

Lewes plans historic day in the park

By Bruce Pringle
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It is still a work in progress, but Lewes' new park is ready for boaters, walkers and anyone with a penchant for waterfront relaxation.

From its just-opened docks and spanking-new boardwalk to its yet-to-bloom flowers, the first phase of the city's 1.2-acre getaway on the Front Street side of the Lewes and Rehoboth Canal will be christened Saturday. The dedication of the park is scheduled for 5:30 p.m. The public is invited.



Lewes Canalfront Park, as it is officially known, opened to boaters last weekend. Pedestrians were welcome, too, though they sometimes had to step around the boxes of plants being placed, painstakingly, into the ground by a crew from Clean Cut Interlocking Pavers.

"These guys," Lewes Mayor Jim Ford noted as he conducted a Friday-morning tour, "are planting them one at a time."

And Lewes, too, is taking a one-at-a-time approach to the park, which awaits shade arbors, more walkways, restrooms and an overlook -- and that's just in the existing section.

Someday, if ambitious dreams come true, the park will encompass 17 acres and feature a hall for community gatherings, a gazebo for low-key outdoor concerts, an educational trail through the wetlands, and more.

Saturday, though, will be a time to celebrate what's in place and how it got there.

The "what" will be obvious, especially to folks who remember when the spot was, as Ford put it, "basically a lot of dump site."

It was a former boatyard, a site of deteriorating buildings, an uninviting patch between the quietly upscale Inn at Canal Square and Lewes' bustling, state-run boat launch.

To many people, anything new proposed for the property might have seemed like an improvement. But when developers said they wanted to build stores and housing there, a vocal group of Lewes residents objected. They argued that private, commercial use of the land was a waste of a potential public treasure. Then they put their energy and their money behind their arguments.

They organized, they fought, they raised the more than \$4.1 million that has been spent on the park so far.

They will be thanked Saturday -- the 800-plus residents and business owners who gave money, the volunteers who gave time and ideas, the government agencies and nonprofit foundations that gave grants.

The day-to-day operation of the park will be overseen by a 67-year-old salt, Marty Whitaker, who started work May 24 as dockmaster.

Whitaker spent eight years in the Navy before launching a career in construction in southeastern

Pennsylvania. In his spare time, he was chief mechanic on a 200-foot-long Portuguese-made tall ship and a member of one of the last crews to sail New Jersey's Barnegat Lightship. When he finally retired from construction, he went right back to work -- aboard the ships of the Cape May-Lewes Ferry.

Now, Whitaker talks like a guy who has found the job of a lifetime.

"I can't think of a better place than this," he said of the park.

Whitaker's new position, he said, is "a culmination of my history with the water, my background in construction and my can-do attitude. I'm Navy, I can do. Don't tell me I can't, I'll prove you wrong."

His exact role is "gonna be made up as we go along," he said. "My hours will float with whatever the need will be."