Rhode Island is known for its beautiful landscapes, diverse wildlife, and premiere outdoor recreational facilities. Arcadia Management Area, which comprises nearly 16,000 acres of the state’s western borderlands, is Rhode Island’s largest recreational area. Arcadia is home to more than 90 miles of forested trails and 30 miles of riverine shoreline.

The new Natural Resources & Visitors Center at Browning Mill Pond will enhance visitors’ experience at Arcadia, offering information on the area’s recreational activities as well as comfort facilities, community space, and an inviting place for picnicking and learning about Arcadia’s storied history.

Exhibits planned for the Center will highlight the importance of Arcadia and its preservation – while allowing visitors to interact directly with the conservationists managing the lands. Located within 10 miles of the majority of DEM’s 51,000 acres of management lands, the venue will be an important base of operation for wildlife and fisheries biologists and foresters, allowing them to better coordinate and be proximate to the resources under their care.

Set back 145 feet from Browning Mill Pond, the Center was thoughtfully designed to reflect the character of its rural setting and to minimize any environmental impacts. It will feature many ‘green’ elements – including pervious parking surfaces, stormwater controls, and native plantings – and was designed to meet the R.I. Green Construction Code, an accepted alternative to LEED.

For questions about the project contact Larry Mouradjian, RI DEM Associate Director for Natural Resources, at 401.222.4700 ext. 2414.

-To Learn More-

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WHY IS THIS BUILDING NECESSARY? WHAT IS ITS PURPOSE?

DEM’s mission is to protect and promote Rhode Island’s environment and natural resources. At the heart of this mission is encouraging people to get outdoors and enjoy nature. And we continue to invest in expanding public programming, such as our popular Great Outdoors Pursuit, and planning for facilities such as this Center as a central part of this effort. Information on recreational opportunities at Arcadia will be available at the Center – as well as comfort facilities and community space. The Center will also allow wildlife and fisheries biologists and foresters to better coordinate and be proximate to the resources managed by DEM. This location is within ten miles of the majority of DEM’s 51,000 acres of management lands, making it an ideal base of operation for staff working on environmental conservation.

WHY PUT THIS FACILITY AT BROWNING MILL POND? AREN’T THERE OTHER FACILITIES YOU COULD USE?

Many considerations were taken into account when selecting a location for the Center. DEM originally envisioned a new building at the Great Swamp Management Area in West Kingston. However, this site was ruled out given several concerns, including its archeological significance. As a formerly developed site and an area in close proximity to important management lands for DEM, the Browning Mill location was selected. DEM does not have an existing structure within its inventory that could support the myriad needs served by the Browning Mill location.

ISN’T THIS SITE PROTECTED OPEN SPACE?

This is a formerly developed site that was once home to a large campground and public beach. Over the years, buildings, gravel roads and parking areas were added to support its recreational uses. In designing this facility, we carefully considered the surrounding rural setting, historic uses of the area, wildlife habitats, and existing infrastructure. The Adirondack-style architecture is meant to complement the area’s character. And many ‘green’ features were included to minimize its overall impact on the environment; this includes pervious parking surfaces, stormwater controls, native plantings, and building materials that promote energy efficiency. The new Center will be located outside the floodplain and was designed to meet the RI Green Construction Code, an accepted alternative to LEED.

WHY WASN’T THE COMMUNITY INFORMED ABOUT THIS PROJECT EARLY ON IN PLANNING?

While we’ve been in touch with town officials during the design phase, it is clear more outreach was needed to ensure people in the community had good information and an opportunity to ask questions and provide input. We hope community members will review the project information available at www.dem.ri.gov/pressroom and reach out to Larry Mouradjian at 401.222.4700 x. 2414 with any questions or feedback. While we cannot move the location of the building or make other major changes at this point, there may be some changes possible – such as to landscaping or exterior lighting.

THE COMMUNITY HAS USED THIS AREA FOR PICNICKING, SLEDDING, ETC. HOW WILL THIS FACILITY IMPACT THESE RECREATIONAL USES?

