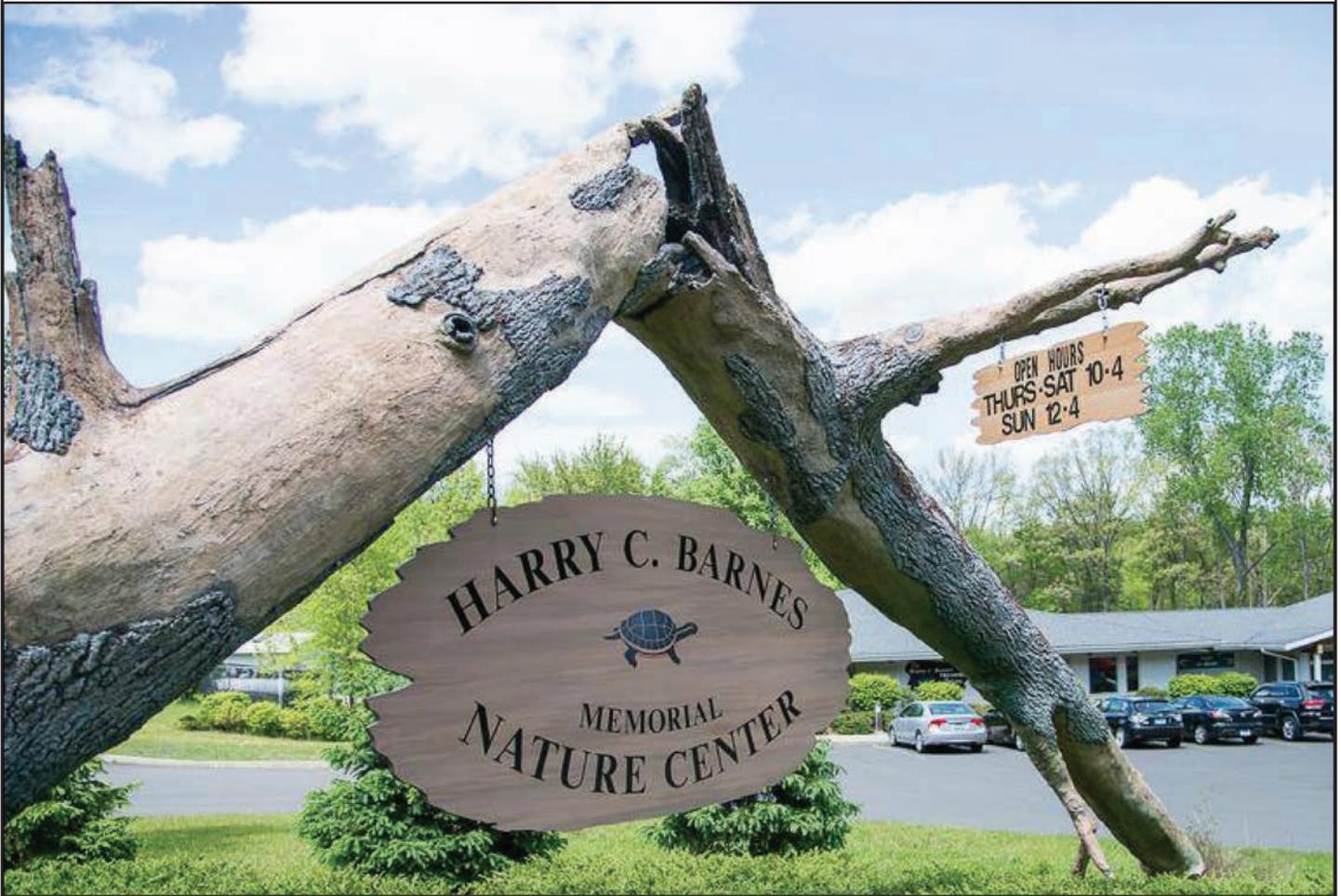




HARRY C. BARNES MEMORIAL NATURE CENTER
INDIAN ROCK NATURE PRESERVE

Blazing New Trails Campaign



Campaign Project: Universally Accessible Nature Trail

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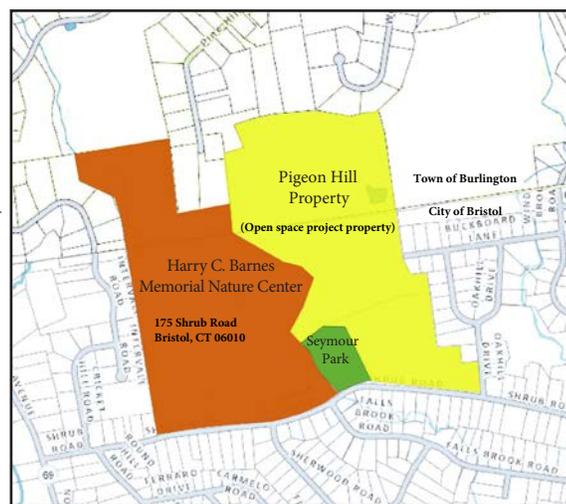
Blazing New Trails Campaign

As the Environmental Learning Centers of Connecticut (ELCCT) celebrates its 50th Anniversary, we are embarking on a capital campaign entitled *Blazing New Trails*. This name signifies ELCCT's path taken; the hundreds of thousands of children and adults educated about the importance of nature and our environment, the hundreds of acres of wildlife habitat protected, and the reputation gained, through hard work and the support of our community, as one of Connecticut's premier environmental conservation and education organizations.

This name also represents our path forward; taking ELCCT to a new level that exemplifies our commitment to our environment, and to our community and its residents. The *Blazing New Trails Campaign* has a goal of 2 million dollars. One million for its Indian Rock Nature Preserve, and one million for the Harry C. Barnes Memorial Nature Center. The anchoring project at the Barnes Nature Center is the creation of a mile long fully accessible nature trail.

