

Debating the future of Riverside Park

A neighborhood is transformed into a park conservancy

Kevin Lester is deputy chairman of the Board of Riverside Park Conservancy, and a neighbor of the park.

By KEVIN LESTER

As a neighbor and longtime supporter of Riverside Park, I am grateful to see New Londoners involved in a serious discussion about how the city can invest in the park, rather than whether it should bother to do so. I am disappointed, however, that the conversation fails of late to address fundamental issues and revolves instead around the possible relocation of a playscape.

The Riverside Park Conservancy opposes moving the playscape currently at Veterans Field into Riverside Park. The price quote for removal, site work and reinstallation is \$56,636, which will negatively impact New London's already stressed city finances. At a cost of over \$90,000, an identical playscape was installed three blocks away at the corner of Crystal Avenue and State Pier Road and there is a similar one next to Riverside Park at Winthrop Magnet School. Participants at park planning sessions have advocated for more interesting equipment that would take advantage of the park's landscape and offer a different kind of recreation.

In March 2012 the state Department of Economic and Community Development awarded a one-year grant to New London Landmarks for a "creative placemaking" project to explore ways to revitalize the Hodges Square neighborhood. Landmarks' coalition partners include the City of New London, University of Connecticut's Community Research and Design Collaborative, Thames Valley Sustainable Connections, Riverside Park Conservancy, neighbors, business principals, artists, community organizers and many passionate citizens. Part of the grant is designated for the development of a master plan essential for the revitalization of Riverside Park.

The park is a key asset of the neighborhood. Three landscape architects — Peter Miniutti, director, and Madeline Schad (UConn CRDC) and Brian Kent (Kent+Frost), whose local successes include the Ocean Beach nature walk and Hygienic Art Park — are sharing their enthusiasm and expertise at no cost to the city as they help us design and plan the fu-

ture of Riverside Park.

On Feb. 13 the preliminary master plan will be presented to the public. It is the result of numerous planning sessions which were held in 2012 at Winthrop School, the Old Town Mill and the Polish American Club, where every attendee was given the opportunity to contribute ideas. The final plan, setting out measurable goals and timelines, will be presented in late spring.

Riverside Park has not been left idly waiting for the master plan to be developed. Grant money has been secured for restroom improvements, and park maintenance has increased dramatically thanks to volunteers and the city's Public Works Department. Last fall, I joined a group of volunteers who planted more than 2,000 daffodil bulbs in Riverside Park. In addition, a colorful swath of flowers replaced the weeds outside the park walls on Crystal Avenue and Adelaide Street, planted by members of the Riverside Park Conservancy and recognized by the New London Beautification Committee. Come next spring — and every year thereafter — the park will bloom in a rainbow of color.

All over the country, park conservancies are forming with the purpose of relieving distressed cities from the financial burden of caring for their valuable open spaces. Riverside Park Conservancy is a 501(c)(3) public charity, allowing it to receive tax-deductible contributions from individuals and apply for government and foundation grants.

The Riverside Park Conservancy is committed to securing funding for Riverside Park's needs: realignment of roads and paths; management of storm water in the park and surrounding neighborhood; access to the park by the community, and from the park to the waterfront; restoration of native plants; community gardens; and, of course, play equipment.

Please attend the next Riverside Park planning session on Wednesday at 6:30 p.m. in the Winthrop School library. Come learn about the work that's been done and share in the cultivation of a bright future for the park.