

NEW HAVEN CITY PLAN COMMISSION ADVISORY REPORT

RE: **RESOLUTION OF THE BOARD OF ALDERS** of the City of New Haven authorizing the New Haven Parks Department to accept a grant in the amount of up to \$334,500 from the Connecticut Department of Energy & Environmental Protection to revitalize the Barnard Nature Center Complex.

Submitted by: Director of New Haven Parks Department

REPORT:1682-09

ADVICE: Approval

BACKGROUND:

The area of West River Memorial Park totals 196 acres and an approximate 7,086 residents live within a 10-minute walk to the park (ESRI, 2023). The current options for foot traffic, cyclists, and people that use mobile devices remain underdeveloped and unsafe. The West River Memorial Park Renewal Team, in partnership with the New Haven Coalition for Active Transportation (NCAT), conducted a walking audit and found cross-park options were unsafe due to the high volume of traffic, chronic speeding, poor lighting, lack of sidewalks or accessible paths, and lack of crosswalks, pedestrian crossings, and traffic signals (NCAT, 2025) at intersections to and from landmarks, such as the Barnard Nature Center section of the park. Despite the improvements needed, Barnard Nature Center and the supporting area is currently utilized to host public canoeing events, community festivals, and environmental education workshops by New Haven Parks Outdoor Adventure Program and the Community Placemaking Engagement Network (CPEN), and has much potential to expand community engagement, if accessibility improvements are made.

The Barnard Nature Center sits on the park property and was completed in 2006. It is one of the few LEED Gold certified buildings owned by the city. The center's sustainable architecture (green roof, solar panel array) and past restoration efforts reflect how urban nature centers can serve as both ecological education assets and community hubs and anchors. Unfortunately, the nature center is currently underutilized, resulting from poor access to the center and unsafe conditions surrounding the park. A 229-foot pedestrian bridge was constructed in 2006 to connect the school campus across a major state road, Ella T. Grasso Blvd. / Route 10 to the nature center. The pedestrian bridge access is restricted to the public-school students and New Haven Parks staff only, so the public does not have a safe crossing to the park or nature center. The Barnard Nature Center was designed not only as a place of environmental education, but also as a symbol of urban restoration and an example of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's "urban oasis" program. However, to date, the nature center is not being used regularly by Barnard School.

One purpose of this project is to revitalize the Barnard Nature Center complex, through providing better and safer access to park users, which in turn will make it a destination within the larger vision for West River Memorial Park, along the West River Greenway. The New Haven Parks Outdoor Adventure Program has a mission to provide access, outdoor activities, and place-based environmental education to the residents of New Haven within the city's parks. Our work fosters community engagement and builds partnerships through stewardship, making improved connectivity and access to an environmental education center within the West River neighborhood a priority for our program, as well as identified as fulfilling priorities of community partners.

While New Haven has ranked well in terms of accessible amenities and reachable distance between parks and residents according to the scores from the Trust for Public Lands (2021), ongoing action is necessary to make our parks and trails more welcoming and accessible to all. Increased access, curated, informational paths and improved amenities within the Barnard Nature Center complex of West River Memorial Park will bring Barnard Nature Center back to life and fulfill its initial intent.

PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS

Vision 2034, **New Haven's Comprehensive Plan**, includes the following goals and strategies:

Great Places to Live

Goal 5: Support place-based programs, policies, and improvements, that align with the unique assets and goals of each neighborhood and residents' quality of life

Move Together

Goal 3: Make it easier and safer for people to walk, bike, and use mobility devices and public transportation.

- Strategy 3.1: Prioritize pedestrian, bicycle, and transit enhancements in historically low income communities, communities of color, and areas where a high share of households don't have access to a car.

Climate & Ecological Connections

Goal 3: Improve the condition of parks and open space and ensure that they are safe and accessible to all.

- Strategy 3.1: Make investments in the park system using an equity investment strategy.

Civic Services & Experiences

Goal 3: Ensure that City services and facilities are accessible to people with disabilities.

Goal 9: Expand and improve access to youth and recreation services

The award and acceptance of the \$334,500 in grant funds from the State of Connecticut DEEP Urban Green & Community Garden grant program for the improvement of and revitalization to the West River Neighborhood Connecticut Trail and Barnard Nature Center will continue to improve upon the access to community facilities, and assets as well as reestablish the presence and access to places of learning and engagement by youth, adults, the broader city residents, and visitors. Improvements to the Trail and Center will providing better and safer access to park users, which in turn will make it a destination within the larger vision for West River Memorial Park, and City of New Haven.

ADVICE

Authorization of this Resolution aligns with the City's Comprehensive Plan and the State of Connecticut's goals.

ADOPTED: May 20, 2026
Ernest Pagan
Chair

ATTEST: _____
Laura Brown
Executive Director, City Plan Department