

# Nurturing Nature

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**A**s we all know, Newport is blessed with a wealth of natural resources, including one of the finest park systems in New England, an incredible coastline and a spectacular collection of specimen trees.

I've served as the city's Tree Warden since 1994, and looking back, I can't help but feel fortunate to have witnessed just how far the city has come over the last 25 years. That's because — just like planting a seed — it often takes many years for a public project to move from idea to completion.

What we've accomplished as a community over the last two decades is commendable. And while it would be nice if I could take credit for even a small portion of the progress that's been made, I am continually reminded of how indebted we all are to the scores of dedicated volunteers and advocates who have worked so hard to improve our parks and open spaces.

In fact, I can think of very few achievements that would have happened without the help of public/private partnerships. This year we're poised to make great strides across a wide spectrum of initiatives, thanks in large part to yet another privately funded effort: the landmark Newport Tree and Open Space Master Plan.

This comprehensive document will serve as a touchstone for our restoration and beautification efforts for years to come, and is the first plan of its kind since 1918, when the city commissioned the Olmsted Improvement Plan, which emphasized the importance of open space to building a healthy and vibrant community.

**Residents can expect to see progress this year to ensure the health of our watershed and to prepare for the effects of rising sea levels.**

Our current master plan renews this focus, laying out a process for public engagement as we work to make Newport's open spaces more equitable in their distribution and connected to our neighborhoods.

With the overwhelming majority of our children living in the North End, and most of our play and recreational facilities to the south buffered by obstacles such as busy roads and bridge ramps that limit connectivity, much of our effort this year will center around some

exciting improvements to Miantonomi Park, where we're installing new restrooms, creating a multiuse playfield and improving park trails.

But as our Open Space Master Plan notes, today it's not enough to simply build facilities. We also need to activate our public spaces to attract residents. To that end, last summer the Newport Open Space Partnership established a Play Hut at Miantonomi Park, while the Aquidneck Land Trust opened the Memorial Tower to visitors every Sunday. More is planned for this year with the addition of Bike Newport's Big Blue Bike Barn, which will take advantage of the recently widened park trails to allow Newport's children to ride their bikes far away from automobile traffic.

Elsewhere, residents can also expect to see progress this year to ensure the health of our watershed and to prepare for the effects of rising sea levels.

Working with the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission, we also expect to begin executing the city's Almy Pond Management Plan, which is aimed at reducing pollution from runoff



**Scott Wheeler** has served as Newport's Tree Warden for the past 25 years.

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up!**

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by removing unneeded pavement and diverting water into wetland meadows. Repairs are also in the works to the Storer Park seawalls, stone pier and adjacent causeway. And wherever possible, the city has committed to replacing impermeable surfaces with more environmentally friendly and resilient surfaces.

This year will also see renovations to the Vernon Park tennis and pickleball courts, the resurfacing of the Martin Luther King Jr. Park basketball court, and the completion of the Morton Park Playground, among other smaller projects.

Looking ahead, we remain optimistic about the completion of the First Mile project, which will allow North End residents to safely access the city center on a dedicated walking and bike path. In Touro Park, a structural analysis and conservation plan is being developed for the Old Stone Mill, which will help guide our efforts to preserve one of the oldest (and perhaps most mysterious) structures in the state.

Finally, projects that will be making their debuts this spring include the recently completed decorative lighting project in Aquidneck Park, which could not have been possible without the dedication and generosity of the Newport Garden Club. Likewise, at King Park, the city has been inspired by the generosity of the Alliance Française de Newport, without whom the restoration of the French Pyramid and Rochambeau statue – and improvements to the adjacent seawall – wouldn't have been possible.

Yes, we are indeed fortunate to live and work in such a beautiful place, but it's an even greater treasure to be blessed with a community that cares so much for our natural surroundings. That's why, although we may still have a lot of work to do, I can sincerely state that today I am more optimistic about the future of our open spaces than I have ever been. 🌿

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