Harry C. Barnes Memorial Nature Center

The Barnes Nature Center was established in 1970 and for 50 years it has been an important community resource in the greater Bristol area. Thousands of visitors have participated in programs and events, enjoyed its exhibits and live animal displays, and explored its trails that traverse a wide diversity of habitats including field, mature forest, wetlands and a pristine native trout stream. The importance of this natural resource is why the City of Bristol, ELCCT, the State of Connecticut, and the community at large, rallied to protect an additional 60 acres of habitat adjacent to the nature center that was destined to be mined and developed. We are pleased to announce that the fundraising stage of the *Save Pigeon Hill* project, part of the *Blazing New Trails* campaign, has been completed, ensuring the protection of the property and essentially doubling this open space in the heart of Bristol.

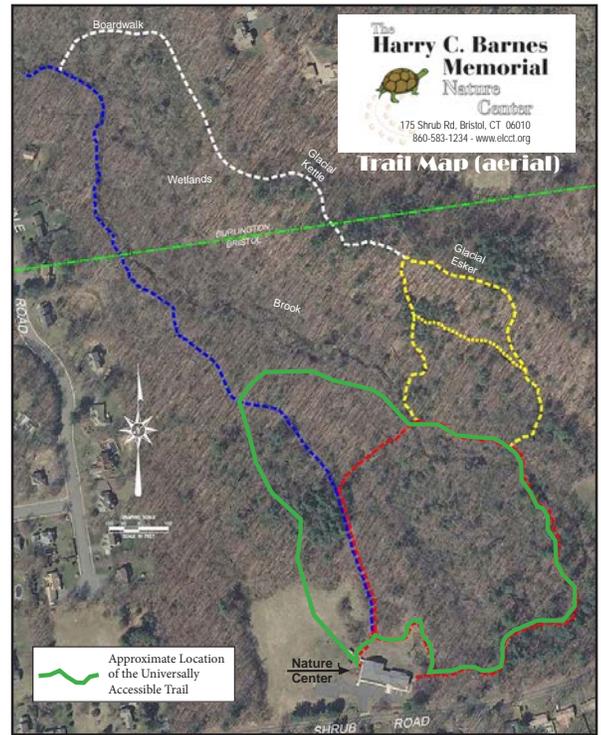


Why a Universally Accessible Nature Trail?

