

Ribbon cut on Blue Trail - all set for paddling

August 28, 2008

East Bay Newspaper by Tom Shevlin

Ribbon cut on Blue Trail - all set for paddling

Ceremony marks completion of first West Side Master Plan project

Tina Dolen of the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission takes in beautiful Narragansett Bay while paddling the Blue Trail.

Congressman and Portsmouth resident Patrick Kennedy joins the paddlers at Weaver's Cove on Friday.

PORTSMOUTH — Greeted by blue skies and calm seas, nearly 100 people turned out as the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission celebrated the dedication of the first leg of its Narragansett Bay Blue Trail on Friday, Aug. 22 at Weaver Cove in Portsmouth.

The “close-to-shore” route designed for kayaks, canoes and non-motorized watercraft is the first project to be realized under the much anticipated West Side Master Plan.

Joined by local, state and federal officials, AIPC Executive Director Tina Dolen took to the lectern prior to taking to the water.

“Recreational elements such as the Blue Trail,” she said, “maximize the ability for us to connect with healthy outdoor activities that sustain our sense of place in this beautiful part of the world.”

U.S. Rep. Patrick Kennedy heralded the project as a model of intergovernmental cooperation.

“This initiative is more than about the Blue Trail,” Mr. Kennedy, a Portsmouth resident, said. “It’s about working together.”

Through more intra-island cooperation, Rep. Kennedy expressed his belief that goals such as addressing the island’s combined sewer overflow problems could also be resolved.

While the event was seen as a public policy triumph to some, for most, the 10-mile water trail marks the chance for a new adventure and a new way to experience Aquidneck Island’s most precious natural resource: Narragansett Bay.

Eventually, a total of nine put-in sites will dot the shore from Portsmouth to Newport Harbor, including stops at Dyer Island and Rose Island.

It also provides a visible indicator of progress in the West Side Master Plan.

“We’re starting to do what you asked us to do,” said West Side Task Force Chairman Dr. Robert Quigley.

U.S. Sen. Jack Reed, who lives just off the trail in Jamestown, helped secure \$600,000 in appropriations for the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission to develop a master plan for the west side of Aquidneck Island.

Commissioned to provide a road map for the future of nearly 5,000 acres along Aquidneck Island's western shore, the West Side Master Plan provides a sweeping vision for an area stretching from the Gateway Center in downtown Newport to the Sakonnet River Bridge, replete with recreational facilities, a scenic shoreline drive and acres upon acres of accessible open space; all of which would be connected by an intermodal transportation network that promises to ease congestion along the island's central traffic corridors.

Fittingly, the plan's first project is one that connects islanders to the water, and encourages the use of environmentally friendly transportation.

"Aquidneck Island residents have an inextricable connection with the bay," said Senate Majority Leader Teresa Paiva-Weed (D – Newport, Jamestown).

Paddlers wishing to take to the water will be directed by map at each of the trail's launch sites, guiding paddlers close to shore and around some of the bay's lesser-traveled inlets and isles.

Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management Director W. Michael Sullivan noted that additional drop-ins would be opened as improvements are made to public piers and access ways along the west side.

Naval Station Newport Commanding Officer Capt. Michel T. Poirier was also on hand for the event. He heralded the AIPC's efforts during a recent briefing announcing the release of the Navy's own Master Plan.

He later took command of the first kayak to lead a ceremonial paddle in Narragansett Bay along side a delegation congressional, state and local dignitaries that included the aforementioned Sen. Reed and Rep. Kennedy, as well U.S. Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse; state Sens. June Gibbs and Teresa Paiva-Weed; and state Rep. Bruce Long.

Funding for the trail was provided by the van Buren Foundation and the Prince Charitable Trust. For a first-hand account of the Blue Trail written by East Bay Life Editor Jim McGaw, visit www.eastbayri.com.