



Riverside friends form conservancy for park's future



Members of Friends of Riverside Park gather at the park Tuesday for the announcement of the formation of the Riverside Park Conservancy.

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New London - Two months after leading the referendum defeat of the Coast Guard Academy's proposal to purchase and develop half of Riverside Park, organizers of the Friends of Riverside Park political action committee have formed a conservancy to continue efforts to preserve, maintain and improve the park.

"No part of Riverside Park is for sale, and we affirm that now," said Kathleen Mitchell, who is chairwoman of the Riverside Park Conservancy, incorporated with the Connecticut secretary of the state on Dec. 23. "These 18 acres belong to this and all future generations of New Londoners."

She spoke to about two dozen supporters who gathered at noon Tuesday in the park's amphitheater. The group, which is seeking nonprofit 501(c)(3) status, will continue to host cleanups and events at the park but will put special focus this year on improving the upper part of the park, adjacent to the academy property, she said. That includes seeking grants and donations to fix a steep, unsafe stairway that connects the park to Winthrop Magnet Elementary School, a project that could cost as much as \$100,000.

The conservancy's announcement comes amid renewed discussions about the academy's need to expand and was timed to send a message that the group would oppose any new offer from the Coast Guard for part of the park.

"We have nothing against the Coast Guard," Mitchell said. "Our only concern is conserving the park for future generations."

The superintendent of the academy has scheduled meetings with city officials in both New London and Norwich about possible sites, following statements last week by the head of the Coast Guard, Adm. Robert J. Papp, that the

academy has reached its capacity and there are functions that the Coast Guard "could justifiably and reasonably look at moving to other locations."

Mayor Daryl Justin Finizio said the group's announcement will not affect his plans to meet Jan. 17 with Coast Guard Rear Adm. Sandra L. Stosz, the academy superintendent.

"The formation of the Riverside Park Conservancy group will not affect future plans or discussions with the Coast Guard," he said in a statement emailed to The Day. "The Riverside Park Conservancy group is an excellent group of concerned citizens. The administration is committed to an open dialogue in good faith and I praise the group for their service and dedication to the city and Riverside Park."

In the referendum, voters turned down the Coast Guard Academy's offer to pay the city \$2.9 million for half the park by a 19-vote margin, 2,098 to 2,079. The academy proposed expanding into the property and using it for new training programs and facilities.

Former Board of Education member Ronna Stuller, one of the PAC leaders and now the treasurer of the conservancy, said forming the new group is the start of making good on pledges not to let the park be forgotten after the referendum.

"We made a promise that Riverside Park would never fall into disuse and disrepair again and that we would help relieve the city of the entire burden" of taking care of the property along the Thames River. She noted that donations to the PAC came from all parts of the city, not just the surrounding neighborhood.

"This struck a chord with New London throughout our city," she said.



Kathleen Mitchell, right, chairman of the Riverside Park Conservancy, formally announces the creation of the conservancy Tuesday at the park.

Stuller said reconnecting the park to Winthrop School, which reopened Jan. 3 after renovations turned it into a STEM school - for science, technology, engineering and mathematics - is particularly important to her. The park could be used as an outdoor classroom to teach lessons in environmental sciences, which could help attract students from the city and out-of-town, she said.

The conservancy announcement began with Charles Gray-Wolf, a member of the local drama group Flock Theater, reading Robert Frost's poem, "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening." In closing, Mitchell paraphrased the poem's most famous line.

"The Friends of Riverside Park Conservancy still has miles to go and promises to keep, and we intend on keeping our

commitment," she said.

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