger opportunity lies in the positioning of this region as a designated National Heritage Area.

One of the major lessons learned from other heritage communities is that when the National Park Service (NPS) is present in such communities, the resources, stability and clout that are necessary for heritage development are usually also present. Furthermore, because the financial and physical resources provided by the Park Service are generally not otherwise available, NPS involvement, can create new and potentially dramatic local economic impact.

In the past, the NPS has generally not relied on the participation of local resources to carry its projects forward. This is one federal agency that typically has brought its own funds, people, and facilities to make a project work. Once committed to a project, the Park Service tends to stay with it for the long haul (Lowell and Salem, Massachusetts are good examples of NPS efforts that have survived through difficult local conditions). As an important side benefit, the Park Service operates with impeccable standards of quality that tend to have dramatic quality-of-life impacts on local communities.

**Long Term Strategy (continued)**

**The involvement of the National Park Service in a community or region requires extensive prior effort. The local area establishes its credibility by building sound organizational structures and by demonstrating community participation in existing heritage programs and projects. It is therefore critical to implement the "immediate next steps" outlined in this plan. These activities will respond to federal guidelines that require evidence of a high degree of participation by state and local community stakeholders. Serious collaborative discussions between and among the local municipalities, the state, and community business and civic leaders will show broad based involvement. While the current Heritage Park Advisory Board and its committees have met regularly, these meetings cannot be construed as broad-based participation of community leaders.**

**With an organizational structure and leadership base to work from, the community can then pursue the designation of a National Heritage area with greater confidence. The community will show its potential for capacity-building and community participation; its ability to collaborate from within; its desire to conserve and interpret treasured historical resources for increased public and economic benefit; and its intention to honor the community's historic fabric. If these are the long term goals that the Thames Maritime Heritage Park can achieve, then the process of securing designation as a National Historic Area will be a worthy endeavor, regardless of the outcome.**

## Conclusion

The work to prepare this Implementation Plan for the Thames Maritime Heritage Park has been productive and resourceful. Many strategic issues of implementation that were not clear in early 1993 when the study was initiated are now near resolution and/or in the process of moving ahead. As such, the Thames Maritime Heritage Park is moving toward reality as a state heritage park, for which many people in the state and region should be commended.

The final chapter of the Thames Maritime Heritage Park has yet to be written. This state heritage park represents the foundation for something potentially larger. With the emergence of the National Heritage Areas initiative, New London/Groton is well-positioned to use the Thames Maritime Heritage Park as a springboard for involvement of the National Park Service. What better place could there be for a national heritage area. The United States government has had, and will continue to have a dramatic presence in the region (Submarine Base, Nautilus Memorial, Navy Underwater Warfare Center, Coast Guard Academy, etc.). The history of the region is rich and nationally significant. The cultural resources exist and are being strengthened by the state heritage park. Economic development in the region has been directly affected by cutbacks in federal defense funding. Whether or not the designation as a National Heritage Area is achieved, the process of going for it will expand the capacity, stability, and impact of the Thames Maritime Heritage Park. What better set of arguments to advocate for additional federal involvement for quality-of-life improvement!

This, then, is the challenge facing the potential heritage area that is New London/Groton, Connecticut: with all that is about to be in place for a state heritage park, is the community now ready and willing to take heritage development to the next step? We believe that answer can and should be "yes" -- through the successful implementation of the strategies presented in this report.