

When built in 1895, the Lechmere Canal in Cambridge, MA, served as a shipping port for East Cambridge's booming manufacturing economy. Over time businesses left the area and the canal fell into disuse; deterioration spread into the surrounding neighborhoods. In the mid '70s it became apparent that the city must make a master plan to reclaim the area. Thus the East Cambridge Riverfront Plan was created. The Land & Water Conservation Fund contributed \$2 million toward the redevelopment of the canal site into a park which became the linchpin of a comprehensive urban design to revitalize the old industrial area. Today the Lechmere Canal Park provides recreation for residents, area workers and casual visitors, and is the center of the massive plan that has created the award-winning and highly successful residential/industrial redevelopment of the Charles Riverfront area.

Revitalized canal sparks urban redevelopment

Profile

Program:	Land & Water Conservation Fund	
Project:	Lechmere Canal Park	
City:	Cambridge, MA (population 91,260)	
Budget:	LWCF	\$2,000,000
	HUD/UDAG	2,700,000
	Urban Self-Help	1,200,000
	City of Cambridge public bond	2,600,000
	Private donations	1,000,000
	Total	\$9,500,000
Participants:	City of Cambridge/Community Development Department Private developers Commonwealth of Massachusetts	
Benefits:	New public open spaces Revitalization of old industrial area Stimulation of economic development New housing & jobs Increased tax base, decrease in need for state & federal funding for City of Cambridge	
Contact:	Planning & Grants Assistance Division National Park Service 143 South Third Street Philadelphia PA 19106 (215) 597-1571	

Old Canal Brings New Life

At the turn of the century barges on the Lechmere Canal brought raw materials to the glassworks and lumber yards of East Cambridge, MA, and delivered finished products from the city's factories to waiting buyers. As businesses gradually failed and left the area, the canal fell into disuse and became stagnant; parking lots, junkyards, gas stations, warehouses and factories dominated the scene. The area along the canal and the Charles River which had been designated as the site for a major public park in 1900 to be known as the "The Front," the "jewel" of Cambridge, was by 1972 a site of blight and deterioration.

The blight and deterioration also meant that the city was losing badly needed tax revenues. Despite the fact that the site is on the waterfront, has excellent views, is only minutes from downtown Boston and Logan Airport, it was of no interest to developers. When the Sonesta Hotel nearby on the banks of the Charles River wanted to expand, banks considered the area too risky and were unwilling to provide funding.

In response to the situation, the City of Cambridge held a series of planning meetings and discussions in the neighborhood in 1975 and 1976. The result was a decision to undertake a comprehensive urban design study of East Cambridge and to formulate a developmental framework for the riverfront that would benefit a broad range of interests: neighborhood and city, public and private. The goals of the study were to increase employment opportunities; expand the city's tax base; conserve the character of the neighborhood; and make productive use of the environmental, recreational, and economic potential offered by the Charles Riverfront.

The productive use of the site was essential to those who lived in East Cambridge for there was a serious shortage of neighborhood-oriented parks

and playgrounds. There were only 3.9 acres of recreational space for East Cambridge's 3,000 residents. Clearly, the plan would have to give priority to improving that situation. The study determined that there were nine actions that were necessary prerequisites to realizing a prosperous and vital East Cambridge Riverfront. The first two were:

Create a 13-acre open space system that would form the skeleton for new development, as well as link the historical residential community to the Charles River.

Transform the Lechmere Canal into the focal point of an animated and unique public space surrounded by retail activity and residential use.

Centerpiece of Redevelopment

The Lechmere Canal Park is the centerpiece of the Cambridge Community Development Department's larger design. The 7-acre park and open space system became the framework for the overall development of the area. A planned strategy enticed builders and developers by first having a park setting around the rebuilt canal with extensive plantings, walkways, benches and tables as an environment for new building. Private developers made commitments to build new office, commercial and residential developments on the perimeter, based on the design of Canal Park. The strategy also assured rehabilitation and conservation opportunities for the adjacent residential neighborhood as a ripple effect of the development of the park.

City of Cambridge/Community Development Department planners worked with developers and landowners to encourage coherent design among the new developments in the area. They also met with the East Cambridge Stabilization Committee,



formed to mitigate some of the impacts of commercial redevelopment on the neighborhood community, to discuss prospective plans. In addition, they supported the city's applications for Community Development block grants that assisted in the construction of needed infrastructure improvements. This partnership between the city, the neighborhood, and private developers has been essential to the success of the Lechmere Canal Park project. Although the project includes developments by three different landowners, the Canal Park area is unified and appears to be the product of a single designer. Architectural guidelines ensured that the designs would function cohesively, so window and ornamental lines match from building to building as do the exterior

materials of red brick and granite. The ground floor of all buildings facing the canal is designed to accommodate retail/restaurant uses.

