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## **Batterson Park, formerly 'a summer destination,' to reopen next summer after a decade of disrepair**

By [Natasha Sokoloff](#), Staff writer July 20, 2024

After years of sitting in deterioration and a number of desperate attempts to revive what was once a lively summertime oasis, [Batterson Park](#) will finally see its renaissance a decade after it shuttered.

Since its closure in 2015, the 260-acre park has been at the center of forlorn cries from central Connecticut residents calling on someone to do something about the land spanning Farmington and New Britain, as it spiraled further into deterioration with each unsuccessful state and local attempt to restore its former glory.

But come next summer, Batterson Park will reopen, after [legislation](#) proposing a way toward the park's rebirth passed this year.

This marks an end to a years-long, futile struggle among local governments and volunteer groups, made particularly difficult because of the unique situation in which the park has ties to three municipalities. Batterson Park is owned by the City of Hartford, but is situated within Farmington and New Britain, which have scrambled for years to come to an agreement on [who is responsible](#) for keeping it up and running.

Across all of those discussions, funding was always an issue. It was Hartford's inability to keep carrying the financial burden of managing the park that led to its status being reduced to limited public access only via the boat launch in 2015, essentially leaving the land in neglect.

But an endeavor spearheaded by Speaker of the House Matt Ritter, D-Hartford, aimed to address both the responsibility question and a solution for the funding issue, and transform Batterson Park back into the regional attraction it once was.

"I just hope we get to enjoy it," Ritter said. "That was the goal. It always has been. It's a beautiful parcel."

He had initially proposed [turning Batterson Park into a state park](#), which eventually lost traction after it was deemed constrained by a lack of resources. But his efforts led to a [study](#) by the state Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, which found a new way forward, and one that made its way through the state legislature.

"It's been a four-year process, essentially, we've worked on this thing," Ritter said. "You know, I was asked for two things. I was asked to find money to clean it up. We did that. And I was told, well, we need money to operate the park. And we did that."

Under the [legislation](#), Batterson Park's new life will come to fruition through a public-private partnership, in which DEEP, the City of Hartford, and a third-party partner enter into a memorandum of understanding for the care, maintenance, and operation of the park.

[Riverfront Recapture](#), a Hartford-based nonprofit organization that manages four parks along the Connecticut River, has been chosen as the official third-party entity in this scenario, according to an email to CT Insider from Cristian Corza, the deputy chief of staff to Mayor Arunan Arulampalam.

The City of Hartford will still maintain ownership of the park and has already begun preparing for a reopening in summer 2025, according to the email.

"We know there are a lot of residents with a number of very fond memories of Batterson Park," said Christopher Hayes, director of Hartford's Department of Public Works. "It was a summer destination and we're excited to allow people to come back there again."

With the passing of the legislation, Batterson Park's care, maintenance, and operation will be funded through the state's Passport to the Parks account, which supports state parks and campgrounds. The bill increases the Passport to the Parks fee by 50 cents for fiscal year 2025-26.

DEEP can then give Riverfront Recapture a grant each fiscal year from the Passport to the Parks account, allowing Riverfront Recapture's agents and employees to enter, maintain, and operate the park, and overall providing the funding stream to keep the park alive.

Arulampalam said earlier this year after the legislation was proposed, that he felt Riverfront Recapture was a strong contender for the partnership, as the city has already benefited from a strong relationship with the organization and worked closely with it.

While the scope of Riverfront Recapture's role and what exactly it entails has yet to be determined, in the other parks it manages, it provides daily park maintenance and a security ranger program, along with producing and managing a variety of events, programs, and activities, said Michael Zaleski, president and CEO of Riverfront Recapture, in an earlier interview with CT Insider.

Even though it's taken a long time to get to this point, Ritter said he was just glad the legislation was able to move as quickly as it did.

"It's exciting," he said. "I mean, it's nice to be the Speaker of the House, because you can move things perhaps at a pace that otherwise may not happen. So I'm happy about that."

And now, it's just a matter of the City of Hartford getting the park back into a condition where the public can use it.

"So I feel like the state has done all it can really do, and I'm hopeful the city can move it along pretty quickly," Ritter said. "I would be very surprised and disappointed if people were not able to begin to use the park, even if it's for passive recreation like walking or kayaking, sometime in the next 12 months."

The city's reopening efforts are in the schematic design stage, according to Corza's email. Before the slated opening next summer, it is working to implement operational components to ensure visitor safety and site security, according to the email.

"The city is going to be building out the park," Hayes said. "So we're taking the original design and modifying it with the new information that has been obtained regarding water quality and just other elements of the park to create an appropriate design that then will get built out."

That could include measures like cleaning and clearing out areas, adding sidewalks and pathways, and building new structures, he said. He expected work onsite to occur early next spring, but what exactly that work will look like is still in its earliest stages.

"This is an area that has been closed to the public since 2015," Hayes said. "So being able to reimagine and revitalize a park that's been closed off is certainly very exciting for us to allow the community to go back there."

The city will be using money from a \$10 million state grant awarded for Batterson Park's revitalization in 2021 for the improvements and renovations leading up to the reopening, he said.

Community members could expect to see potential site designs come out in the fall, during which there would be opportunities for public input and engagement, Hayes said.

And although the amenities that may be offered at Batterson Park have yet to be determined, according to the email, Ritter said he had heard possible plans for a splash pad.

A big question among many community members throughout restoration conversations has been whether Batterson Park Pond will be opened back up for swimming, which it was historically popular for. DEEP concluded in its study that because of the pond's poor water quality, efforts to accommodate swimming and wading were both expensive and impractical to maintain over time, and it was best suited for noncontact recreational uses.

"So at this time, we're moving forward with a plan that would not include swimming," Hayes said.

Ritter had said that he expected the park would have a lot of the same use and similar amenities as other state parks. Some possible amenities for this public-private park governance model listed in the DEEP study include passive uses, playgrounds, a splash pad, geocaching, an event lawn, disk golf, and boat rentals.

But it will ultimately be up to the city to decide what will be offered, Hayes said. And as they work with the design team, they will consider the amenities to be implemented in the plans.

"That's something that we'll have a clear picture on in the mid-fall," he said, adding that there would be an opportunity for public input during that time.

Ritter said he was just excited that its opening would mean offering a place for Hartford-area residents to go, regardless of the amenities.

"I think we learned after the pandemic that you need these places to go," Ritter said. "To be with their families, to enjoy a day, to go for a hike, to go for a kayak, just to be outside."

Batterson would offer much-needed open space and outdoor recreation to residents of central Connecticut, who would also have public transportation options to get there.

"I just can't wait to be at the ribbon cutting," Ritter said.

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