

New Seaside Gateway Trail better connects Bridgeport to Seaside Park

Andy Tsubasa Field, *Staff Writer*

June 4, 2023



BRIDGEPORT — Frederick Law Olmsted, famed creator of Central Park, designed Seaside Park in the 1800s with the hope of better connecting people to nature.

Now, more than a century later, a new trail hopes to do just that.

“It continues Frederick Law Olmsted’s landscape design philosophy that embraced the healing power of nature that is created by plants, shade, fresh air, and vista,” Beth Santa, the Seaside Gateway Trail project’s team leader, said in a statement. “In honor of the 200th anniversary of Olmsted’s birth, we and our contributors are thrilled to renew the original 1867 Olmsted plan’s intent of accessibility to beauty and the outdoors for all the people of Bridgeport, The Park City.”

The University of Bridgeport recently announced the next phase of the Seaside Gateway Trail that overall includes an accessible walking trail along the park, new native trees and a meadow, some of which is already completed. University officials plan for the park to host an outdoor gathering space.

The trail will connect the Perry Memorial Arch on Waldemere Avenue to entrances at Marina Park Circle and Howe Avenue. Bridgeport’s Parks Commission and engineering department approved construction designs in March.

“The new footpaths and tree canopy of the Seaside Gateway Trail create a welcoming doorway to Bridgeport’s spectacular waterfront,” Santa said. “The new pathway design feels like it was created 150 years ago and gives new purpose to the layout of the trees, young and old.”

The project started over five years ago. In 2020, the University of Bridgeport joined fundraising efforts for the project before ultimately taking on a bigger role.

In a statement, Melanie Strout, the university's director of civic engagement, said the project has involved students, faculty and staff to help "improve the greater South End community." Strout pointed to how the Accounting Society student group helped the project manage grant funds, which she said "enabled us to keep the project moving forward without delay."

Along with connecting Seaside Park to Bridgeport, the project includes planting native trees and plants to protect the park against severe storms. An underground drip irrigation system with a solar-powered backflow prevention device will support the land during droughts.

In 2022, the Fairfield Garden Club and Women's Seamen's Friend Society of Connecticut purchased and planted almost two dozen storm-resistant, native trees using \$15,000 and \$10,000 grants. A volunteer team that included a University of Bridgeport professor and students, along with area residents, watered trees during severe droughts last year, according to the announcement.

Last year, the project was awarded a \$100,000 grant from the Community Environmental Benefit Fund, which is managed by the Bridgeport-based Environmental Task Force conservation group. Those dollars funded most of the project's first phase, which included the trails and underground drip irrigation system.

Other grants the project received for the first phase included \$10,000 from the Stephen J. and Madelyn M. Santa Environmental Fund, along with another \$10,000 worth of stone matrix trail material donated by O&G Industries, Inc.

The project's second phase consists of the installation of bollards and benches, along with native grass and ground cover plant areas partly to prevent erosion. University officials say the project needs private funding and additional grants to complete the phase.

For the third and final phase of the project, the University of Bridgeport plans for the upcoming trail to feature a gathering space, which would "allow community members, residents, and students to gather and engage in both educational programming and cultural events, among other learning opportunities," according to the announcement. The space, called the "Gateway Classroom," would also need additional funding, the announcement said.

"Witnessing the progress of the Seaside Gateway Trail has been very exciting for the faculty and students here at UB," Jim Casey, chair of University of Bridgeport's natural sciences department, said in a statement. "In addition to bolstering plant and pollinator biodiversity and further beautifying the already wonderful Seaside Park, the area will provide an outdoor classroom where students might meet for field-based science lectures and labs."

"The trail will foster a sense of place and encourage students to get outdoors and take pride in our beautiful setting here," he added.