

PREMIUM DOWNTOWN

Construction begins on Tom Lee Park's boardwalk

By [Bill Dries](#), Daily Memphian

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The Memphis Flyway boardwalk and observation deck will open in 2026. (Memphis River Parks Partnership)

Memphis River Parks Partnership is planning an elevated, unobstructed view of the Mississippi River from the Memphis mainland.

To that end, it broke ground Thursday, June 6, on a 218-foot-long observation deck on the southern end of Tom Lee Park.

The \$10.4 million “Memphis Flyway” will branch off the park’s southernmost path where the land rises and becomes Ashburn-Coppock Park, which joins and overlooks Tom Lee.

Redesigned Tom Lee Park ready for debut

From the north-south paved path where Tom Lee becomes Ashburn-Coppock, the east-west flyway takes a few gradual turns over the brush-covered embankment to the river’s edge on its way to a platform that provides sweeping river views.



The Memphis Flyway boardwalk and observation deck to be completed and open in 2026 is where Tom Lee Park meets Ashburn Coppock Park, taking several curves as the park land begins to rise to the south.

(Memphis River Parks Partnership)

During the river's annual fluctuation, which can swing 52 feet in a year, the platform will sometimes be over the river's surface.

The project is funded by the Tennessee Heritage Conservation Trust Fund, the Tennessee Department of Transportation, the U.S. Economic Development Administration and an anonymous donor.

The flyway, which will meet federal Americans with Disabilities Act standards and be free to the public, is scheduled to be completed and open in 2026.

It will be part of a park environment that on the southern end is intended to be more solitary with spaces to explore the riverfront's natural scenery. That includes the "Habitat Terrace" with an outdoor classroom on a wooden deck, pollinator plantings for school field trips and a "sound garden."



Local leaders broke ground Thursday, June 6, where Tom Lee Park meets Ashburn-Coppock Park for the Memphis Jetway project. The dirt marks where the entrance to the boardwalk begins that ends with an overlook offering an unobstructed view of the Mississippi River. (The Daily Memphian)

The recently completed \$61-million redesign of the park includes native plants and trees throughout.

Areas in the center and on the north end are more geared toward public gatherings and programmed activities. The park's centerpiece, the "Sunset Canopy," features a covered area for basketball, pickleball and even musical and dance performances.



The Memphis Flyway project is to be completed in 2026. (Memphis River Parks Partnership)

The natural area begins further south at the Tom Lee memorial and continues south past the pale rip-rap rocks that accentuate the statue of Lee reaching from his boat to pull in a person.

Studio Gang and SCAPE, the companies who planned and oversaw the park's larger redesign, designed the flyway.

A flyway — then called a “canopy walk” — emerged as part of the park's redesign in 2019 as a replacement for a “Habitat Tower” in the same general place.

Memphis skaters celebrate Tyre Nichols' birthday

The tower would have provided an overhead view of the river and a nesting site for migrating birds.

The tower was removed from the updated plans shown in May 2020. Soon after, the canopy walk was put on hold as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers expressed concern about the park's ongoing stability.

Partnership president and CEO Carol Coletta called the Jetway project a “miracle baby” during because of its difficult journey.

Tom Lee Park was expanded to about 25 acres from 5 acres starting in 1989 as part of a Corps project to stabilize the eastern bank of the Mississippi River and protect it from powerful river currents undercutting it.

The Corps built a stone dike out into the river, and fill material was placed behind the dike to raise the land's elevation so it could be used as part of the larger city park.

Prior to that, Tom Lee and Ashburn-Coppock were separated by a thin section of riverfront land called John B. Edgar Point that brought the river much closer to Riverside Drive.

Tom Lee Park design retooled to suit mediation, Corps of Engineers

A section of the dike later collapsed. That sunken part of the park remains a “no cut, no fill zone” as a result of renewed Corp concerns in 2020 that the area “could creep with time.” That according to Corp documents The Daily Memphian obtained at the time in a request for records on the project.

Corps restrictions on the area, as presented in a Feb. 18, 2020, meeting, included no modifications to the stone dike wall; no concentration of water flows over the dike wall; no areas of cut (removing dirt) in the park; restricting any fill to 150 feet inland from the dike wall; and no structures extending over the dike wall.



The boardwalk broke ground on Thursday, June 6. (Bill Dries/The Daily Memphian)

The Army Corps approved the new plans, said Art Davis, MRPP chief operating officer.

“It has its own foundation. We worked with the Corps of Engineers ... to make sure we don’t do any damage. It’s really just a different foundation and they are not connected at all,” he said. “It originally had some suspension lines. But through consultation with engineers ... it was decided it was better to have a foundation.”

The path of the flyway is to be built on the side of the escarpment or the slope where the park’s elevation changes suddenly. Three steel mast column bundles support the boardwalk.

There were other talks about the lighting of the platform to make sure riverboat operators aren’t blinded by the lights at night.

“It was important for us to get their approvals and then it was important that we design a project we could actually plan for and build,” Coletta said.

Former Daily Memphian Reporter Wayne Risher contributed to this story.

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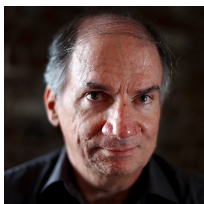
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Bill Dries covers city and county government and politics. He is a native Memphian and has been a reporter for more than 40 years.