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Views of Bocuzzi Park in Stamford on March 12. The Zoning Board approved the construction of a Harbor Education Center at the park, plus a bunch of improvements to the site in general.

## ‘NOT JUST BARS AND BREWERIES AND BOARDWALKS’

Stamford pursues harbor education center on waterfront

By Veronica Del Valle

STAMFORD — For the more than a decade, Stamford’s shoreline has been rebuilt from the ground up.

Developer Building and Land Technology put high rises where superfund sites once sat. Breweries, restaurants, and a few coffee shops have popped up around the South End. Development has piqued interest from investors in the once-industrial neighborhood.

But a glistening Harbor Point boardwalk isn’t enough, argues SoundWaters President Leigh Shemitz. Education needs a home on the waterfront.

“When you look at really successful harbor activation — places like Baltimore, like Boston — it’s not just bars and breweries and boardwalks, though those are awesome and ... important,” Shemitz said. “What really sets us apart in successful and innovative harbor activation is having something to do and some place to learn.”

Shemitz’s organization focuses on protecting Long Island Sound through advocacy and education, and it’s about to embark on its latest project: a state-of-the-art education center at Bocuzzi Park meant to keep locals engaged with Fairfield County’s natural bounty.



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**Bocuzzi Park on March 12.**

News of the SoundWaters lease at Bocuzzi Park stirred up controversy in 2019, when the mayor’s office and some Board of Representatives members attempted to renegotiate parts of the lease. But even as city officials bristled over precise details, almost every city representative embraced building a new education center to serve the city’s students.

Shemitz said new education center is all about access to the commu-

nity. She often tells people that the upgrades “bring the water back to Waterside,” a quote she attributes to the late city Rep. Elaine Mitchell.

A friend told Shemitz years ago that she “didn’t really think of Stamford Harbor as a place.” There were public beaches and public parks, but no public access.

“There were very few public access points, and few ways to get out and see the Sound. There was a lot of

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damage lands, and there were some superfund sites," she added. "With all the work that's gone on there, it is becoming a destination."

The updates to Bocuzzi Park, to Shemitz, are an extension of that work.

"The sooner the better," said Erik Swanson, who manages the private TGM Anchor Point Marina next door. The SoundWaters Schooner, their 80-foot boat, has operated out of the TGM Marina since 2016. "We love having them, but they get their own space through this."

The project means that Bocuzzi Park itself will see some major changes. Currently, the only parking lot sits right on edge of the Sound, adjacent to a deteriorating sea wall.

Rep. Virgil de la Cruz, who represents Waterside, said that the parking lot looks more like an auto-body shop during the warmer months.

"It almost becomes like ... (a) repair yard," he said. "People bring their cars and change the oil. ... Whenever it rains, all that residue... is deposited on the parking lot."

Without a strong sea wall, all the oil slicks and piles of detritus can flow straight into the water, polluting the Sound.

The waterfront parking lot will be replaced with a "dune habitat" — man-made sand hills meant to



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**Mike and Chelsea Galgano push their son Luke, 1, on the swings at Bocuzzi Park in Stamford on March 12. The Zoning Board approved the construction of a Harbor Education Center at the park, plus a number of improvements to the site in general.**

soften the shoreline and provide a barrier against erosion. The new lot, once built, will sit closer to the education center. Architectural plans for the center have yet to be finalized.

While the education center is expected to break ground this year, the habitat won't be a reality until 2022. The Bocuzzi Park Master Plan — completed back in 2018 — allocated another \$348,000 toward building the dunes.

All in all, the new building costs about \$8 million. Mayor David Martin proposed putting up \$750,000 for the project in his capital budget. The other \$7 million comes from state grants and private contributions.

While the money for SoundWaters in Martin's budget must still be approved by the Board of Finance and Board of Representatives, Rep. Matt Quinones thinks green-

lighting the center is a "no brainer."

"This is one of the positive things that can happen when local, state, and federal governments partner with private organizations," the Board of Representatives president said. "I feel pretty confident, being that no objections to date have been voiced on the project."

The plan for creating something to do through park updates is twofold. The new education center

provides a place for some of the nonprofit's enrichment programs, but it also gives a home to community amenities. Currently, SoundWaters runs its Bocuzzi Park programs out of a trailer on park land.

Three programs will get a home at the Harbor Education Center — one for life skills, another for job skills, and the third for college skills.

On the life skills front, there's the Young Mariners

program. Middle school students stay with the program from sixth grade until ninth grade, and learn science, history, and geography from Stamford Public Schools educators. At the same time, they learn to sail.

Job skills are covered by Harbor Corps — a program that teaches job skills to young adults.

"Those are young people aged 18 to 24 with a high school degree, who are not college bound, and are looking for meaningful, well-paying, satisfying careers, which it turns out one can find in the maritime world," said Shemitz.

The SoundWaters Research Initiative helps students on the collegiate track through a two-week intensive geared towards marine biology research

On the more commercial side of things, SoundWaters rents out kayaks and paddleboards from Bocuzzi Park, and has for years. The same space that will let Stamford's students explore the water can take tourists out too.

All these initiatives are meant to close the gap between those who have access and those who don't.

"As this park comes together in a really 21st century way, the city can really engage with the waterfront in a way they can't right now," Shemitz said. "It's literally behind the fence. The fence will come down, the parking lot moves away, and we're going to have a way that a very natural, and resilient landscape."