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FEATURED TOP STORY

Gov. Hogan celebrates Denton visitor center groundbreaking

By DUSTIN HOLT dholt@chespub.com Jun 24, 2016



Maryland Transportation Secretary Pete Rahn, left, Gov. Larry Hogan, Denton Mayor Abby McNinch and J.O.K. Walsh break ground Thursday for the new Crouse Park Visitor and Heritage Center in Denton.

PHOTO BY DUSTIN HOLT

DENTON — Gov. Larry Hogan celebrated the groundbreaking for the new Crouse Park Visitor and Heritage Center in Denton Thursday with town and county officials.

The ceremony comes 14 years after a study recommended the town build a visitors center, and the Denton Development Corporation began the planning process.

In January, the state approved the town of Denton's plan to build the center, which will be on the Choptank River waterfront at Crouse Park. The center will be a part of the Wharves at Choptank Crossing project.

The visitors center's construction and improvements to Crouse Park will be funded by state and federal money. The 2,500-square foot visitors center and site work will cost about \$2.1 million. Much of the state and federal funding comes from gas taxes set aside for visitors centers.

"It's great to be back here in Denton," Hogan said. "I'm especially pleased to be able to join you as we celebrate this important achievement for the town of Denton, for Caroline County and for the entire state of Maryland. No project should ever take 14 years, and that's why our entire administration worked tirelessly with the town of Denton and your state delegation to help make today possible.

"As we finally break ground on the Crouse Park Visitor and Heritage Center — Caroline County's very first visitors center — I want to recognize former Sen. Richard Colburn and former Del. Rudy Cane who sponsored the bond bill to secure additional state funding to get this important project underway," he said. "This 2,500-square foot center will highlight the region's robust cultural and historical heritage. I'm looking forward to coming back to see its exhibits on the Native American period, the Underground Railroad, the Civil War and the Chesapeake Bay ecosystem."

The new visitors center, will be the headquarters for the Caroline County Office of Tourism along with an interpretive center, heritage display and restrooms for tour buses. The center will be built on stilts and have three exterior decks for a panoramic view of the Choptank River waterfront in downtown Denton.

Improvements to Crouse Park include rebuilding the park ground by raising it almost a foot to curb a flood hazard. The park also will feature a nature trail, children's play area, rain garden, native plants and access to the Choptank River for water sports.

"Tourism is big business in Maryland, and this center will be great for Denton and Caroline County," Hogan said. "It represents the northern gateway to the Harriet Tubman National Scenic Byway and Michener's Chesapeake Country Scenic Byway as visitors explore the region.

"In addition to supporting tourism, this center will also be a boon for the local economy," he said. "The primary focus of our administration is economic development, growing our private sector, putting more people to work and improving our economy.

"By encouraging more people to visit Denton and Caroline County, the Crouse Park Visitor and Heritage Center will provide future opportunities for the waterfront here, including the exciting plan for the Wharves at Choptank Crossing," he said. "I look forward to seeing this visitor center open for business next year."

The town put the project out for bid at the end of January with Harper and Sons in Easton winning the construction bid. The Wharves at Choptank Crossing began in 2002 with the town of Denton working with Caroline nonprofit Denton Development Corporation to come up with a plan for the Choptank River waterfront. The project has faced many hurdles since 2002 with trying to secure funds, getting environmental approval from many state and federal agencies and having permits and grants expire while new permits and grants were being applied for.

"I'm truly honored to have the governor here," said Denton Town Manager Don Mulrine. "He is the governor of the people. You can truly see that in everything he does throughout the state.

"He has put businesses as a top priority," he said. "He has also put every town, every city, every county as the top of his priority. You see that with (state) Route 404 and what he has done out there with funding it.

"The Visitor and Heritage Center at the Wharves of Choptank is very special, and should do a lot for a lot of individuals in the town of Denton, our partners with the neighboring towns in Caroline County and Caroline County in itself. Denton Development Corporation with J.O.K. Walsh and his team started this in those early days. They started the designs. They started with the grants. They started with the ideas of putting this plan together at the Wharfs here.

Mulrine thanked the Maryland Department of Housing and Community Development for securing funding for the project.

"Those people go out of their way to help us, and get to where we are today," he said. "Without them, we would not have been able to put together that last piece of funding."

Walsh said the visitors center will play four roles — enhance recreation, education of ecology and heritage, community facilities and help small businesses and nonprofits in the county.

"This is a river town," he said. "This is our only river access.

"The Wharves project is the western anchors for our historic downtown," he said. "The eastern anchor is the Artsway, which is an arts colony along Fourth Street. Between there, we are going to put restaurants. We already have three and we are about to get our fourth and we hope to have a fifth over here on the waterfront. Between these restaurants, we are going to put our retail so it is all strong from beginning to end.

"The visitor center is going to send people out in the county — everything from canoe outfitter in Greensboro and down to the Soap Box Derby that is conducted in Federalsburg," he said. "There is a tremendous amount of heritage stories available right here on the waterfront. There is also plenty of education things to do in the county, and that is where the visitor center comes in."

Walsh thanked Mulrine and former town manager Terry Fearins for leading the project.

"Terry Fearins had the foresight to get the consultants to come in 1997 and 2002," he said. "Don Mulrine, the only thing you can say about Don is he is tenacious. He is decisive. He is absolutely the most important person with this project."

Walsh also thanked Colburn and the Caroline County Commissioners for supporting the project.

"Richard Colburn is the most determined, the most persistent guy you'll ever meet," he said. "He never, never, never, never stops pushing for the state and federal funds. We really, really appreciate them. We could not have done the project without him."

Colburn thanked the Caroline County Commissioners for pushing the project year after year.

He said Maryland has benefited greatly from the business-friendly approach by Gov. Hogan.

Denton Mayor Abby McNinch said the town was honored to host Hogan and the first lady, Yumi Hogan.

"When I reflect on this project, the adjectives that come to mind are persistence and perseverance from everyone involved," she said. "These adjectives also exemplify the unique spirit of Denton, Caroline County and the Eastern Shore."

Funding for the project includes \$1.66 million from federal TEP funding, a \$150,000 grant from the state Community Legacy Program and \$165,000 from a state-approved bond bill. The visitors center is scheduled to be completed in fall 2017.

Also attending the ceremony were Maryland Agriculture Secretary Joe Bartenfelder and Eastern Shore Delegation members Del. Jeff Ghrist, R-36-Caroline; Sen. Addie Eckardt, R-37B-Mid-Shore; Del. Johnny Mautz, R-37B-Talbot; Del. Jay Jacobs, R-36-Kent; and Del. Steve Arentz, R-36-Queen Anne's.

After the ceremony, Hogan visited businesses in downtown Denton.

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