

Ground broken on first phase of Seaford's Oyster House Park along the Nanticoke

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Dec 2nd,
2020

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Randall Larrimore, chair of the board for the Chesapeake Conservancy, left, and Seaford Mayor David Genshaw break ground on the Oyster House Park project Tuesday. (Submitted photo/Trisha Newcomer)

SEAFORD — Project partners broke ground Tuesday on Phase 1 of the revitalization of the old J.B. Robinson Oyster House site along the Seaford River Walk, a multifaceted initiative that links the city's past, present and future.

Seaford Mayor David Genshaw and Chesapeake Conservancy Board Chair Randall Larrimore were on hand to mark the groundbreaking.

“We are very excited this day is here — the kickoff of the first phase of the development of the Oyster House Park,” said Mayor Genshaw. “This project features numerous components, which are important to the city of Seaford, such as giving public access to the

Nanticoke River, promoting our Seaford history, driving economic revitalization to our downtown, all while promoting and protecting the environment of our Nanticoke River.”

This initial phase will be focused on enhancing access to the Nanticoke River. The bulkhead will be reconstructed to stabilize the shore, a living shoreline will be planted, and the Seaford River Walk will be extended an additional block with fishing nooks for community use.

Other new community amenities include a performance deck, boat-docking facilities and a kayak launch. This phase is anticipated to be complete by the spring, with public use available by summer 2021.

The project is financed through a mix of private and public resources, including:

- State transportation funding allocated by state Rep. Daniel Short, R-Seaford, and state Sens. Brian Pettyjohn, R-Georgetown, and Bryant Richardson, R-Seaford.
- Funding from the Delaware Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control, the Longwood Foundation, Crystal Trust, the Welfare Foundation and REI.

“I really think the key part of this story is the city of Seaford is really just a conduit for this whole thing. Yes, the property is located in Seaford, and it celebrates Seaford’s history,” Mayor Genshaw said. “But really, the Chesapeake Conservancy is the group that is driving this, with their funding and federal connections. Fortunately, the Chesapeake Conservancy is well-connected and well-respected. That is an important piece to that.”

In 2018, the Chesapeake Conservancy, a nonprofit based in Annapolis, Maryland, partnered with the city of Seaford and the Mount Cuba Center to purchase and donate the 1-acre waterfront parcel.

Chesapeake Conservancy then worked with the city in a yearlong public-planning and comment-period process to seek community input that was incorporated into a draft master plan for the Oyster House Park.

In late February 2020, Seaford City Council approved a master plan calling for four stages of the park’s construction.

Through resources raised by the conservancy, construction bid documents were designed and released last summer, and, after a competitive bidding process, the Dissen & Juhn Co. was chosen for the first phase of the project.

There is a local connection linking Seaford’s past to the Chesapeake Conservancy and to Mr. Larrimore, a Seaford native who now resides in New Jersey. Mr. Larrimore’s father — Randall Avery Larrimore — was the city’s mayor in the late 1950s.

“So Randy got involved, and he just has a passion that somebody not from here wouldn’t

have. He has this commitment to want to do something to give back to his hometown,” Mayor Genshaw said. “I don’t know that this project would have gotten this far this quickly without his involvement.”

Phase 1 is essentially the extension of the River Walk and shoreline improvements.

“The challenge with (this) piece of property is the city of Seaford has infrastructure. It’s a sewer pipe that runs right in the center of it. The cost to move that pipe ... up off the flood plain, north off the waterfront, that alone is \$1.2 million just to move the pipe,” said Mayor Genshaw.

Subsequent phases are planned to take place over a five-year period, with each phase focused on providing benefits for the community that can be enjoyed immediately upon completion.

“I think we are looking probably around somewhere in that \$4 (million) to \$6 million range by the time this thing is all done,” Mayor Genshaw said.

The park complements a significant number of other conservation projects downstream and along the Nanticoke River, one of the few tributaries to the Chesapeake Bay that has remained unspoiled and offers an area of very high biological diversity.

Through partnerships with the U.S. Department of Defense Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration Program, The Conservation Fund, The Nature Conservancy, the Mount Cuba Center, the Sussex County Land Trust, the Nanticoke River Watershed Conservancy and others, the Chesapeake Conservancy has helped protect 2,700 acres in 19 projects across the corridor linking Vienna, Maryland, to Seaford.

These 19 projects link to other previously conserved properties and refuges, which creates 19,300 total acres of safeguarded land in the Nanticoke River watershed, resulting in a powerful impact on the environment.

“Partnering with the Chesapeake Conservancy, along with Mount Cuba, has blessed our city, and we cannot thank them enough for their leadership on this project,” Mayor Genshaw said.

“Seaford is a truly unique gateway to the Nanticoke River and an ideal location for fishing and recreation,” said U.S. Sen. Chris Coons, D-Del. “I’m thrilled that Seaford residents will soon have better public access to the beautiful river, which honors a rich cultural history as an important part of our state. As someone who spent a lot of time in local government doing land-use planning, I know how challenging this process can be, and I’m grateful to Mayor Genshaw and all the community partners who’ve made this project a reality.”

“The National Park Service has worked with Chesapeake Conservancy for more than five

years to document, protect and share the importance of the Nanticoke River's cultural and natural resources with the public. Seaford offers the public a key spot to start exploring the Nanticoke, one of the most pristine rivers in the region," said the National Park Service's Chesapeake Bay Office Superintendent Wendy O'Sullivan.

Mr. Larrimore added: "I am thrilled that the first phase of this park is underway. It will give people a reason to go downtown and enjoy our wonderful river. This project will have an even bigger, reverberating impact by inspiring visitors to help conserve the Nanticoke River and the Chesapeake Bay itself, adding to a growing movement to protect and restore 30% of the Chesapeake Bay watershed by 2030."

Chesapeake Conservancy President and CEO Joel Dunn agreed.

"The Seaford Oyster House Park will stand as a powerful example of how communities can leverage conservation and public access to natural assets like the Nanticoke River in order to provide new economic opportunities like outdoor recreation and tourism and, in turn, help to transform communities themselves," he said.

Mayor Genshaw said the park project joins other revitalization initiatives in Seaford.

"There is a lot going on in Seaford right now, and there has been for some time," he said. "If you add up the millions of dollars just being invested between (the Sussex Montessori School), this project and what we have going on in the industrial park, the Residences at Riverplace, people are dumping a ton of money investing in Seaford. There are some really good revitalization things happening."

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