

## East Side waterfront parks catching up

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It's a tale of two waterfronts.

On Manhattan's West Side, both [Hudson River Park](#) and [Riverside Park](#) provide acres of ballfields, running and bike paths, boat launches, playgrounds and other recreational amenities. In contrast, a decaying and disjointed esplanade lines much of the East River.

Slowly, the East Side is starting to catch up. A string of land deals, park restorations and pier rehabilitations in recent years has put the city closer to making the idea of a green necklace around the island of Manhattan a reality.

"The waterfront is one of the city's greatest assets," said Seth Pinsky, president of the [New York City Economic Development Corp.](#) "It is our responsibility to exploit it in a way that maximizes it for the enjoyment and [benefit](#) of the city and its residents."

In March 2011, Mayor [Michael Bloomberg](#) unveiled "Vision 2020: New York City Comprehensive Waterfront Plan," a proposal to revitalize the city's 520 miles of shoreline. The EDC is in charge of planning and executing many of the projects in the plan, which lists the East River as a priority.

Work has already been done in lower Manhattan to move this vision forward.

Last July, the first phase of a \$165 million project by the EDC to revitalize a 2-mile stretch of land along the waterfront from the southern tip of Manhattan to East River Park, just north of the Manhattan Bridge, opened to the public. The two-block portion of the esplanade from [Wall Street](#) to Maiden Lane features bar seating, benches and chairs, plantings, a new dog run and a lookout that allows visitors to observe the water with unobstructed views.

In the fall, Pier 15, a 2-level reconstructed waterfront pier, opened to the public one block below the [South Street Seaport](#).

"There's really been a great change down here," said Andy Zargoza, 54, a native New Yorker who stopped to enjoy the view by Pier 15 one Friday evening. He rides his bike along the waterfront daily. "I used to come to this area and there was nothing here. Now look at it. It's beautiful."

The EDC has also begun preliminary construction on Pier 35, which is just north of the Manhattan Bridge, and plans to open it in September of next year. It will include landscaped open space and an "Eco Park" -- an intertidal zone that will provide habitat for aquatic species. Much of the larger project that will include a separate bikeway and walkway, planters and seating along the esplanade is also expected to open in stages next year.

Sen. [Charles Schumer](#) (D-N.Y.) and state Sen. [Daniel Squadron](#) (D-Brooklyn) announced in November that they secured \$14 million in federal funding from the Lower Manhattan Development Corp. to begin the redevelopment of Pier 42, which now houses an empty warehouse, into parkland. The pier, located between Gouverneur and Jackson streets, will expand East River Park, a 45-acre stretch of land that runs from East 12th Street south to Montgomery Street.

"This funding is a big step toward the world-class waterfront and open space we've long fought for, while continuing the revitalization of lower Manhattan," Squadron said.

According to LMDC estimates, the entire project would cost about \$40 million, which could potentially come from additional LMDC financing, if it becomes available, or from the city. But there is no timetable for completion yet.

### UN parkland exchange

For east midtown, city and state officials announced a complex preliminary land deal with the [United Nations](#) last October that could close the 22-block gap in the East River esplanade. In exchange for building a tower on part of [Robert Moses](#) playground, just south of UN headquarters, the United Nations would give \$73 million to the city to replace the lost parkland and build an esplanade from East 38th Street to East 60th Street, where there is now only intermittent access to the water.

"We are allowing for development of open space at no additional cost to taxpayers, and that is very unusual," said City Councilman Daniel Garodnick (D-Manhattan), one of the elected officials who pressed for the deal. "We very badly need to expand parkland on the east side of Manhattan. This is a historic opportunity to do just that."

Though there is no official agreement with the UN yet, Mark Thompson, chairman of Community Board 6, said the UN is creating designs for the new building and has begun to transfer funds to the city for the development of the new open space. "Wheels that have turned so slowly are starting to finally move rapidly," Thompson said. "This has been in the

works for a very long time, and bit by bit it will happen."

#### **New ideas for esplanade**

At the southern end of the future esplanade from East 38th to 41st streets is Waterside Pier, a former Con Edison energy company site that has been defunct for years. In 2011, fulfilling legal obligations outlined in the original lease, Con Ed gave the city \$13 million toward the eventual reconstruction of the pier into park space.

"We're finally starting to see investment in the east midtown waterfront, which hasn't seen as much investment as other areas of the city," said Raju Mann, director of planning at the [Municipal Art Society](#) of New York, which is involved in the design of the pier.

The esplanade from East 60th to 125th streets has been plagued for decades by crumbling seawall and giant sink holes. Though there were some city-funded improvements in the last year, residents and community groups say much more needs to be done.

No funding is in place, but Civitas, a nonprofit organization that works for improved land use and transportation policies on the [Upper East Side](#) and [East Harlem](#), recently organized a design competition to develop creative concepts for the esplanade.

"The way these conversations start happening is to have competitions and get designers thinking about how to develop a site differently," said Hunter Armstrong, the group's executive director.

However, those planning these projects may want to look to the issues facing Hudson River Park to help avoid future problems, Mann, the art society planning director said.

"If there's any word of caution to all this planning on the East River, it's that it's one thing to build something. It's another thing to maintain it," he said.

#### **Maintenance issues**

Currently, the 5-mile stretch of land along the Hudson from [Battery Park City](#) to [Hell's Kitchen](#) in midtown is facing major financial problems. The park, which is funded by the city, state and revenue the park produces from its commercial sites, is only 70 percent complete and will cost \$200 million to finish.

But government funding has fallen to \$7 million from a high of \$42 million in 2008, and the Hudson River Park Trust, created in 1998 to manage and develop the park, also faces maintenance issues unforeseen when it was built, said Stefan Friedman, a trust spokesman.

The cost of caring for structures built over water is far higher than those on land because they are subject to winds, tides and marine borers that infiltrate wood and eat it.

"The 14 years since the Hudson River Park Trust's creation revealed the incredible expense of maintaining a park with two inherent design challenges -- it is built on water and serves as the foundation for significant infrastructure," Friedman said. "The initial cost maintenance estimates do not come close to the actual dollars needed."

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