Our goal with the Center is to enhance the visitors’ experience at Arcadia – from providing information on recreational opportunities in the area to offering comfort facilities and an inviting space for picnicking and learning about the history of Arcadia. We hope the community will continue to enjoy this area as they always have in addition to participating in the expanded programs and opportunities made possible by the facility’s presence. The exhibits planned in the space will celebrate the importance of Arcadia and its preservation. And people will be able to interact directly with biologists, foresters, and other staff to learn about and get involved with environmental conservation efforts. We anticipate offering business and some weekend hours to accommodate public programming and needs throughout the year – with increased coverage during peak seasons.

WILL THIS FACILITY LEAD TO MORE TRAFFIC IN THE AREA?

We do not anticipate a marked increase in traffic as a result of this facility. By comparison, the traffic during the summer season would have been much greater when the beach and campground were in operation. The site is designed to accommodate just over 40 parking spaces. At times, visitation may increase slightly – for educational programming or visiting staff. Public visitation to the facility is weather dependent but expected to average 50 visitors per week.

IN BUILDING THIS FACILITY, ARE YOU FOLLOWING THE SAME ENVIRONMENTAL STANDARDS PRESCRIBED FOR OTHER BUILDERS? THE SITING FEELS TOO CLOSE TO THE WATER AND INCONSISTENT WITH WETLAND PERMIT RULES.

Yes, we are governed by the same standards. This facility – including parking lots, landscaping, and wastewater treatment systems – are outside of freshwater wetlands and related buffers. The project required, and received, a wetlands permit due to changes in the design of its stormwater management system. All stormwater and wastewater treatment standards (including setback requirements) have also been met.

WILL THIS FACILITY IMPACT WATER QUALITY IN THE POND?

We have designed the new facility to ensure it does not degrade the pond or contribute to flooding. As mentioned above, it will reside outside of the floodplain and incorporate many “green” elements from pervious parking and stormwater controls to native landscaping.

WILL THIS PROJECT IMPACT WILDLIFE AND PLANT HABITATS?

According to Rhode Island Natural Heritage data, there are no endangered/threatened species or other important habitats impacted by this project. The only Natural Heritage data point in Browning Mill Pond is for a plant, Zigzag bladdertongue. The plant is associated with wet, sandy, acidic soils and bogs or ferns. Soil maps and the heritage record suggest that it would most likely be found along the south shore of the small cove that the building will overlook. This is a wooded area well outside the Center footprint. Planned stormwater controls from the building and parking areas will prevent impacts to water quality in the pond.

We know there are concerns in the community regarding long-eared bats. While suitable habitat for the species exists in this area, according to wildlife experts, there is no evidence to suggest the trees that will be cleared during construction provide critical habitat. We estimate that no more than a dozen trees, identified as roadside and landscaped plantings by DEM’s Forestry Division, will be cleared during construction. By way of background, this species of bat breeds in the fall, using tree cavities to give birth and raise their young from late May through July. With construction of the Center planned for early spring, we do not anticipate any impacts.

WHY DOES THE PROJECT COST $7 MILLION? HOW IS IT BEING PAID FOR?

This project went out to bid twice with the goal of minimizing cost. The original bid was $7.7 million; the second bid was $7 million. Given the rural character of the area and the facility’s planned uses, special care was taken to ensure the Center’s design would complement its surrounding setting and provide an inviting space for the public to enjoy. This project was approved for Rhode Island Capital Plan (RICAP) funds, which are available only for capital projects such as this Center. Other recent projects funded through RICAP include the new beach pavilion at Lincoln Woods State Park (opening this spring), comfort facilities at Fisherman’s Memorial Campground, and improvements to Colt and Goddard State Parks. These projects are in line with the State’s broader effort to support management and growth of the outdoor recreation economy. Over the last year, the Rhode Island Outdoor Recreation Council worked to advance an actionable vision for investing in our state’s wealth of historic parks, beaches, campgrounds, and other recreational facilities. This vision is captured in the Final Report, A New Vision for Outdoor Recreation in Rhode Island, in December 2016.

TO LEARN MORE: Call Larry Mouradjian, RI DEM Associate Director for Natural Resources, at 401.222.4700 ext. 2414
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