

Collaborating for the Future: Partners in the Park

► *New Bedford Whaling NHP*

“Partners in the Park has allowed for cohesiveness among the partners, ensuring that their...missions are in step with the mission of the park. —Antone G. Souza, Executive Director, Waterfront Historic Area League (WHALE)



The “Partners in the Park” initiative at New Bedford Whaling NHP is an excellent example of integrating civic engagement principles and practices into all aspects of park planning and operations. Partners illustrates the power of cultivating a collective relationship with the park’s many stakeholders and communities of interest. As a result of inviting stakeholders to join in an on-going roundtable dialogue, NPS has forged a cohesiveness of purpose and spirit among its partners. This cohesiveness has enabled NPS to collaborate more effectively with its partners to develop and now implement the park’s GMP.

The Challenge: Creating a Shared Purpose

New Bedford Whaling NHP is a national park originally conceived by and built on partnerships. NPS owns only two buildings of the more than 70 in the park, and the park’s enabling legislation requires NPS to “collaborate with the city of New Bedford and with associated historical, cultural, and preservation organizations to further the purposes of the park...” In addition, the legislation requires that four non-federal dollars for every one federal dollar be spent through cooperative agreements.

A culturally, ethnically, racially, and linguistically rich city, many different groups manage different facets of the city’s history and heritage. Some are large and comparatively wealthy institutions while others are small, unincorporated community groups. The groups are not without some dynamic tension and, at times, rivalry.

While specifying a partnership framework, Congress left its implementation to park managers. The challenge of minimal ownership, a legislative mandate to collaborate, a matching funding stipulation, and a multitude of different organizations and agencies required the park to devise creative solutions that brought all groups together not just to work with the NPS, but to work with each other towards a shared goal.

Building New Relationships

As part of the GMP planning process, NPS brought together the many groups and agencies that were active in passing the enabling legislation for New Bedford Whaling NHP. The park staff supplemented this list by soliciting broader public involvement primarily through cable television and the local newspapers. However, during the course of the GMP planning process, NPS employees recognized the need for a more open and wider ranging dialogue in addition to the more focused public meetings. Before the passage of the enabling legislation, the common purpose among the many organizations and agencies was to create the park. Now, with the park in existence, the staff realized that they needed to create a new dynamic: they had to change *why* these groups worked together as well as *how* they worked together. Without common purpose there could be no collaboration, and without collaboration the park would not be able to implement the GMP.



To create common purpose, the park invited cultural institutions, city agencies, and community groups to join together as “Partners in the Park” as a way to foster cohesiveness of purpose and spirit. Partners meetings were open to all meeting once a month throughout the GMP planning process. In addition to discussing the plan, the Partners meetings served as a nexus of communication between NPS and the park’s many communities of interest. Participants learned more about each other and the programs and projects that each were undertaking individually. In addition, the partners learned more about NPS, its culture, and its ways of working. Likewise, NPS staff learned more about the individual partners and the nature of the relationships between them. All were able to safely express their ideas for the future of the park.

Over several months an informed constituency with a common purpose emerged enriching the discussions at the public meetings and the GMP itself. Developed within a context of civic engagement, the GMP serves as a contract between the community and NPS. Partners in the Park poised NPS to begin implementation of the GMP through collaboration as mandated in the park’s enabling legislation.

Partners in the Park continues to meet regularly extending its focus to the implementation of the GMP. Organic in nature, its composition has changed and expanded over the years and will continue to do so as the park continues to develop and as new groups emerge and new needs are identified. It continues to serve as a forum for discussing substantive issues concerning the operations of the park, a mechanism for ascertaining the ideas, attitudes, and needs of the stakeholders, and as a forum for initiating joint programs.

Today, the park staff collaborates on numerous fronts with its partners including: interpretive and educational programming, special events, infrastructure work, marketing, and exhibit development. Without these joint ventures, the park would not be able to fulfill its mission of preserving park resources and providing visitor services through collaboration and partnership. Moreover, these collaborations allow NPS to reach further into the New Bedford community than it would be able to do on its own. As a consequence, the national park is a visible and established part of the city’s landscape, and the National Park Service is an active partner in the cultural life of the city.

Because of the necessity for and intrinsic value of collaboration, the staff supports the time devoted to Partners in the Park out of park operating funds. NPS considers Partners in the Park a critical part of the fulfilling the park’s mission.

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Civic Engagement Principles & Practices

Partners in the Park is a model for how ongoing collaboration can increase the effectiveness of parks and partner organizations to protect park resources, enhance the visitor experience, and serve the community. Key elements include:

- Investing significant time to learn about its partners, build relationships, ask about their needs, and ask for their ideas.
- Investing considerable time through collective dialogue to foster a sense of common purpose and spirit in support of the park. The staff considers this investment of time to be a critically important part of the park’s work and business strategy.
- Understanding and respecting the particular strengths that each partner brings to the table and using those strengths effectively. All partners, no matter how small, have something to contribute to the protection of the park’s resources and to enhancing the visitor experience.
- Giving equal recognition and credit to partners and encouraging partners to do the same with each other.