

# **Batterson Park, once an oasis during summertime hot spells, is on course to reopen in two years, thanks to state funding**



Rows of picnic tables in front of abandoned buildings near the beach at Batterson Park in 2019.

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Following years of neglect, the roughly 200-acre Batterson Park is on track for a \$10 million makeover that could make it once again a premier summertime swimming spot for central Connecticut.

The new state budget carries funding to clean up the park's 165-acre pond, remove invasive plants, truck in more sand for the beach and replace the decrepit, vandalized concession building and bath house.

If construction stays on course, the park could reopen as early as mid-2023. That's an especially appealing idea for central Connecticut people amidst summertime hot spells like the current one.

"On a hot day like this, you can imagine what it would be like to sit beachside on that beautiful lake," Hartford Mayor Luke Bronin said Tuesday afternoon.

Bringing Batterson Park back will be done by Hartford public works department, and maintaining it will be a joint effort of Hartford, New Britain and Farmington. Volunteers and neighbors around the park on the Farmington and New Britain border also have established the nonprofit Batterson Park Conservancy to help with upkeep once it's restored.

"I'm thrilled to see the money in the state budget for the revival of Batterson Park — this blighted park deserves much-needed renovation," New Britain Mayor Erin Stewart said.

Political leaders from Hartford, which owns the parkland, as well as New Britain and Farmington credit House Speaker Matt Ritter with landing the state aid.

Ritter initially intended to secure \$7 million from state bonding, which could have taken a year or more to process. But as the budget-setting cycle neared the end in June, he got agreement from colleagues and Gov. Ned Lamont to include \$10 million as a direct appropriation instead.

The state aid will reimburse Hartford for its staff time along with contractors, building materials and other expenses.

"This is where state government can be so helpful to our cities. If Batterson Park was controlled by affluent communities, it never would have fallen into this disrepair with burned-out buildings," Ritter said.

Decades ago, Hartford touted Batterson as one of its main parks. Its huge pond was intended as a way for city residents to get relatively convenient access to a beach, since the Long Island Sound shoreline is more than an hour's drive away.

The city in the 1960s and '70s reported that thousands of people a day were using the park in summertime. Visitors paid small fees; at one point the charge was \$3 for Hartford residents and \$5 for nonresidents, and crowds came from around central Connecticut on summer weekends.

But Hartford scaled back maintenance because of budget constraints, and by 2015 it shut down the park entirely to save money. Since then vandals have damaged the buildings and many seasons of neglect have ruined benches, picnic tables, grills and other amenities.

The \$10 million will add security equipment and surveillance cameras, replace the ruined amenities and restore those that can be preserved. Hartford Public Works Director Michael Looney said an important part of the work is removing invasive species from the pond and shoreline.

The Conservancy, along with Hartford, Farmington and New Britain, will work out a shared system for keeping up the property in the future.

“Working together with the city of Hartford and the town of Farmington shows that a true regional effort can spur development that wouldn’t have happened,” Stewart said.

Bronin called the park “a beautiful and important regional asset.”

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Ritter said rebuilding Batterson Park is a “once in a generation” opportunity, and predicted it will be a big quality of life improvement for lower income people in central Connecticut.

“There’s good bus service to the Westfarms mall area, so you’re very close taking the kids and spending a day at the beach,” Ritter said.

State Rep. Peter Tercyak, D-New Britain, lives along the pond, and said he’s eager to see people return to the beach.

“This is progress for sure. And I think it’s good we’re paying for this from the budget, not bonding,” he said. “We’re having a pretty good year, so let’s pay for it instead of putting it on the credit card.”