



Water taxi makes a splash in New London, Groton



Paisley Donavon-Scott, 5, center, of New London and her friends Sky Croft, 3, right, of New London and Kiandra Rollins, 9, left, of Providence, R.I., enjoy the view while riding with their families on the new water taxi that connects New London City Pier, Groton Fort Street landing and Fort Trumbull State Park in New London Saturday, Sept. 6, 2014. The water taxi provides a transportation option for people to enjoy the historic parks and homes in the area.

Dana Jensen/The Day

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The inaugural run of the Groton-New London water taxi ferried full boatloads of passengers across the Thames River all day and into the night Saturday, giving the region a taste of a service supporters say would be essential to linking historic and cultural sites in the two communities into a multi-site attraction called the Thames River Heritage Park.

"I thought it was just great. I really loved it," said David Bailey of Groton, who rode the water taxi from Groton over to City Pier and Fort Trumbull in New London, then back to Groton in time for ceremonies at Fort Griswold State Park. "It'll definitely get more people to come down here, which is really what we want."

The free water taxi service's pilot voyages Saturday were the culmination of a regional effort to revive the creation of a new "state park without boundaries" that would include both forts, the Submarine Force Museum and USS Nautilus, the proposed Coast Guard Museum, the Avery-Copp house and other historic homes and sites. The water taxi will continue the 15-minute river crossing today and Sept. 13 and 14 from 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. on a 30-minute loop between City Pier, Fort Street in Groton and Fort Trumbull.

"Thank you for bringing the Thames River Heritage Park to fruition," Lt. Gov. Nancy Wyman said during a news conference about the park plans.

The news conference was followed by ceremonies at Fort Griswold marking the 233rd anniversary of the Battle of Groton Heights, in which 85 Revolutionary War patriots were killed by British forces.

Combining the two events was a fitting way to highlight both the significant historic assets of the region that would be cornerstones of the park, and put them in the context of the future plans, speakers said.

"We're celebrating history, but we're also making history," said state Rep. Ted Moukawsher, D-Groton.

The water taxi, a vessel on loan from Mystic Seaport for the two weekends, was filled to its 44-passenger capacity for nearly every one of its dozen trips across the river Saturday, demonstrating that if such a service were made available on a regular basis, it would be well used, supporters said. Private donors helped provide support for operating the water taxi, and Cross Sound Ferry crews operated the vessel at cost, and also coordinated insurance and Coast Guard approvals. Funding also came from the state, Groton City and the city of New London.

Groton City Mayor Marian Galbraith noted that businesses along Thames Street were busy with customers all day who'd taken the ferry across from New London.

"I am so excited about this," she said. "It's got momentum behind it."

Alan Plattus, director of the Yale Urban Design Workshop and a consultant for the Avery-Copp House, helped initiate the revival of the decades-old plan for the park, and said the region's leaders came together to support it in a way he has rarely seen in his 25 years of working with communities in Connecticut.

"In a practical sense, the stars are aligned for this," he said.

Key components of the park already exist, he noted. The water taxi is the element that would bring them together by getting visitors out onto the waterway that is central to the region's historic and cultural identity, and give them a chance "to have the experience of the river and seeing the sites from the river," Plattus said.

While previous plans for the park stalled over where and how to create a visitors center, the new concept is to use mobile technology to link the sites into a network, he said. What's mainly needed now is the "soft infrastructure" of interpretive signs, organization and coordination, he said.

"We don't need a visitors center," he said. "Every place is its own center, and visitors can start their journey at any point."