

Waves of Optimism for Waterfront

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By Vivian Li

For more than a year now, the economic news has been discouraging. As we enter 2009, there are waterfront happenings which give us reasons to celebrate:

Nearly a decade in the making, Battery Wharf, with its mix of condominiums, beautiful hotel rooms and public spaces, has quietly opened on the North End waterfront. Last month, the Fairmont Batter Wharf Hotel greeted its first guests, some of whom came by water taxi. Visitors walking along Battery Wharf's HarborWalk are able to go to a free second-floor observatory, with views of the harbor and East Boston, and in February the public will be able to enjoy a free ground-floor maritime exhibit in a museum quality setting, consistent with the site's Chapter 91 tidelands license requirements.

Nearby, construction is well underway for a new marine mammal center at the New England Aquarium. When completed next summer, there will be a new 700sq. ft. shallow pool for sea lions and seals, a new glass-enclosed area adjacent to the pool that will promote visitor interaction with the animals, and the creation of a larger, continuous pedestrian plaza overlooking Boston Harbor that also provides a view of the marine mammal center to those walking by. In a city and a region where tourism is the second largest employer, these improvements will enhance the visitor experience and potentially generate both additional tourists and local residents' spending.

Extras First

Likewise, the "topping off" ceremony on the first office building on the Fan Pier in December was a much-welcomed event. Even before the building opens in January, 2010, a number of public amenities incorporated in city and state permits will be coming on line at the Fan Pier: an enhanced HarborWalk segment on the south side; phase one of the marina, which has been advanced to be completed by next spring in order to host large-scale civic events; and a public green and public plaza next to the new building.

Less than half a mile away, construction is underway on the former Jimmy's Harborside Restaurant site for new restaurants, offices, and public access. When completed in the summer of 2010, a public landing/water taxi stop and HarborWalk segment for the public will open for the first time ever along that site, adjacent to a new Legal Sea Foods restaurant, as well as other restaurants, and outdoor seating area.

Boaters this summer may have noticed dredging operations in Boston Harbor. The first phase of the Inner Harbor Maintenance Dredging project, which dredged the harbor to a depth of 40 feet, was completed in November, allowing container vessels carrying cargo from Europe or Asia to utilize Conley Container Terminal in South Boston without having to wait for high tide.

The planning and permitting processes for these projects started close to a decade ago at a time when water quality improvements to Boston Harbor were first becoming evident to the general public. In these challenging economic times, city and state agencies, together with public authorities such as Massport and MassDevelopment, should continue to move forward with their planning and public participation processes so that waterfront developments and harbor improvements are fully permitted and ready to move forward when lending institutions and/or governmental agencies are able to provide capital or economic stimulus funds.

The coming year will be a wonderful time to enjoy Boston Harbor and the waterfront. Boston Harbor will be teeming with boats during the Volvo Ocean Race on the Fan Pier in April and Sail Boston's Tall Ships celebration throughout the harbor in July. Now more than ever, Boston's waterfront should be a key destination for residents and visitors alike.