

Bridgeport Journal; A Long-Struggling City Happily Rediscovered a River and Seeks to Renew a Waterfront

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BRIDGEPORT, Conn., April 12 - Several centuries back, before this city rose and fell and then began its endless effort to rise again, before jobs and money and the middle class vanished and before the waterfront was walled off by industry and Interstate 95, a river ran unbroken from the valley to the sea.

It was the Pequonnock River, and it is still there, still running, if not unbroken. It flows all but unnoticed in places, behind rotted warehouses, around withered pilings and underneath rumbling roadways. In some spots it is dammed to a near standstill. Yet its essential course, connecting the uplands of the Pequonnock River Valley to Long Island Sound, remains this city's creaking spine.

Now, at its mouth and inland where it bends toward the city limits, the river also connects two of the newest of those endless efforts to make Bridgeport rise again.

One would be grand and transformative, a 52-acre project to build waterfront residential high-rise buildings and stores on a peninsula called Steel Point, directly south of I-95. Development of the site has been discussed for more than a decade, but supporters of the current project, who include Gov. M. Jodi Rell, say it now has renewed momentum, and they expect a groundbreaking this summer, thanks to political will and fresh financing toward its cost of more than \$1 billion.

Upriver, a second project for restoring life to the Pequonnock may be less ambitious, but it is farther along. On Wednesday, as part of a new program to encourage urban fishing, more than a dozen schoolchildren helped workers from the state's Department of Environmental Protection stock about 1,000 brook, brown and rainbow trout in the river where it is dammed at Bunnells Pond. The pond is a concrete-banked body of water between a four-lane highway and a sprawling park designed by the landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted that is now home to the Beardsley Zoo.

"It's surprising how many things live in that body of water," said Gregg Dancho, director of the zoo, as white noise from Route 8, the highway, hummed in the same big breeze that lofted the ring-billed gulls coasting and yawing overhead. "You wish the highway wasn't there, but there's nothing you can do about that."

Reconnecting residents to the rivers that run through some of the rustier sections of America's cities is hardly a new endeavor. Recapturing waterfronts for residential use, from Cleveland to Miami to New York City, has for decades been a focus of "in-fill" development, converting decayed old urban sites for new uses.

But in Connecticut, where glacier-made valleys and streams still shape transportation and development patterns, Bridgeport missed out on the momentum.

"Now that has changed," said Michael P. Nidoh, director of planning for the city. "You can't find land on the East Coast like we have in Bridgeport."

Daniel Pfeffer, president of Midtown Equities in New York, the lead developer of the Steel Point project as well as major projects in Miami and Baltimore, said: "Bridgeport's time has come. This is what we specialize in, taking challenging urban in-fill projects. I say 'challenging' because up until recently, people have tried and people have failed."

Something of an Industrial Age aberration in suburban Fairfield County, one of the nation's wealthiest regions, Bridgeport was on the brink of bankruptcy early in the 1990's. Yet its boosters -- a thriving species that needs no supplemental stocking -- have been declaring the city in renaissance since before Joseph P. Ganim went to prison in 2003 after a dozen years as mayor. He is serving a nine-year sentence for taking kickbacks from contractors, including some who were involved in the city's revitalization efforts.

Even as the city, an 80-minute train ride from Manhattan, has struggled with corruption, crime and unemployment, it also has gained a new stadium for its minor league baseball team, the Bridgeport Bluefish, and a new hockey arena, both with significant aid from the state. Downtown, at least three residential projects are in various stages of development, including the conversion of the old City Trust bank building on Main Street.

A transportation center under construction will link the train service on Metro-North's New Haven Line with local buses and the ferry to Port Jefferson, N.Y. A planned trolley system across the Pequonnock to the new Steel Point development, where the river meets Bridgeport Harbor, would also be linked.

Last month, Mrs. Rell announced \$8.5 million in new state aid to help the city buy some of the final parcels of land for Steel Point. She also promised \$750,000 to help dredge the harbor to increase container shipping.

Edward Lavernoch, who is managing the project for the city, said that the city and state have invested almost \$50 million, including the money Mrs. Rell announced last month, largely to acquire property and do environmental cleanup. He said government investment would rise to as much as \$290 million of the overall cost of \$1 billion or more. Land cleared long ago for the Steel Point project now grows weeds. It has been years since the state and the city paid to relocate residents and businesses from the site, and some questioned whether the project would ever go forward. Dreams of an Indian casino in the area have been abandoned, and property disputes still loom. But Mr. Pfeffer, the current developer, said his project, which would also include a marina and a public promenade, will indeed be built.

Up at Bunnells Pond on Wednesday, Luis Rivera wandered over to watch the pond being stocked with the help of the schoolchildren, students at the Barnum School, in advance of the beginning of trout-fishing season, which was yesterday.

The pond was drained for cleaning a few years ago and bounced back. It now provides spawning grounds for alewife and herring that make their way up the Pequonnock with the help of a fish ladder built over one dam by biologists with the Department of Environmental Protection.

With binoculars around his neck, Mr. Rivera recalled fishing the Pequonnock in the 1980's as a young man but said he had fished only in the Sound since then. This spring, however, he figured the fishing would be pretty good in this part of the river.

"It may be worth it to buy a \$20 license," Mr. Rivera said.

Photo: Steel Point, near Interstate 95 in Bridgeport, is the site of planned stores and high-rise condominiums. (Photo by Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times)

Map of Bridgeport, Connecticut, highlighting Steel Point development: Two projects at different ends of Bridgeport both involve the river.