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Bristol parks accessibility project progresses

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By **Marin Howell**

BRISTOL — Town officials and community members in Bristol are continuing to explore options for making three of the town’s parks easier for all to access and enjoy.

The project, which took off last year, is aimed at identifying ways to make Memorial, Sycamore and Eagle parks more accessible. A steering committee made up of several community members has in recent months worked with engineering

firm DuBois & King to assess existing conditions at the three parks.

The group has also begun gathering feedback from the community and plans to continue soliciting residents' input for the project as it unfolds.

“One of the things that I think is really important in the (request for proposals) was that the town wanted to make sure the contractor was engaging with the community at every step,” said Porter Knight, a Bristol resident involved in the project. “We wanted to make sure there was public input at every step because this is a community envisioning project.”

According to the request for proposals put out by the town, objectives of the project are to:

- assess existing park conditions and terrain to determine feasibility for accessible recreation,
- develop conceptual plans for each park illustrating potential recreation options and
- create detailed site design drawings and construction documents with construction cost estimates.

The Bristol selectboard earlier this year selected Dubois & King as the contractor to help tackle the project and agreed to allocate a portion of the town's American Rescue Plan Act funds to support the initiative.

“It's a fascinating project, and when we saw it coming across our desk as a request for proposals, we jumped right on it because it's at the interface of recreation, accessibility, community vitality as well as ecology,” said Dan Mallach of DuBois & King.

Initial phases of the project have so far included examining existing conditions at each of the parks — Memorial Park is off Route 17 toward South Starksboro, Sycamore Park is off Route 116 on the New Haven River, and Eagle Park is on Lincoln Road on the New Haven River above Bartlett Falls. DuBois & King visited each park with the steering committee this past spring. Mallach said in addition to looking at things like parking, pathways and way finder signage, the team is also trying to think more creatively and openly.

“The project is both very specific in terms of accessibility, and that is ADA accessibility potentially for wheelchair users or people using strollers or walkers or canes, but we're also taking a broad view of accessibility in terms of the diverse ways in

which people perceive and enjoy places,” Mallach explained.

He noted accessibility starts at home and that part of the team’s work includes looking at examples of other parks where information about the space and its amenities is available online.

“We’ve recognized that many families or individuals who are caregivers of folks with mobility challenges really do want to know what the parking and access experience and facilities and amenities will be like at a place before they leave home,” Mallach said.

He underscored that the project is an opportunity to more broadly consider how all visitors access and experience the three Bristol parks.

“While accessibility often is primarily discussed in terms of mobility challenges, and that is really at the foundation of the impetus for this project, the definition of accessibility is evolving to understand that people interact with the world in numerous, diverse ways,” he said. “That is built into this project; that as we support those with mobility challenges, we’re also trying to support those with other ways of interacting with the world and make them feel comfortable that if they were to visit one of these three parks, they’d have an experience that’s enjoyable in the manner that they find most useful and fun for themselves or those accompanying them.”

Mallach added that there is a “do no harm” aspect to the project in terms of the ecology of the parks, which are located along rivers and a part of river ecosystems.

GETTING FEEDBACK

The team’s work so far has also included efforts to engage with the community around the project. A survey was put together and distributed earlier this year, and Mallach pointed to recent conversations with individuals at the Bristol Farmers Market about their use of the parks and amenities they’d appreciate.

“We heard everything from ‘river water sometimes goes very quickly, and I would prefer calmer water,’ ‘I would prefer a place that’s easier to push a stroller around’ was another comment we heard from an individual who recently visited Eagle

Park with his family but would like to be able to access more of that park by stroller,” Mallach said. “That’s exactly the kind of feedback and information we’d like to hear.”

The team is currently working to develop specific design concepts for the project.

“In this design concepts phase we’re thinking about circulation that is logical and legible, that promotes a sense of aesthetic appeal while also recognizing that some people with mobility challenges or various environmental sensitivities don’t like to feel isolated,” Mallach said. “Right now, we’re thinking about the nuts and bolts of routes and amenities, and at the same time, still trying to think big.”

The team is also looking to continue gathering feedback from the community. Knight said the group plans to relaunch its survey through Front Porch Forum and posters around town. Community members can also learn more about the project and provide feedback during the Pocock Rocks Music Festival and Street Fair in Bristol on Aug. 17, where the Bristol Accessible Park Initiative will have a booth.

Mallach said that throughout the design concepts phase the team is working consider the cost of maintenance as well as installation and make sure steering committee members have an opportunity to offer feedback.

After refining and completing design concepts, DuBois & King will then transition into preparing construction documents.

“We want to make sure we get enough public feedback, we want to make sure that we do our due diligence even on the conceptual level, we want to continue to dream big and think of any possibilities at all and put them down on paper,” Mallach said.

DuBois & King hopes to present construction documents and cost estimates to the town this fall.

“Anything that is ultimately recommended through this project will be considered by the selectboard and the people of the town of Bristol when it comes to moving forward, but everything’s on the table right now, and that’s part of what’s exciting about the project,” Mallach said.

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