

## New Bern Buoy its Downtown through Riverwalk Project

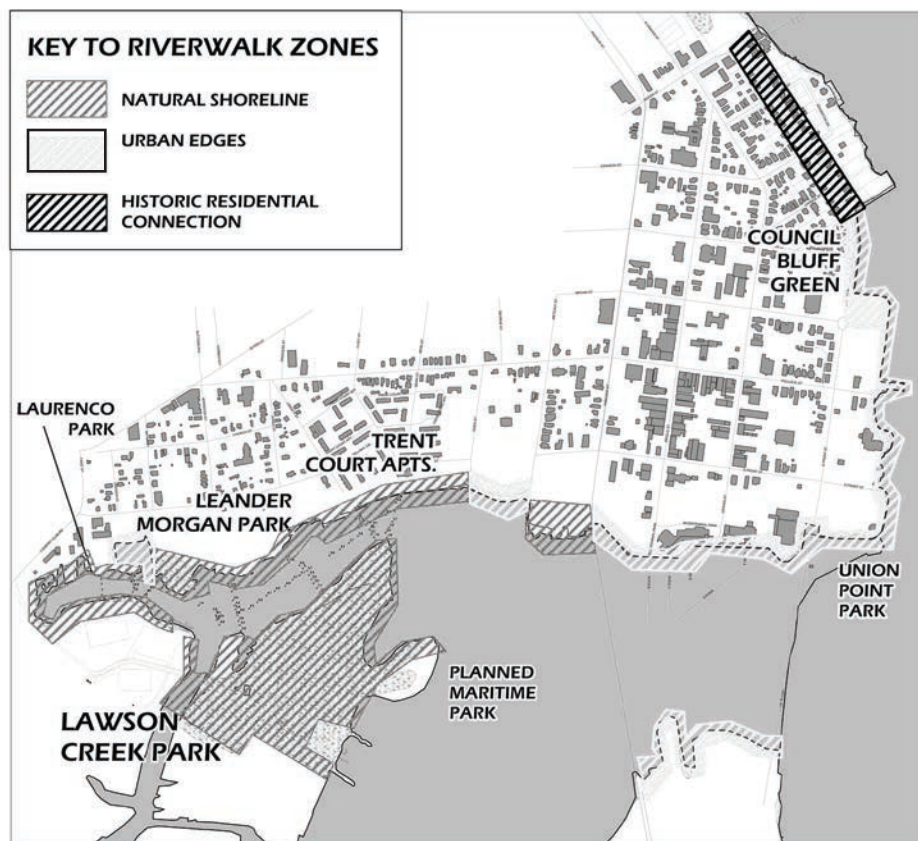
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*Editors' Note: The annual conference of the North Carolina Chapter of the American Planning Association (NCAPA) will be held in New Bern this year. This article describes some of the city's ongoing greening efforts that conference attendees can experience during their visit.*

New Bern, North Carolina's colonial capital and first state capital, ushered in its 300th anniversary on December 31, 2009. The anniversary celebration has served as a catalyst for millions of dollars of investment and construction in this waterfront city's downtown, including \$3.5 million for 1.5 miles of major streetscape improvements to Broad Street; \$40 million for the replacement of the Alfred Cunningham Bridge over the Trent River; construction of the new \$60 million N.C. History Education Center adjacent to the Tryon Palace gardens on the Trent River; the \$10-12 million renovation of the historic Federal Building; numerous private residential and commercial construction projects; and substantial progress on the completion of a continuous, two-mile Riverwalk along the Trent and Neuse River shoreline.

Founded in 1710 by Baron Christoph von Graffenried and named for the Swiss capital, New Bern is located on a spectacular peninsula at the confluence of the Trent and Neuse Rivers. The rectangular grid pattern of the streets extended to the water's edge, where wharves, piers, warehouses, and shops housed the community's trading economy. From its earliest days, New Bern's waterfront was key to its success – first as an important colonial port city, and later as a bustling railroad and shipbuilding center. The town's growth was slow and incremental until WWII, when the military installation at Cherry Point and other bases in the region accelerated growth to the northwest and south of town. Like many small cities, however, New Bern's downtown began to decline as industry abandoned rails and rivers for superhighways, and as citizens moved away from the downtown area to reside and shop in the newly developing suburbs.

The downtown waterfront steadily declined, eventually turning into a collection of deteriorating



New Bern Riverwalk Master Plan. Map courtesy of Susan Moffat Thomas.

warehouses and commercial buildings. As businesses closed, buildings were boarded up and many old, historic homes were demolished. The construction of the Neuse River Bridge in the early 1950s led to the widening of Broad Street, creating a barrier between the residential area and the central business district.

Downtown New Bern reached its lowest point in the early 1970s, when – under urban renewal – all but three buildings on a 14-acre Trent River tract were demolished and a bulkhead was constructed along the water's edge. The tract lay vacant throughout the decade, despite proposals generated by a redevelopment commission.

In 1977, community leaders and government officials took steps to reverse the downtown trend and commissioned a revitalization plan. Downtown's waterfront orientation was seen as the basis for developing a new market, primarily consisting of recreation, retirement-oriented housing, and tourism, to bring a new affluent population of retirees, vacationers, and convention-goers into the central area of New Bern.

A major element in the plan recommended a walkway along the Neuse and Trent River shoreline. The City adopted the plan and retained ownership of a 30-foot strip along Trent River in the 14-acre urban renewal parcel, constructing a sidewalk to ensure pedestrian access along the waterfront. The goal was to eventually have a pedestrian connection along the Neuse and Trent Rivers throughout the downtown area. To manage and

coordinate New Bern's renaissance, leaders from the city, county and community created the private nonprofit Swiss Bear Downtown Development Corporation in 1979 to spearhead and coordinate the revitalization of downtown and its waterfront.

