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In Southport, Conn., a Park Is Reborn

Outdoor Enthusiasts Transform a Neglected Nature Preserve



Natalie Keyssar for The Wall Street Journal

Friends of Southport Park's President Frank Festini, Treasurer Ellen Levinson and Vice President Dan Zelson.

In Southport, a Park Reborn

By JOSEPH DE AVILA

A group of outdoor enthusiasts is turning a neglected, privately owned nature preserve in the southwestern Connecticut town of Southport into a newly minted park.

The Sasquanaug Association, which owns Southport Park, worked with other nonprofit partners and private donors to raise \$350,000 to redesign the 11-acre tract. The private park opens Saturday and the public will be admitted free of charge.

"A lot of people who lived here much longer than I have never even knew the park existed," said Frank Festini, a custom-home builder who belongs to the Sasquanaug Association, a local nonprofit group. He has lived in Southport for more than a decade.

The park is wedged between Interstate 95 and the Amtrak and Metro-North railroads. It previously had some worn-down walking trails amid overgrown woodlands dotted with invasive

plant species such as garlic mustard and barberry weeds.

As part of its face-lift, the park's trails were cleared, and new local plants and flowers were added. The park now has a proper entrance, new bridges, a log fort and viewing area to watch the nearby trains pass.

The property originally belonged to the New York, New Haven and Hartford Railroad that operated in the Northeast from the late 1800s to the 1960s. About a century ago, the railroad company chopped down all the trees of what is now Southport Park to sell as lumber.

"All the neighbors were so upset they were able to raise funds to buy the park from the railroad company," said Ellen Levinson, a member of Sasquanaug Association.

In 1914, local resident Milton Lacey bought the cleared land from the railroad company. He and other Southport residents then slowly restored the area as a park and nature preserve. In the 1950s, Mr. Lacey left the

parkland to the Sasquanaug Association, a local group originally formed to bring sidewalks to Southport, Mr. Festini said.

Southport Park eventually fell on hard times, and became a foreboding forest where few residents explored. The Sasquanaug Association, who formed a separate group known as Friends of Southport Park, figured getting money from local government wouldn't be easy, so its members looked elsewhere for redesign funds. They thought "rather than get into that mire, we'd just go ahead and raise the money ourselves," said Dan Zelson, a Southport resident and shopping-center developer who helped steer the redesign plan.

The park's rebirth, along with recent development nearby such as a condo and hotel property, has helped improve the area near the railroad, said Mark Finlay, a local architect who worked on the park design. "One piece at a time we are pulling this side of the tracks into the center of Southport," he said.