

Watertown Riverfront Park Case Study

Prepared by [Empower Success Corps](#) (ESC) in partnership with the Solomon Foundation and Barr Foundation

Primary Sources

Herb Nolan and ESC

Project Summary

The Watertown Riverfront Park is the result of a ten-year public-private partnership between the Solomon Foundation, the City of Watertown, and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. It was initiated with the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) in 2006 as one of the Foundation's first public-private projects. For a mile below the Watertown dam, the neighborhood was walled off from the Charles River by an impenetrable tangle of vines and shrubs. The narrow asphalt trails were so heaved by roots and broken up that few people ventured along with them. The collective intent was to fully restore access to this mile of riverfront and make it a destination for everyone.

Today the Watertown Riverfront Park is part of a river walk that circles the upper basin and serves tens of thousands of people in the cities of Boston, Newton and Watertown. It is a critical link in a regional path system leading from Waltham to downtown Boston. Visitors have access to river overlooks, sculptural benches, and playgrounds. People who are visually impaired can now enjoy the freedom of the outdoors as they follow a braille trail.

Phase II, which still remains to be implemented, will complete the Watertown Riverfront trail to the Squibnocket Park just downstream. Funding for that second and last phase of work could come from \$500,000 in funding contributed by Simmons University in 2012 as part of their long-term lease of Daley Field and, possibly, from I-cubed funding from Athena Health negotiation.

Design Phase

This project was initiated in 2006 after a bicycle ride along the length of the Charles River Basin by Steve Burrington (DCR Commissioner), Dan Driscoll (DCR), Herb Nolan, and David Solomon. Having senior DCR leadership see the poor condition of the park and the potential for improvements first-hand was a critical first step. The Watertown waterfront had already been identified as a priority in the Charles River Basin master plan which Herb Nolan managed as a consultant with Goody Clancy. There was broad community support for the project going back decades.

Following the bike ride, the Solomon Foundation proposed a public-private partnership with DCR whereby the Foundation would pay for and manage the entire design process from conceptual design through working drawings and DCR would provide oversight and get the project built as funding became available. Generally speaking, it was not the lack of capital dollars that was preventing the agency from getting more done to meet its mission. Rather, it was the difficulty of getting projects identified and vetted by the community and then far enough along in design to understand the costs and benefits. The Solomon Foundation was asked to fill this role. A broadly representative working group of advisors was formed, which later became the Friends of Watertown Riverfront with a three-year grant from the Foundation. It included several city councilors, the president of Perkins School for the Blind, the president of the Watertown Savings Bank and several members of the community living near Charles River Road. DCR assigned a project manager to the effort to monitor progress and provide feedback to the partners. Together with senior staff at DCR, Herb Nolan led a visioning exercise to listen to the concerns and ideas of stakeholders and to work through alternative programmatic ideas. The Solomon Foundation paid for a conceptual design by Sasaki Associates to give form to the ideas coming out of the visioning process and, after approximately 18 months, a consensus plan emerged. Sasaki was then hired by the Foundation to complete working drawings and obtain all necessary permits.

Construction Phase

Despite the broad support locally and within the agency, the project did not receive the funding needed for rapid implementation. In the interim, a smaller project for the restoration of the nearby Saltonstall Founder's Monument, however, did receive matching funding from the agency and was considered a modest win by the community. The onset of the recession delayed the park project for several more years during which the leadership of DCR changed several times. The leadership turnover might have sealed the fate of the project but for the efforts of Representative Jon Hecht and the Friends of Watertown Riverfront Park. With Solomon Foundation support, they continued to advocate for the project and its funding over the better part of a decade—and the project was not allowed to be forgotten. Part of their pitch for this park was the proposed sensory trail that Perkins School for the Blind was helping to shape. Ultimately the Watertown Riverfront Park made its way to the very top of the Federal Land and Water Conservation Fund list.

Once funding was secured, DCR's Dan Driscoll took full control and brought in a new consultant, Chester Engineers, to refine some of the shoreline treatments and advance the sensory trail, a critical part of the challenge. With the DCR managing the project, Solomon Foundation's role came to an end. Knowing that access for the blind had to be handled with great care and creativity, Herb Nolan recruited Mitch Ryerson, a talented local sculptor, to work with the DCR and Perkins School for the Blind to design the sensory trail and sensory garden. Mr. Ryerson, ultimately, became the subcontractor for the sensory garden since he was the only person qualified to fabricate these unique sculptural elements.

In 2016 after a two-year construction process, the Watertown Riverside Park was opened with great fanfare and began to be used. With broad new paths and cleared views of the river, park use has increased tremendously. The Watertown Riverfront Park is held up as a successful public-private partnership.

Post Construction Assessment

Ironically, one type of user that still remains underserved are people with visual impairments. Despite the best efforts of the design team, the braille trail and sensory garden create barriers for people who are visually impaired. This was evident in a visit with students and teachers from Perkins School for the Blind in the spring of 2019. Their inability to find their way to the start of the trail, to find the elements intended for their use including the braille plaques on the tops of the posts, or to navigate through the open sensory garden space pointed out some basic flaws in design thinking. All of the designers were sighted individuals who lacked a deep understanding of the unique experiences of people with visual impairments. This situation points to a shortcoming of the design process. Students and adults with visual impairments should have been more involved in the design process, and certain elements such as the braille trail should have been mocked up on-site to test ideas and inform the final design. This is something the Solomon Foundation could have supported in an ongoing relationship with the DCR project team. Handing off responsibility for a project from one leadership team to another—private to public—is essential, but some level of continued collaboration is important to a successful outcome.

Some of the shortcomings of the braille trail and sensory garden could be fixed with a public-private partnership with the active involvement of visually impaired individuals.

Role of the Foundation

The Solomon Foundation played a key role at several critical points along the way from conception to final design: its instigation of the initial bike ride, convening of the key stakeholders for two full years to reach consensus on needs/design, funding of the design process, recruitment of the artist, advocating for funds to help build the park, and its ongoing investment of time and effort over a period of ten years. Solomon partners reported that they could not have been successful partners on this project without the Solomon Foundation's guidance, conceptual plan, and commitment. The Foundation's expertise and commitment to the project helped to buoy the spirits of all partners and allies—and to keep the project alive and moving forward over a decade.

Timeline of Activity Milestones

Historic

Year	Milestone
2006	Project Scoping
2007	Conceptual Design
2008	Restoration of Saltonstall Founder's Monument
2014	Groundbreaking
2016	Ribbon Cutting
2019	Post Construction Assessment

Stakeholders, Partners, Allies

- Solomon Foundation
- Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR)
- Friends of Watertown Riverfront Park
- Perkins School for the Blind
- City of Watertown
- Representative Jon Hecht
- Sasaki Associates
- Chester Engineers
- Mitch Ryerson, Artist
- Watertown Savings Bank

Funding Sources

- Solomon Foundation - full design and permits
 - \$150,000
- Land and Water Conservation Fund, DCR, City of Watertown, Perkins School for the Blind, Watertown Savings Bank, private citizens
 - \$2,850,000

Lessons Learned

- Tell a good story.
- Serve multiple user groups.
- Find and support champions in the community and in the agencies.
- Patience and persistence over time are essential.
- Keep private partners engaged to address key problems.
- Create room in the schedule and budget to engage special users in the design.
- Esteem for Solomon Foundation's expertise was an invaluable anchor.