In 1980, the revitalization effort gained momentum when New Bern was among the first five North Carolina cities to participate in the Main Street Program, created by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Now administered through the N.C. Department of Commerce, the program provides technical support to smaller cities like New Bern that use historic preservation to promote economic development. Since that time, an aggressive revitalization effort and strong public-private partnership added millions to the tax base and created hundreds of jobs. Over \$165 million has been invested in major rehabilitations and new construction, including four waterfront hotels, three marinas and major streetscape and park improvements. Tourism, a \$12 million industry in the early 1980s, generated nearly \$105 million in visitor spending in 2008.

By the late 1990s, completed sections of the Riverwalk were primarily in the downtown area. The best examples are Council Bluff Green, a small, two-block park in a residential area along the Neuse River, and Union Point Park, located at the confluence of the Neuse and Trent Rivers. Although concrete walkways of various widths – some set back from the water and others



**Union Point Park** at the confluence of the two rivers, after renovation in the late 1990s. *Photo courtesy of Susan Moffat Thomas.*



at the water's edge behind a bulkhead and railing – had been constructed over a 30-year period, the walkway was interrupted on many public and private properties. The Riverwalk along the urban renewal property ended at the railroad tracks on Hancock Street, adjacent to the new N.C. History Education Center on South Front Street. In 2004, when planning began for New Bern's 300th anniversary celebration, the City and Swiss Bear made the completion of the Riverwalk a top priority. A Connectivity Committee was formed to meet the goals and objectives.

In 2006, Swiss Bear and the 300th Committee retained a firm to develop a master plan for completion of the Riverwalk from Queen Street to Lawson Creek Park, building on the sections already completed and those planned for the near future. Throughout the process, the Master Plan Steering Committee and the Connectivity Committee sought out professional expertise from volunteers, City officials and department heads, NCDOT staff, and board members who had a direct interest.

The plan envisions two main zones, urban and natural. Although exposed aggregate concrete was used at Union Point Park and Council Bluff Green, the use of permeable pavers was recommended for the remaining walkways to meet state stormwater regulations. To provide the experience of moving from a historic downtown to walking through natural wetlands, the plan calls for a walkway on pilings along the shoreline all along Lawson Creek connecting to Leander Morgan Park and Lorenzo Park, and continuing on to Lawson Creek Park. This rustic section, west of the pedestrian footbridge, would create opportunities for bird watching, fishing and contemplation.

In 2007, the City approved the plan to complete the two-mile walkway, including the connection to Lawson Creek Park via a pedestrian footbridge. The 900-foot timber footbridge would connect with the downtown on City land and join the existing wetlands walk at the gazebo in Lawson Creek Park. Since there are no true public downtown transient docks available to citizens or visitors, transient boat docking facilities and a marina designed to replicate the old Neuse River Lighthouse off Jack's Island were added to the plan. The committee also envisioned acquiring the retired Herbert C. Bonner ferry, built in New Bern, for placement off Lawson Creek Park as a static artifact to use for receptions, concerts, engine room tours, etc. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's Boating Infrastructure Grant (BIG) program, with grants funded from federal excise tax money to construct transient boat docking facilities, was identified as a resource.

In 2008, The Harold H. Bate Foundation awarded Swiss Bear a \$64,900 grant for the footbridge project and in April 2009, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service awarded Swiss Bear one of 18 national grants for its transient dock project. The grant for \$646,650 covers just under 50% of the total estimated cost of the project.

Sidewalks in three blocks of privately-owned historic homes along East Front Street were designated

parts of the Riverwalk. The City received a Coastal Management Waterfront Beach Access (CAMA) grant for \$28,635, with a local match of \$9,545, to develop a walkway in a park-like setting at the end of Queen Street. They also received a CAMA grant for \$12,559, with a local match of \$4,168, and developed the space at the end of Pollock connecting to a privately-owned tract on the north side of the waterfront Pollock Street Park and walkway. The owner of that tract recently developed a marina and restaurant and constructed a promenade in character with the promenade at Union Point Park along the Neuse River waterfront on his property, granting an easement to the City for the walkway. The City is in the process of obtaining an easement from two private property owners to the south of the Pollock Street Park to construct a walkway on the Neuse River, several feet from the bulkheads of the two properties and connecting to the Union Point Park promenade. This project will be funded through a CAMA grant (approximately \$400,000 with a local match).

A design firm created a concept plan for a park on a narrow tract of City land at the end of Broad Street from East Front to the Neuse River. This public green space would include benches, tree lighting and a 30-foot high sculpture commissioned by a New Bernian as a 300th anniversary gift to the City. The sculpture commission fee and installation cost are approximately \$150,000. In addition, the estimated cost to develop the actual park at the end of Broad Street is \$135,000 to \$150,000. Swiss Bear is organizing a campaign to raise funds by recognizing contributors on granite panels in the developed space.

In addition, at the N.C. History Education Center (scheduled to open mid-summer 2010), a public pedestrian path/walkway is being constructed through a natural landscape and wetland near the Trent River.

As with any project of this magnitude, there are many obstacles to overcome. The downturn in the economy has been a challenge for finding additional funding to complete the marina, footbridge and navigation hazard clearing. A business plan to operate the marina has been drafted and the application for a major CAMA permit is under study. Another challenge has been gaining the full support of the newly elected Board of Aldermen and Mayor. In the recent election, all but one incumbent lost their seats on the Board. Swiss Bear accepts these challenges and will continue to pursue the ultimate goal of working in partnership with the City to complete a major attraction envisioned more than 30 years ago.

## References

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