

Heritage park plan advances

Local architect firm hired
to design visitors center

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New London — After a nearly 14-month delay, state officials have hired a Norwich architectural firm to design the \$2.6 million visitors center and museum that is the linchpin of the Thames River Estuary Heritage Park project.

The state Department of Public Works hired Richard Sharpe Associates to design the center, which will feature exhibits of the region's maritime history as well as provide maps and other information about attractions on the park tour.

Local officials, who have been waiting since the state Bond Commission released funding in November 1990, said they are relieved that the largest component of the project can get under way.

"It has been a very frustrating process so far," said New London Director of Development and Planning Bruce G. Hyde. "I know public works has a lot of projects and I'm sure they did the best they possibly could, but this process has been cumbersome.

"That is the thing that is going to draw people into this and keep them coming back," he said.

Rep. Thomas G. Moukawsher, D-Groton, whose district includes many of the proposed park tour sites on both sides of the Thames, said Hartford has to be ready to make the project a reality.

"We have been pressing the department for many months to try and put this on a higher priority level. While we have gotten positive responses, we have not, until now, gotten results," Moukawsher said.

The state made its selection last week, one day after Gov. Lowell P. Weicker Jr. visited the region to discuss its economic future. "I think that the

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governor's presence here and his announced interest in getting things in our region moving could only have been a positive influence in making this a priority," Moukawsher added.

Along with Richard Sharpe Associates, which designed the Norwich Superior Court building, the state also has hired Museum Design Associates of Salem, Mass., to plan exhibits at the center, and Coulter and Delaney, a local public relations firm, to promote the center.

City and state officials are expected to meet with the architects in the next two weeks to define the scope of the design work, Hyde said.

Lower costs

The delay could have a positive effect, Hyde added, noting that since November 1990, the continued economic slump has driven down construction costs.

The Heritage Park project, most of which is being overseen by the state Department of Environmental Protection, involves nautical and walking tours of historic sites on both sides of the Thames River.

Proposed sites for the tour include Fort Griswold State Park, the USS Nautilus, the Naval Submarine Base, New London Ledge Lighthouse and New London Harbor Lighthouse, the Custom House, Whale Oil Row, Fort Trumbull and the Coast Guard Academy. d