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Site Superintendent Mike Patterson leads a tour of the Cohen SoundWaters Harbor Center at Bocuzzi Park in Stamford on March 31. The new facility is designed to support SoundWaters' Young Mariners, Harbor Corps and College Skills programs, with features including a research lab, job skills training workshop, classrooms for academic and sail training, and a safe waterfront with year-round access to Long Island Sound.

‘Bring the water back to Waterside’

SoundWaters project to create public access to Stamford Harbor

By Ignacio Laguarda

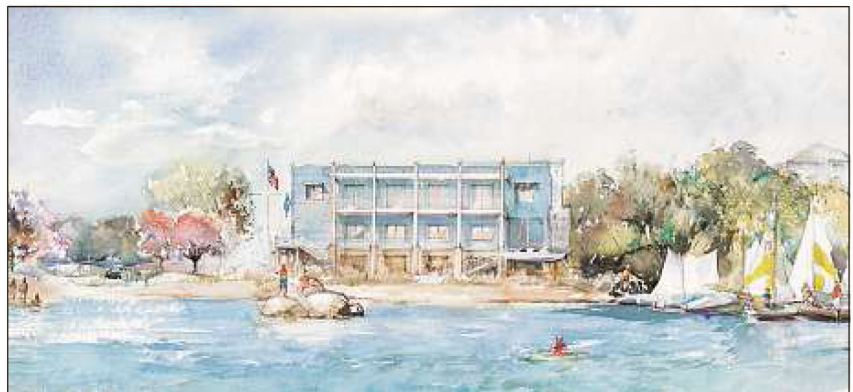
STAMFORD — A new state-of-the-art harbor education center is coming to Bocuzzi Park, but the building is only one piece of a project meant to create public access to Stamford Harbor and Long Island Sound.

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on protecting the Sound through advocacy and education. “To be able to actually get out on it and use it and be part of it ... you actually have to have a boat and have access and have skills.”

That’s where SoundWaters comes
See Center on A6



Contributed photo



Above, an artist’s rendering of the new Cohen SoundWaters Harbor Center at Bocuzzi Park in Stamford. At left, construction continues on the facility on March 31.

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in. The organization offers a number of programs primarily to school-aged children and teenagers to introduce them to the Sound.

This July, SoundWaters is expected to open a brand new \$8 million marine education and research center called the Cohen SoundWaters Harbor Center.

The center is not the only improvement planned for the area. The access road to the property will be replaced by one that lines up with Congress Street and will extend to the new center, where a parking lot will be built. Near the water, a crumbling parking lot and old chain-linked fence will be switched out for sand dunes and a small beach area with new wetland tree plantings.

Eventually, if the city secures enough funding, the adjacent playground, baseball field and tennis courts will also be upgraded, and a splash pad will be installed near the shore, plans show.

Once complete, the revamped park and waterfront will create a rare access point to the Sound for residents of Waterside.

That has been a long-standing goal for Shemitz, who recalled a motto she shared with Elaine Mitchell, former representative for Waterside on the Board of Representatives.

"Elaine Mitchell and I, years ago, we talked about 'Bring the water back to Waterside,'" Shemitz said. "There should be a way that people can actually get there."

The new 12,000-square-foot center will allow SoundWaters to expand its offerings, she said.

It will house three programs: Young Mariners, which teaches young students life skills through sailing; Harbor Corps, which offers maritime job skills training for young adults; and Research Intensive, a college-level marine research program for high school students. The center will also include launch access for SoundWaters' fleet of sailboats, and publicly available kayaks and paddleboards.

Long term, the idea is to have Stamford high school students use the facility as part of the school district's planned "career pathways" program which is set to debut in the fall, she said. The program was created to help students better transition into post-secondary life and gain real-life work experience.

The organization currently serves roughly 30,000 students each year. Shemitz said the hope is to expand that number to 45,000 with the new building.

Inside, the new structure



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Construction continues on the Cohen SoundWaters Harbor Center at Boccuzzi Park in Stamford on March 31. The new facility is designed to support SoundWaters' Young Mariners, Harbor Corps and College Skills programs, with features including a research lab, job skills training workshop, classrooms for academic and sail training, and a safe waterfront with year-round access to Long Island Sound.

includes a workshop area with access to an outdoor patio where boats can be lifted and brought into the space for repairs. Next to the workshop is a lab to be used by students in the research intensive program, as well as a large space on the second floor for the Young Mariners program.

A filming room with a green screen is also planned, in part because during the COVID-19 era, the organization conducted programs virtually and discovered it needed more high-tech surroundings.

SoundWaters has a collection of roughly 100 sailboats, an 80-foot schooner and a 24-foot boat referred to as the "research vessel." The boats are used for a variety of different programs as a way to get people on the water.

But sailing isn't really the point of the organization's mission, Shemitz said.

"You would think we really care about sailing," she said. "We actually really don't. It's a means to an end."

That "end" is providing education about the Sound, helping young people find maritime jobs and preparing high school students for a career in marine biology, to name a few of the goals attached to SoundWaters programs.

As work continues on the new building, the city is also investing in improvements to Boccuzzi Park, including beach restoration



SoundWaters President Leigh Shemitz shows the waterfront view from the new Cohen SoundWaters Harbor Center at Boccuzzi Park in Stamford.

in the form of sand dunes and public access to the water. Part of the city's budget for the upcoming fiscal year is a request of \$2.9 million for park improvements currently before the city's Board of Finance.

At a recent Board of Finance meeting, city engineer Lou Casolo said that money would go toward building a new road into the property, a new cul de sac and a "dunescape," — a landscape that includes sandy dunes.

It was the dunescape area that brought the site into the public eye earlier in

the process after a city assessment found the soil was contaminated with arsenic, which led to city cost overruns.

The dunescape would be placed where a crumbling parking lot currently sits. That lot is one of the biggest eyesores on the property, officials said, as rising tides have resulted in large craters on the surface. Separating the lot and the water is a decrepit chain-link fence, which would also come down as part of the project, plans show.

But in order to avoid an extensive soil remediation project, city officials said

they are looking at building the sand dunes on top of the parking surface, letting the asphalt act as a cap on whatever harmful materials could be underneath.

"I've never designed a dunescape over an existing parking lot before, but maybe it's possible," Casolo said during a Board of Finance meeting.

Later, he said, "I think we're only going to get ourselves in deeper from an environmental point of view if we start ripping up the parking lot."

The brand new center and revamped park and beach area will be a far cry

from the early days of SoundWaters, which was created in the late 1980s in response to a series of articles in The Stamford Advocate about the deteriorating state of the harbor.

For about a decade, SoundWaters had a boat but no real place to call home. They were essentially a "ship and a shack," as Shemitz described it.

In 2000, the organization finally found a home in the form of the historic Holly House on Cove Island where it still operates. The Cove location will remain, even when the new center officially opens, Shemitz said.

The new harbor center is funded partially through the state of Connecticut, which is spending \$2 million on the structure, as well as the city of Stamford, which is contributing \$800,000. About a year ago, the Steven & Alexandra Cohen Foundation awarded \$3 million to the project.

The remaining cost of roughly \$2 million is being raised through private sources, Shemitz said there's about \$1 million to go in fundraising.

"It should be ultimately a destination," Shemitz said of the center, park and shoreline. "If we all do our job really, really well in the city, the parking lot will end up being too small, because all of a sudden, people will want to come here."

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