

Thames Maritime Heritage Park

White Paper

Findings & Considerations for Organization & Governance

4 April 2005

Amaze Design, Herbert Sprouse Consulting & Copley Wolff

Authors' Note: This paper refers to the Thames Maritime Heritage Park (PARK) which encompasses heritage sites along both the Groton and New London sides of the Thames river. An element to be included in the PARK is a Waterfront Park Recreation Area (WPRA) to be located on the New London waterfront adjacent to city pier and the south of the train station. Where the authors wish to reference the Thames Maritime Heritage Park, the term "PARK" may be used and where the authors wish to reference the Waterfront Park Recreation Area the abbreviation "WPRA" may be used.

Resource Assessment and Considerations

Review of prior studies of the New London/Groton waterfront confirm a thoughtful long-term commitment of the local authorities and private organizations to exploring ways to further activate the Thames river waterfront with recurring, linked activities. Selected recommendations of prior studies have been implemented. The combined desire to create a distributed heritage park on both the east and west sides of the Thames and a waterfront park in New London poses challenges, particularly linked to parking and circulation. Summertime weekend events demonstrate a strong market for such events, however the market for additional events and daily activities need to be tied to a regional market.

Use of the river for transportation to sites in Groton and New London seems practical and desirable. The use of the river for a taxi and/or ferry system will assist in moving visitors to and from Groton, where parking and surface roads limit visitor options for creating a seamless visit to multiple sites.

The "working waterfront" is an important component of any approach to creating a new visitor attraction. Creation of recurring after-hour events may improve public awareness, akin to "waterfire" in Providence, RI. There is a belief by stakeholders that the PARK could provide complimentary attractions to visitors already drawn to the region for other cultural tourism.

The primary aim of the Thames Maritime Heritage Park is to create a positive economic impact by leveraging the heritage assets within the Groton and New London communities. It is the belief of the consultant team engaged in the analysis and planning of the PARK, that this can only be achieved if there is a coordinated management “organization” committed to the PARK’s long-term development and sustainability. This paper suggests the elements the team believes are required to create a PARK of sufficient offerings so as to be distinctly marketable, and suggests methods by which the PARK may be managed and grow over time.

Elements of a Marketable Attraction

There are three main visitor attraction components that have been identified for the PARK:

1. Events

The waterfront setting for both communities provides a wonderful opportunity for events of various scales. One can envision small group harbor cruises to major events such as Sailfest.

2. Cultural Heritage & Education

The area abounds with interesting and historic places and events. These range from the obvious such as Forts Trumbull and Griswold to the less noticed like the Avery Copp House or Monte Cristo Cottage. This constellation of historic attractions would benefit from adequate directional signage and way-finding to knit them into an understandable pattern.

3. Recreation

In addition to the obvious waterborne recreational opportunities, the New London/Groton area also features other public parks, beaches and sport opportunities apart from the Thames Maritime Heritage Park. The area has much to offer. These opportunities can also be tied together through signage and way-finding.

Taken together, all three components create a compelling range of options for visitor engagement.

Considerations for Target Marketing & Branding

Before we can provide further analysis of the identity of target audiences for the PARK and historic properties and proceed to create solutions for attracting them, we must make an initial determination of the hierarchy of uses which further physical and organizational development will target.

When considering the PARK and related historic attractions as an “event space” the following observations are most important:

- Several major events are currently staged in the PARK, providing it with its most concrete identity and attracting the largest attendance and heaviest use of the PARK.
- However, the “density” of the events – their frequency through the year – is low. This is especially important during the summer peak period, when there are a limited number of significant events between early July mid-September.
- The existing events are organized and promoted by independent, non-profit, largely volunteer organizations. While cooperative in outlook, few mechanisms exist to support the production or promotion of these events overall.
- Previous conversations have been held within the community to explore the desirability and feasibility of providing larger scale coordination and management of the PARK and the programs held there. To date, no appropriate funding mechanism for this function has been identified.
- Similarly, the marketing of New London and its attractions to tourists and travelers falls within the larger mandate of two regional agencies, one of which is located in the city.
- Finally, the retail market area for downtown New London is relatively localized, demonstrating that efforts to expand the retailing market reach and to develop and promote the PARK overall, and the Waterfront Park Recreation Area in particular, may be mutually beneficial.

If the focus is shifted toward an understanding of the PARK and attractions as a venue for history education, the following considerations are most relevant:

- The physical dispersion of the various history sites has contributed to continuing difficulties in creating a coherent learning experience and a promote-able identity that uses the variety of sites well.
- Along the I-95 corridor, several major, history-related attractions are well promoted and provide highly organized, identifiable experiences. Inevitably, the current situation fosters a competitive environment for attraction of travelers and tourists.
- The possibility of linking the two Forts, the downtown environment, the Nautilus Museum and the history of the working waterfront can provide a compelling set of stories that would be attractive to a broad demographic.

- To accomplish this, critical issues of physical dispersion, complex subject matter and overall identity must be addressed through physical development, transportation solutions, managerial capacity and promotional resources. Each of these is critically important, and a design solution alone will not be sufficient to affect the desired results.