The rebuilt canal extends inland 1,000 feet from the Charles River and culminates in a circular pool 300 feet in diameter with a soaring 60-foot fountain in the center. The canal is about 100 feet wide; it is about eight feet deep in the center and four feet at the edges. Two levels of landscaped walkways, 10- to 14-foot wide, run about a quarter of a mile around the perimeter of the canal and make an excellent jogging track. There is a gazebo projecting partway into the canal and benches and historic lighting fixtures are strategically placed in the landscaped park. A private maintenance

contract, administered by the Department of Public Works, is paid for by the city and abutting landowners on a proportional basis. The city pays approximately 25 percent of the maintenance cost while the abutters pay 75 percent with their individual rates varying according to their frontage on the park.

The Canal Park forms a part of the larger open space system connecting with Charles Park, Front Park and the widened riverfront linear park. A new parkway system routes most traffic away from the riverfront while easing the traffic burden on the historic neighborhoods.

The Private Investment

A total of \$170 million in private investment has gone into the development immediately abutting the park and it will produce an estimated \$3.5 million in taxes. There are five major building sites surrounding the park that provide a mixed development:

An office building completed in 1985 provides 111,000 square feet of commercial space for a software company with 300 employees.

A condominium with 180 units built in two phases, the first completed early in 1988 and the second under construction.

The Cambridgeside Galleria, designed to emulate London's Burlington Arcade—one of the most successful enclosed shopping streets in the world—is a mixed-use development with 680,000 square feet of retail space, 90,000 square feet of office space, and 80 housing units which began construction late in 1987 and is expected to be completed in 1991.

Adjacent commercial office buildings were planned in two stages. The first was completed in 1987 with 100,000 square feet floor area and the second, which will provide 160,000 square feet, will begin construction in Spring 1989.

The City of Cambridge has been very successful in promoting new development, increasing its tax base and providing new public open space

recreation in an area where none existed at the Lechmere Canal Park. The overall East Cambridge Riverfront Plan is expected to bring in \$555 million in private development with more than \$11 million in new taxes. As a result, continuing development in the residential areas adjacent to public parks in East Cambridge will enhance the parks' usability. If the public needs for open space continue to be provided and maintained by the private sector, as they are in Canal Park, and the public enjoys the parks and treats them well, the city's scarce resources can be devoted to the maintenance of other existing facilities.

Beginning in 1979, the East Cambridge Stabilization Committee was given \$250,000 a year for a period of 13 years to fund projects identified by the neighborhood as important to its long-term stability and livability. Funding for the first five years came from federal Community Development Block Grant funds and now comes out of City tax revenues. Use of the money is restricted to Block Grant eligible activities. Four community playgrounds have been allocated money for substantial rehabilitation and improvement. In addition, money has gone for housing rehabilitation for low- and moderate-income residents and to fund publication of a community newspaper distributed free to all residents.

The area that was of no interest to developers is now highly desirable and land costs have risen 10-fold in the intervening years. Even more gratifying to the planners is the Citation for Excellence in Urban Design/1988 conferred on the East Cambridge Riverfront Plan by the American Institute of Architects which states that the award is "a reflection of the commitment and creativity of the recipient(s)."

The Lechmere Canal Park was also recognized in 1988 as an outstanding example of how a park stimulates economic development. The award was presented by the Mid-Atlantic Region of the National Park Service after a competition designed "to recognize the outstanding achievements of the Land and Water Conservation Fund program and to encourage excellence in the planning, design and management of park and recreation facilities."

Written by Dolores M. Mescher



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

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EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT
ROBERT W. HEALY
City Manager

RICHARD C. ROSSI
Deputy City Manager

February 27, 1989

To the Honorable, the City Manager:

Enclosed please find a brochure which we received from the National Park Service, U. S. Department of the Interior, recognizing Lechmere Canal Park for its role in stimulating economic revitalization in East Cambridge. The National Park Service has a strong interest in the project having assisted in construction of the park through a Land and Water Conservation Fund grant of \$2,000,000. Last June, the National Park Service gave the City an Award of Excellence for the park and has now published this brochure which is being distributed nationwide. The recognition is a tribute to the City of Cambridge and its accomplishments in encouraging revitalization through public improvement projects.

Very truly yours,

Robert W. Healy
City Manager

RWH/mbf
Enc.

Agenda Item No. 3 S-128

Re: enclosed brochure prepared by the National Park Service, US Dept. of the Interior, recognizing Lechmere Canal for its role in stimulating economic revitalization in East Cambridge.

In City Council,

February 27, 1989

2-27-89

Placed on file.