

Bradenton-Sarasota Rowing Facility at Benderson Park Going Vertical with Five-Story Finish Tower

New facility to add convenience and comfort to park.

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UNIVERSITY PARK -- The first vertical structure at Nathan Benderson Park will make quite a statement.

At five-stories and 24,000 square feet, the \$5 million finish tower and media center will help put Bradenton-Sarasota on the map as a world-class rowing destination.

Thursday afternoon, eight men and women in white helmets picked up shovels and ceremonially tossed a little soil to mark the start of construction.

Randy Benderson, chairman of the Nathan Benderson Community Park Foundation, said the finish tower marks the start of the final part of the vision to bring world-class rowing to the area.

"We are another step closer to making this the best rowing facility in the world," Benderson said.

The boat house is next, he told a crowd seeking shade from sweltering heat under a white tent.

The finish tower will include a welcome center, public restrooms, offices, covered viewing areas, VIP level space and a conference room.

The 600-acre park with a 400-acre lake at its center staged its first regattas in 2009 as planning started to transform the former borrow pit into something unique and spectacular.

More regattas followed in 2010, 2011, 2012, and 2013. Park construction started in 2011 with a \$19.5 million appropriation of tourist development tax bond revenue by Sarasota County.

Officials are looking forward to Rio de Janeiro Olympic Rowing Trials at the park in 2016, hosting the world rowing championships in 2017 and the NCAA rowing national championships in 2018.

"This is a big, significant milestone to go vertical for the first time with the project and it means that we're one step closer to hosting true world-class events," said Paul Blacketter, president of Suncoast Aquatic Nature Center Associates.

Scott Anderson, vice president of philanthropy for the Nathan Benderson Park Foundation, recalled the late Nathan Benderson shared the dream with him for the park when it was still a neglected piece of property on the southwest corner of University Parkway and Interstate 75.



County administrator Tom Harmer, County Commissioners Christine Robinson, Al Maio, Charles Hines, Paul Caragiulo, Gulf Coast Community Foundation specialist Scott Anderson and Benderson Development president Randy Benderson participate in a groundbreaking ceremony for the finish tower at Nathan Benderson Park.

"The total vision was phenomenal," Anderson said. "This is just the beginning. You will see iconic structures go up here," he said, referring to an amphitheater, children's playground, multiuse boathouse, grandstands and JumboTrons planned for the park.

Architects include Guy W. Peterson, Damien C. Blumetti and Jedd Heap of Fawley Bryant as project manager.

Blacketter praised Fawley Bryant for going beyond the call of duty with its work on the project, recognizing its unique importance to the community.

Manatee County has played a key role in bringing first-rank rowing to the area with improvements to Fort Hamer Park, including adding an 8,000-square-foot boathouse to store racing sculls in 2011.

The Fort Hamer training facility has attracted Harvard University and other top rowing teams during winter months.

Donovon Keene and Andre Dupuis, Harvard rowing students raised in Sarasota County, attended the groundbreaking.

"It's pretty incredible to have a world-class rowing facility in our backyard," Dupuis said.

Rowing boosters are working to make the park North America's premiere 2,000-meter sprint course and rowing center.

Nathan Benderson Park Foundation plans to donate the finish tower to Sarasota County through Suncoast Aquatic Nature Center Associates.

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