Inspiring and enabling people of all ages to spend time in nature is at the core of the Environmental Learning Centers of Connecticut's mission. There is nothing like spotting a Barred Owl roosting in a tree and watching as it silently watches you, exploring the forest and finding a salamander, or enjoying the changing seasons along a familiar trail. These experiences are long-lasting and shape opinions about the natural world leading to the protection of our natural environment.

Setting the educational benefits aside, the health benefits of spending time outdoors in nature is well-documented and has not been more evident than during the current COVID-19 pandemic. People continue to take advantage of parks, nature centers and open spaces in large numbers to reduce stress, provide activities for children, get exercise, and develop an increased appreciation for nature. Exposure to nature has been linked to a host of benefits, including improved attention, lower stress, better mood, reduced risk of psychiatric disorders and even upticks in empathy and cooperation.

Unfortunately, a large part of our population is unable to traverse a typical nature trail; the elderly, people in wheelchairs, families with young children in strollers, and people who are vision impaired. The need is clear and growing. Aging Baby Boomers mean more and more people looking for easy, relatively obstacle free places to explore nature, and according to the US Census, 1 in 5 people have a disability in the US. Though there are a fair number of rail trails in Connecticut that are accessible, they are often adjacent to roadways and are shared with cyclists and runners, detracting from the natural experience. We were unable to find an accessible nature trail in Hartford County that was over 500 feet long, let alone one that was part of a nature center with regular programs, exhibits, staff, and ADA compliant facilities. These opportunities are lacking state-wide as well. According to the State of Connecticut's 2017-2022 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan, nearly one-quarter (23%) of all state residents feel that their needs are "not at all met" when it comes to ADA accessibility of trails in Connecticut.



The Plan

The Universally Accessible Nature Trail will be one mile long. This will provide a significant experience in nature and enable people of all ages and abilities to explore the natural areas of the Harry



Trail example

C. Barnes Memorial Nature Center. The trail will start at the education building and continue through a meadow for views of grassland birds, butterflies and wildflowers. From there, it enters a mature pine forest and heads towards Freeman Hill Brook where it crosses the brook in two places. After the second crossing, it enters mixed deciduous forest and follows the border of the City of Bristol's Seymour Park before eventually ending back at the nature center.

The two ends of the trail will connect behind the building with a series of boardwalks and benches affording views of shrubland habitat, a small pond and the Center's raptor aviaries. A second phase

of this project is to construct new raptor viewing aviaries, making it easier for people with disabilities to view the center's hawks and owls, as well as a nature play area with a children's garden.

The trail will be roughly modeled after the Silvio O. Conte National Wildlife Refuge's Fort River Trail in Hadley, MA. It will be constructed with a combination of crushed stone and wood boardwalk, allowing for the use of wheelchairs, walkers and baby carriages. Benches will be positioned approximately every 300 feet, and covered pull-offs will provide shelter from pop-up rainstorms as well as places for picnics and education programs.



Trail example



Education will be a big part of this project. Interpretive signs will be placed in areas of interest covering topics such as the importance of wetlands and native plants. Bluebird nesting boxes and other habitat management techniques can be explained through signage and a changing “story book lane” would allow parents and their children to read pages of a story book related to their surroundings as they walk the trail. We are also considering including elements for vision and hearing impaired individuals as well. Lastly, the trailhead will include pavers and benches commemorating the donors who helped with this project.

Utilizing ELCCT's network of over 200 volunteers, the trail will be constructed through a combination of contractors, community members, civic groups and corporate employees, making this as a significant project by and for the community at large.

Conclusion

The completion of this trail will allow ELCCT the opportunity to reach new demographics and will enable more people from throughout Connecticut and beyond to learn about nature and our natural environment who would otherwise not be able to. The trail connects directly to the education center with ADA compliant facilities. The combination of the Barnes Nature Center, the new “Pigeon Hill” property that will be acquired through the help of a Connecticut Open Space Grant, and the City’s adjacent Seymour Park, makes the Shrub Road area of Bristol a destination for both active and passive recreation made possible by state, city and private non-profit collaboration. The creation of a fully accessible nature trail will significantly enhance this resource.

