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State Park by Avery Point gets $2.87 million restoration

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A restoration project at Bluff Point State Park led by the Connecticut National Estuarine Research Reserve was awarded a $2.87 million grant from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to protect the park against an encroaching sea level.

The grant is focused on replacing three of the park's culverts to restore the water flow between tidal marshes and tidal waters, according to Jason Krumholz, the principal investigator for the restoration and stewardship coordinator at the Connecticut National Estuarine Research Reserve (CTNERR). Culverts are large pipes that pass water under roads and obstacles.

"They're clogged and partially broken," Krumholz said about two of the three culverts. "Climate change and sea level rise has kind of gotten the best of them and they're really not doing what they need to do anymore."

CTNERR became part of NOAA's National Estuarine Research Reserve system in 2022. The reserve is one of 30 coastal areas designated to protect and study estuarine systems which are regions where rivers meet the sea, according to NERR's website.

Each of these reserves are managed by a lead state agency or university, with input from local partners, which NOAA oversees with funding, guidance and technical assistance. The University of Connecticut is the lead state agency for CTNERR, working in close collaboration with the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, and other local organizations, according to CTNERR officials.

Bluff Point is 4.3 miles away from the University of Connecticut's Avery Point campus. A 2023 NOAA sea level report said the rate of sea level rise in coastal areas is greater than the global average, and a research paper by UConn Professor James O'Donnell predicted sea levels to rise by a foot and eight inches in the sound by 2050.

Krumholz said the conditions of the culverts reduce water flow to important coastal marshes and worsens tidal flooding on the main path. He said the CTNERR saw a "win-win" to restore the marshes and main path by replacing the culverts with elevated bridges.

"The elevated bridges will allow people to still get out and enjoy the environment they want to enjoy," Krumholz said. The engineering firm CTNERR partnered with for the project, SLR International, also assisted in creating a site plan, which notes that CT DEEP estimates approximately 500,000 annual visitors in the park.

The project's elevated boardwalks will also address safety concerns that stem from the flooding main path additionally serving as the emergency access route, Krumholz said.

"You don't want to drive an ambulance through a foot of seawater to try and get someone in the event of an emergency," Krumholz said. He said the boardwalks will mostly be designed for pedestrians, with carrying capacity for emergency vehicles.

A 2023 grant from the Long Island Sound Futures Fund helped collect feedback from over 600 visitors and assess Bluff Point, according to the Long Island Sound Partnership. CTNERR's Education Coordinator Larissa Graham and Coastal Training Program Coordinator Katie Lund are helping Krumholz incorporate the feedback into the restoration, he said.

"We heard a lot of very good feedback and some of that feedback was... 'we love this place just the way it is, be careful about changing it,'" Krumholz said. "We're not trying to pave paradise here; we're trying to keep it the way it is for generations to come."

Focusing on the boardwalks with the grant money is how Krumholz said the restoration will preserve the natural character of Bluff Point while improving accessibility to the park. Krumholz said that when he's working on site, he'll often encounter visitors trapped by the tides.



The Bluff Point State Park shoreline on a calm sunny day. There will be a restoration project taking place that costs $2.87 million to revamp the state park. PHOTO COURTESY OF @ALLTRAILS ON PINTEREST.

"I've carried a lot of strollers across flooded portions of the path because someone will go out as the tide is coming in and it's dry, and then they're coming back and they're like 'wait a second, this was dry here before, and now there's water here, can you help me carry this stroller across,'" Krumholz said.

The grant covers the restoration of three marshes, but Krumholz said the CTNERR team is analyzing whether one of the degraded culverts for the marshes needs to be replaced.

"My preliminary thoughts from looking at it and walking past it a whole bunch is that it's fine, but we don't want to go on a preliminary hunch," Krumholz said. "It kind of falls in the less is more, where if it's doing what it needs to do, and it ain't broke, then don't fix it."

If the culvert does not need to be replaced, then the project may look to other options, which could include a living shoreline that uses natural materials like plants to protect against erosion, Krumholz said. He added that all decisions will need to be approved through the DEEP permit process before this takes place.

Eric Gileau, the operation supervisor for DEEP's eastern district, said the permits ensure that the development needed at Bluff Point help reach the project's intended restoration goals.

"This particular property has been one that hasn't really seen much money put into it... it's definitely due for some infrastructure development," Gileau said. "Anytime we want to recreate the marshes, we want to make sure we're not overly disturbing the area."

Some of the permits for the restoration project have already been approved, like a Chronolog system that Krumholz said allows visitors to place their phone in a structure that takes photos for artificial intelligence to document the changes over time. He said the Chronolog structures will be added very soon.

Other community engagement activities for the project, like volunteer days for invasive plant removal and coastal training workshops, will be worked into the project schedule once a more accurate timeline can be determined, Krumholz said.

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Releases New Album 'Hoggar' Tinariwen

OPINIONS | PAGE 7
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