



Creating Rivergate Park: Cleveland Rowing Foundation buys site on Cuyahoga River

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Rowing Foundation board members along with a Rivergate Park member look at the room in the old retail boat store of the defunct Commodore's Club Marina that Cleveland Rowing will use to store their racing shells photographed September 10, 2010 along the Cuyahoga River. The non-profit organization bought the riverfront property from the now-defunct Commodore's Club Marina on Columbus Road Peninsula, which decided to close last spring and create roughly seven acres of publicly accessible recreation and parkland on the Cuyahoga River, whose banks are largely off-limits.

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- The Cleveland Rowing Foundation closed a deal Monday to create Rivergate Park, a new public park on the Cuyahoga River devoted to rowing, canoeing, kayaking and dragon-boating.

The foundation raised \$3 million in grants, donations and loans in less than a year to purchase nearly seven acres on Columbus Road Peninsula from the former Commodore's Club, a powerboat marina and boat storage center at 1785 Merwin Ave. The park is expected to open next summer.

"I am ecstatic," Jon Adams, co-chairman of the Rivergate Fund, said Monday. "We started at a tough time, given economic conditions, and fortunately, the community responded and made Rivergate a reality. It's a real win for the city."

John Debo, chief development officer of the Cuyahoga Valley National Park Association and a former superintendent of the national park, said Rivergate is "going to help reanimate the Cuyahoga River basin. It will be a catalyst that brings new energy and the right kind of development to the banks of the Cuyahoga and brings the city into new era that is very much river-focused."

Rowing foundation members hailed the deal as a sign of vastly improved water quality on the Cuyahoga.

"Back in the old days, you'd encounter rafts of debris that were impenetrable," said foundation member Bill Braun. "The difference in water quality today is incredible."

The Rivergate deal, aided by the San Francisco-based Trust for Public Land, requires the private, nonprofit rowing foundation to provide public access in perpetuity as a condition of grants it received.

At least two acres will be open and accessible to the public, although foundation officials said most of the property will be accessible and will feel seamless.

The new park, with 1,100 feet of river frontage, will replace the rowing foundation's rented facility on Scranton Road Peninsula, just upstream, where it has occupied 200 feet of dock space, a storage facility and 2.5 acres of land since 1989.

The foundation is the umbrella organization for rowing programs organized by eight local colleges, universities and high schools, plus the Western Reserve Rowing Association, which serves adults.

The new location includes a 6,000-square-foot clubhouse and an 18,000-square-foot storage building big enough to hold all 120 rowing shells now owned by members of the foundation.

The facilities at the new Rivergate provide plenty of space for existing programs. The rowing foundation also hopes to offer kayak rentals on the river as soon as next summer, followed soon after by canoe rentals.

Programs for adults and families interested in rowing will be available, plus an expanded program aimed at enticing teens from Cleveland schools to get involved.



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Rowing Foundation's board member and founder Bill Braun (l-r) is photographed with CRF's Theresa Gang, executive director, and Jon Adams, campaign co-chair of the Rivergate Park project, in the boat storage warehouse along the Cuyahoga River September 10, 2010 with a number of four-person shells stacked behind them. The non-profit organization bought the riverfront property from the now-defunct Commodore's Club Marina on Columbus Road Peninsula, which decided to close last spring and create roughly seven acres of publicly accessible recreation and parkland on the Cuyahoga River, whose banks are largely off-limits to the public.

The rowing foundation will soon launch plans to design landscaping and a community boathouse, which could cost \$7 million to \$10 million.

Owners of the Commodore's Club extended the deadline for the land purchase several times since the original date of March 31. Foundation members said they completed their fundraising campaign in recent weeks with a \$45,000 donation from Parker Hannafin Corp. and a \$925,000 bridge loan from Huntington Bank.

Other important gifts included a \$250,000 dollar-for-dollar matching grant from philanthropist Peter B. Lewis, chairman of Progressive Corp., plus a total of \$100,000 from Case Western Reserve University, the Spartan Alumni Rowing Association and Paul Buchheit, an early Google employee who wrote the Gmail program.

Foundation grants included \$300,000 from the Cleveland Foundation \$200,000 from the Gund Foundation and \$100,000 from the MetLife Foundation in New York.

The city of Cleveland will kick in a \$300,000 loan proposed earlier this year by Mayor Frank Jackson and approved by City Council. The city is also planning to build a small skate park immediately east of Rivergate to replace the former skate park at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum.

Rivergate Park will become part of a regional network of trails, pedestrian bridges and parks taking shape along the river from Cleveland south to the Cuyahoga Valley National Park and beyond.

"This is really just another link in the chain of establishing a strong, strong public park presence along the Cuyahoga from the lakefront into downtown Akron," Debo said.

"Once people get on the river and see how great it is, they're going to be really excited," said Robert Valerian, president of the rowing foundation. "When I think of the city, I think about what it looks like from the Cuyahoga River."