

Heritage park, water taxi mark end of first season

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New London — The group promoting the Thames River Heritage Park marked the end of the first season of regular water taxi service on the river with an event Friday at Fort Trumbull that celebrated its accomplishments to date and setting future goals.

Jacalyn Dietrich, co-owner of Thames River Water Taxi LLC, said Monday that the service ferried 1,500 to 1,800 passengers between Fort Trumbull and City Pier in New London and Fort Griswold in Groton during its inaugural season. The service began in mid-June and concluded in mid-September, running on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays.

“It was about what we expected, because of the late start to the season,” Dietrich said.

The service is being run by Dietrich and her husband, David. They plan to return next year but will start the service on Memorial Day weekend.

Next year, she said, the service will offer more river tours for school groups, wedding parties and private groups, making use of both of the refurbished Navy vessels being used as water taxis.

“There are a lot of possibilities,” she said.

The water taxi service is a key element tying the park together. The park comprises more than a dozen existing historical and cultural sites on the Groton and New London sides of the river.

Chris Cox, president of the Thames River Heritage Park Foundation, said the group will continue meeting through the winter and spring to plan for next season and build up the infrastructure of the park. The group also has begun exploring possible state, federal and private funding sources for a dock at the Submarine Force Museum at the Naval Submarine Base in Groton, which would expand the taxi's route upriver. The Navy, he said, has agreed to maintain the dock once it's built.

"We need about \$700,000 to build a dock for the water taxi," he said.

Expanding service to the Submarine Force Museum and its signature attraction, the Nautilus, would give the heritage park access to some of the 150,000 people per year who visit that site, Cox noted.

The foundation, he said, has obtained nonprofit status and is working with the state Department of Transportation as well as New London and Groton City to install signs on highways and local roads for the park. It also is seeking grants from foundations and other private sources to enable it to hire staff and do more promotion.

Groton City Mayor Marian Galbraith, vice president of the board, said plans are underway to increase ridership on the water taxi next year with improvements to the boats and partnerships with other groups to promote the service. This winter and spring, she said, board members will focus on honing the main themes of the park and how they will be presented to visitors.

The challenge, she said, is finding the thread that connects the various sites, which date from the 1700s through the 20th century, into a coherent story of the region that park visitors can appreciate.

“We really need to define and package the park experience and draw the various sites in,” she said. “We need to define what the park message is that we’re trying to get across.”

The board will meet again in mid-November. By January, Cox said, he hopes the group will be able to make some major announcements.

In remarks at the gathering Friday, Cox reviewed the history of the park, progress to date and laid out the challenges ahead. Among attendees at the gathering was Susan Whalen, deputy commissioner of the state Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, which has two sites in the park, Fort Trumbull State Park in New London and Fort Griswold State Park in Groton.

“History is never over,” he began. “As the board, and the many friends of the Thames River Heritage Park, have accomplished a demonstrable success with the water taxi, we must now find the funds to connect with the Nautilus at the Submarine Force Museum to make business sustainable. ... and, as a service to our extraordinary state and local historic sites, we feel the mandate to produce an experience that will develop the educational and economic dynamic that we were conceived to address. It is just the beginning of what the Thames River Heritage Park can accomplish.”

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