

Canalfront Park in Lewes dedicated with fanfare

By Henry J. Evans Jr.

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With a deep-lunged growl of pure elation, Lewes Mayor Jim Ford declared the first phase of the city's Canalfront Park open to the public at 6:27 p.m., Saturday, June 2.

Ford preceded his yelp of joy with explanation that he had earned the privilege and is, after all, the city's mayor.

The Cape Henlopen High School Jazz Band set an upbeat tempo for the event, preceding comments from those who worked to help make the nearly decade-long process leading to the park's opening a reality.

Ford was joined in the celebration at the park's new dockside facility by a host of state and local dignitaries including Gov. Ruth Ann Minner, U.S. Rep. Mike Castle, state Sen. Gary Simpson, state Rep. Joe Booth, Sussex County Councilman Lynn Rogers and numerous others.

Beneath nearly perfect skies hundreds gathered to witness the park's opening and celebration of completion of the first of three phases.

A brief history

Dennis Forney, campaign co-chairman of the Friends of the Lewes Canalfront Park, provided a 3,000-year history of the land in the canalfront area.

"There are Native Americans living along the shore of the creek here. They were gathering mussels, they were gathering oysters, they were living the good life that the Delmarva Peninsula offers," Forney said.

Forney's historical chronicle moved through the eras of European arrival, Lewes shipbuilding and ship pilots setting up homes along Pilottown Road.

"We had people that came in and found the mighty, mighty schools of menhaden that would show up each year," Forney said of the oil-rich fish that led to the creation of fish factories along Lewes' southern shores.

"For dozens of decades, the town thrived off the harvesting of menhaden. At this site a boatyard was set up and the purse-seiners would bring their boats right up the creek and they would be hauled out on a railroad right into this park," said Forney.

A structure in the park was once a net house used to repair menhaden fishing

nets.

“There’s a lot of history that we’ve seen along this canal,” said Forney. But change came. The fish factories, clam processing and chicken processing plants had all seen their day.

“They went away and property values started to rise. The boatyard that was here was a site where people scraped the bottoms of their boats and dropped paint on the ground. It was a vital part of the community,” Forney said.

He said Jim Kiernan and Ron Moore saw value in the canalfront property and thought it would be prime for retail and residential development.

“All of a sudden Lewes looked around and said, ‘Gosh, that’s really not what we have in mind for that area,’” Forney said.

He said after lengthy discussions between the city’s planning commission, mayor and council, Kiernan, Moore and Dale Parsons, whose family owned the property, an idea developed.

“Hundreds of people in the community came forward and they pledged hundreds of dollars, they pledged tens of dollars, and they pledged thousands of dollars, to get a fund-raising effort off the ground to raise more than \$2 million to buy this property and proceed with the development of a marvelous park,” Forney said.

He said a committee selected Philadelphia-based world-class landscape architectural firm Andropogon Associates, to design the park.

“We think when this park is finished, it will be about the greenest park in the state of Delaware,” Forney said of Andropogon’s design.

Financial partners

Forney said the park represents a cooperative effort of public and private contributions. He said that when the project was first conceived, then-Mayor George H.P. Smith, led a delegation to Washington, D.C., to meet with then-Sen. Bill Roth.

“The mayor was so adamant about going over and garnering as much support as we possible could. That support has continued through our congressional delegation; Congressman Castle and Senators (Joe) Biden and (Tom) Carper,” said Forney. The park has received more than \$4 million in state and federal funding.

Joseph Schell, Friends of the Canalfront Park Campaign chairman, said the park has made outstanding progress because more than 700 people supported

the idea.

“What you see before you is wonderful compared to what was here four or five years ago. But what is going to be here two or three years from now is really going to be amazing. It will be a treasure not only for this city and this county but for this state,” said Schell.

In addition to grants received from the Longwood Foundation and Welfare Foundation Inc., Cape Henlopen School District students, in a Pennies for the Park campaign, collected 370,000 pennies to be used to purchase fishing and crabbing equipment for use by park visitors.

“Thank you for bringing a check and not the pennies,” said Ford as he accepted the \$3,700 check from pennies program coordinator Barbara Passikoff.

The park’s next construction phase will add rest room facilities, a canal overlook, shade arbors, walkways and lighting. Work should begin this fall and be complete for use by visitors next summer.

Schell said the park’s final phase would stretch the facility along the canal beyond the lightship Overfalls.

“All of the residents of Lewes, and all of the visitors to this town, will be able to enjoy the fruits that we have,” said Schell.

The final phase of the park will begin when the state has completed construction of a new public boat ramp to be located at the end of Pilottown Road. Plans call for removal of the existing boat ramp and parking lot and the installation of a Village Green, a gently sloped grassy area with plantings, pathways, and benches. The entire project is scheduled for completion in 2009.

A cooperative effort

Forney said development of the park wouldn’t have been possible without cooperation of the state’s Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control whose secretary, John Hughes, said land the park occupies was listed among the state’s brown fields – land parcels that have sustained environmental degradation.

“I was a mayor of Rehoboth Beach and I was always jealous of Lewes,” said Hughes of the way city residents pulled together to make the park happen.

Castle said Lewes’ leaders and residents have a talent for focusing on what they want to achieve and being unrelenting.

“I’m going to tell you how Lewes works. I don’t know anybody who does a better job of lobbying,” said Castle. He said the park represented the beginning

of one of the “great, improved greenways the state is going to see.”

Castle said Minner and Hughes have always shown great vision in working to retain open space in the state.

“We may be a small state but we’re the eighth most crowded state in the country,” Castle said.

Minner said the park, with its native plantings, state of the art stormwater management system and green design, is an example of what’s involved in creating a livable Delaware.

“How many of you were here eight or 10 years ago and are saying, ‘It was a polluted site. I can’t believe it could be done,’” said Minner.

Public appreciation

Following the opening the public roamed the park – reminded to remain on the walkways to give recently planted grass an opportunity to grow.

“I think it’s fabulous. We waited a long time and we’re very appreciative of the efforts that went into it. I’m particularly happy for our grandchildren who will inherit it someday,” said Pilottown Village resident Helga Gayowski.

Joan Scone lives in Pennsylvania and also has a home in Lewes as she’s watched the park progress.

“It’s really something to look forward to. I, too, have grandchildren and I’m anxious to bring them down so they can enjoy it,” Scone said.

Matt Frawley and son Daniel, 7, of Wilmington, rode their bicycles across the canal bridge from the Nebraska Avenue home they’re staying in to attend the park opening.

“From what I see it’s gorgeous. It’s going to be a great place for families to bring their children and a great attraction for Lewes,” said Matt.

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6/5/07