

## Braille Trail officially open at Watertown Riverfront Park

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Several years of planning and work on the Watertown Riverfront Park and Braille Trail have finally come to fruition. A collaboration between public and private interests, the common goal of a park in Watertown accessible to people of all ages and abilities drove the project forward to create a finished product that many agree is a great asset.

The park, which is located between Charles River Road and the river itself at the intersection of Irving Street, features a crescent-shaped trail of a quarter mile, for blind as well as for seeing visitors. The trail is marked by a guide wire that runs along the edge and which users can hold as they visit the trail. The interior of the trail is a sensory park, which includes a marimba bench and large wooden boats on the ground for visitors to climb on and sit in. There are also walls and logs for visitors to interact with.

Along the peripheral guide wire are stone markers describing different features of the natural Charles River habitat. On the side facing the trail the words are engraved into the stone, and on the other side, at an ergonomically comfortable angle, are the same messages, in Braille. These stone markers are signaled along the guide wire by wooden blocks.

Parties involved and invested in the park's creation include not only the Department of Conservation and Recreation and the neighboring Perkins School for the Blind, but also the Town of Watertown, several private foundations, and local community foundations such as the Watertown Community Foundation.

At a ribbon-cutting ceremony on Thursday, representatives and community members gathered at the site to hear speakers describe the vision and determination that brought the project about.

Leo Roy, the DCR commissioner, spoke to the crowd gathered and cited the trope that "failure is an orphan, yet success has a thousand fathers," saying that in the case of the successful Braille Trail it was true.

He cited studies that show the link between the amount of time people spend outdoors in nature, and their well-being and success in life. “Our job at DCR is to connect people with all these resources we have,” he said. The trail, he said, would make more resources more accessible to more people.

Matthew Beaton, Secretary of Energy and Environmental Affairs, thanked DCR for “working tirelessly every day to pull off projects like this.” He cited the unique nature of this particular spot, for its connection with the river banks and with the woodland, and emphasized the importance of “access for people of all abilities to our resources.”

“It was an all-hands-on-deck approach with all our partners,” Beaton said, echoing Roy’s note about the number of contributors to the project. Not only was that true of the park’s creation, he said, but it will continue to be true in the future: although DCR is responsible for the park, members of the Perkins School community will assist in, and take responsibility for maintenance of the trail and garden.

“We’ve been waiting for this day for a long time,” said David Powers, the president and CEO of the Perkins School, during his remarks. “This park is the backyard to the Perkins School. From the beginning, Perkins shared the vision for this park with DCR, as well as state and town officials.”

He took time as well to explain how intentional the park’s design had been. “One of the charms of the riverfront is the sounds of the riverfront,” he said, drawing attention to the multi-sensory aspects of the park. “It’s a big part of the design.”

Citing colleague Kim Carlson, the Director of the Perkins Library and President of the American Council for the Blind, he stated that “this path is the most accessible of its kind in the nation.”

Herb Nolan, a representative for the Lawrence and Lillian Solomon Foundation, which contributed significantly to the project, spoke about the importance of private and public interests collaborating towards common goals.

While reaching out to new stakeholders can bring much-needed innovation and resources, he said, the role of public agencies is essential.

“We’re not here to fill in gaps in public budgets,” he said. “We need those state agencies to be well-funded.”

“We’re very thankful for their work,” he added.

Nolan and Roy both cited Mitch Ryerson in their speeches for his work designing and building the park. Ryerson collaborated with Sasaki Associates to design the sensory garden, and laid out much of the park's structure. Ryerson also built the boats himself. His first profession, he said, was as a boat-builder, so he was pleased to be able to incorporate boats into the park. Boats were appropriate, he said, not only because of the park's proximity to the river but because of the historical significance of that spot – it was one of the first spots, he said, where the English and Native Americans interacted in the area. The boats he designed were intended to be an allusion to the boats used at that encounter.

Ryerson also designed a Marimba bench, a wooden bench that doubles as a musical instrument that visitors can play. The bench is inscribed in Braille with a poem that is also carved into some logs meant for sitting and climbing on the other side of the garden.

“I had to learn the mechanics of it,” he said, “so that the park wouldn't just be a nod, but something the blind can actually use.”

The soft wire boundary of the park, he explained, meant that blind children could play on the different structures and explore the area safely.

He also said that he had learned much about tactile variation being important landmarks. For example, he said, the small wooden “bridge” near a river access point contrasts with the texture of the rest of the path and helps people identify where they are.

However, he explained, these elements are not oriented only towards those who are blind. “It's not a compromise,” he said. “It augments everyone's experience.”

Rick Corsi and Dan Driscoll of DCR, as well as the Solomon Foundation, gave him artistic freedom, he said, and trusted him, which he appreciated. That level of trust is ideal, he said, because in that case “they get your best work because you feel like giving your best work.”

The process, from brainstorming to design to construction, has involved countless players over the course of more than three years. In the spring of 2013, the planning process began with community discussions about what a park would ideally look like. Both the Perkins School and the Watertown community were involved.

Town Council member Vincent Piccirilli, who attended the inaugural event, explained that the Solomon Foundation and other private foundations contributed resources for the design process, and then DCR agreed to pay for its construction. Budget limitations stymied the process, prompting other groups to contribute. The Town of Watertown, for example, gave \$100,000 to the project.

“We find when there are multiple funding sources, there’s a greater sense of ownership,” Leo Roy added. “Not just for making it happen but for the longer-term maintenance.”

Roy emphasized DCR’s goal in building the park of “helping people of all interests, all abilities, all goals, to enjoy our resources. We’re so blessed to have these resources in our state.”

“It’s also part of a statewide effort of universal access,” he added.

The path connects to a larger network of pathways that go along the Charles River, from the Watertown dam to Boston Harbor, he said. In some places there is still work to be done, but many segments of the path are already completed. “We’re really trying to improve these linkages,” Roy said.

He brimmed with enthusiasm about the new Riverfront Park and Braille Trail. “Walk with your eyes closed – you’ll hear the river, you’ll hear the insects, you’ll notice it all.”