Finally, if the PARK and related properties are viewed through the lens of active and passive recreation uses, the following are important considerations:

- Generally, the infrastructure to support recreation use is limited and does not present a “destination” profile to users not already familiar with downtown New London/Groton.
- As mentioned above, the physical dispersion of the historical sites makes developing and promoting an image for the PARK and attractions a complicated task.
- However, the potential for creation of more extensive recreational facilities at the Waterfront Park Recreation Area could serve as both an attractor for repeat use by locals and as an image enhancer for those less familiar with the Thames Maritime Heritage Park’s event uses.

Creation of a Sustainable Thames Maritime Heritage Park

For the PARK to become marketable as a destination, it will need to develop a mixture of active and passive uses around which an operations organization can be developed. At this point in the analysis, the following levels of additional activity are nominated as a minimum “threshold” for achieving an image-able PARK that can attract a sustained level of use:

1. Private, consistently operated boat tour or similar packaged means of touring the attractions within the PARK;
2. 2 – 3 Additional waterfront events per year, filling out the summer season;
3. Signature recurring event(s) or attraction, to function like “Waterfire” in Providence;
4. Self-guided daylight tour of historical locations (including such things as “talking houses/talking streets”);
5. Infrastructure enhancements to facilitate passive PARK recreation;
6. A unified approach to promotion including a logo, signage and advertising tags and slogans for the PARK and other related attractions.

While the design and construction of facilities and infrastructure will be required, it is also clear that a number of basic management tasks must be accomplished in order for the PARK operations to be sustainable and for desired impacts on downtown New London to be realized. The absolute level of management activities will vary with the extent of development and the target audiences selected, but the most basic functions must be provided for development of the PARK to be meaningful for the city and its residents of both New London and Groton, justifying the investment in PARK development. The categories of management activities required are:

- Executive leadership – which sets the operational goals for the PARK, conducts planning, seeks funding and supervises programs, maintenance and marketing activities.
- Coordination and liaison – which establishes and maintains the relationships between the significant participants in the PARK and downtown.
- Marketing and promotion – which establishes the identity of the PARK in the public mind and conducts activities designed specifically to stimulate its use.
- Program staffing – which provides programs for PARK visitors and users and facilitates use of the PARK for events.

Given the current municipal budget constraints, it is likely that a hybrid approach to meeting these management requirements will be taken. Because several organizations currently exist in downtown New London or are active in the PARK (including the state park operations, New London Mainstreet, and the City Center District) one approach would be to build organizational capacity by adding limited staffing and program budget for the PARK in coordination and extension of these existing efforts. Some possibilities include:

- Cost and personnel sharing with existing organizations, allowing part-time positions to become full-time through added responsibilities and budget;
- Obtaining grants or other financial support for extending the organizational capability of one or more existing organizations to serve the needs of the PARK;
- Creation of a minimal executive structure, possibly with a governing board or policy body, to coordinate the activities of existing organizations with specific reference to the activities in the PARK, and/or;
- Further cooperative education and recreation programming ventures with the local schools (reportedly being done in part by Five Rivers Consortium and Thames River Heritage 2005).

If organizational capacity is developed in this way, it will be possible to provide at least the minimum level of management, coordination and funding necessary to operate the PARK. A longer term goal could be to create a permanent, stand-alone organization dedicated to PARK operations and programming. However, in the short term this approach presents some challenges:

- It will be difficult to ensure continuity of funding, staffing and programs from year to year;
- Shared personnel will be accountable to more than one institutional “boss;”
- The various cooperating organizations may share annual peak periods of activity and programming, stressing the capacity of the hybrid structure to provide all of the service required, and;
- It may be unclear who is primarily responsible for advocating for the PARK and maintaining the vision for its development and use.

An alternative approach, possibly more radical in its organizational and political ramifications, would be to eradicate the current working distinctions between the downtown New London commercial district and the PARK, combining resources, operations and “branding” to create one unified destination attraction. Although the initiation of this approach would require significant efforts at developing a consensus among the players, the potential benefits are substantial. If downtown New London and the PARK attractions (including those in Groton) could be positioned, programmed and promoted in a consistent manner as a single destination, the number of attractive events and experiences sharing the location’s identity would be significantly larger, resources devoted to advertising and promotion could be increased, and the range of visitors and users attracted to New London/Groton would potentially be broadened considerably. In general terms, a new organization would be developed, by redirecting funding, staffing and governance structures from the existing organizations, that would carry the mandate of operating, programming and promoting the downtown and the PARK as one “branded” destination. This approach would have the effect of:

- Maximizing the effectiveness of the limited available funds for downtown and the PARK;
- Clarifying and enhancing the promotional messages for all of New London and the related Groton properties and increasing the available resources for advertising and promotion, and;
- Providing a single organization with a clear purpose, effective governance and adequate staffing to accomplish the goals established for downtown and the PARK.

As the design team has expressed previously, the level of organizational and managerial support that can be created for the PARK will have a direct impact on the types and the level of development specified in the overall development plan. Therefore, a consensus on the desired approach(s) to providing the management and staffing capabilities for the PARK must be reached so that realistic designs can be developed.