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## City's future steps off at the downtown Parade

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Dana Jensen/The Day

From the new Parade in downtown New London, Union Station.

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When New London Mayor Rob Pero snips the ribbon from a cherry picker high above the new and improved Parade on Saturday, he will be ushering in a new era for the city.

"It's a fresh start for the area," said Pero, who will officially dedicate the redesigned Parade during a Parade Parade celebration from 2 to 9 p.m. Saturday.

"It's opening vistas and the views," he said. "Overall, its a new beginning in the downtown that will signal to visitors and people who live in the community that the Parade is a gathering place."

Those with a vested interest in the city are hoping the reconstruction of the Parade at the foot of State Street will be the impetus needed to highlight the city's history, its businesses and its beauty.

The \$10 million project, almost entirely funded with state money, won't be completed for Saturday's dedication. But city officials say most of the job is done and it's time to invite in the public.

"A lot of money was spent on this project and a lot of initiative put into it, and I think it's important to acknowledge that," Pero said.

He called the Parade a gathering place for the downtown that will send visitors off in different directions to explore the rest of the historic downtown and the city. Hopefully they will also explore restaurants and shops scattered about the downtown street.

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In 2008, the City Council approved the project and awarded a contract to Haynes Construction. Plans included flattening the grassy berm that faced Union Station, taking down a pedestrian bridge that connected the Parade to the Water Street Parking Garage and moving the 236-year-old Nathan Hale Schoolhouse to a location near the parking garage. The schoolhouse had been moved six times previously.

An amphitheater was built facing the train station and Water Street, and built-in benches were installed under pergolas along Atlantic Street. Pavers are spaced so water seeps into the ground and is absorbed, rather than running off into the stormwater drainage system. The project also includes a new glass-enclosed elevator and stairwell for the parking garage, but that will not be ready for Saturday.

But what's important, according to those planning the celebration, is not how much has yet to be done but how the space will unite the city and provide an outdoor space for future entertainment.

Partners for the celebration, which is being funded in part with \$10,000 in city funds and about \$30,000 in donations, include Pfizer Inc., Connecticut Commission on Culture & Tourism, Chelsea Groton Bank, Cross Sound Ferry, Viola Water, Centerplace, Carabetta Brothers, MetroCast, Fusco Corp., TCORS law firm, Citadel Radio and The Day.

"I'm encouraged to see partnerships developing within the city," said Joseph Celli, manager of the Water Street Parking Garage, who has been put in charge of the celebration. "And the city is recognizing the tremendous economic impact that historic and cultural organizations have on this city."

In planning the celebration, Celli also assembled a committee of nonprofit, entertainment and historical organizations including the Garde Arts Center, Hygienic Art, Kitchings Productions, New London Main Street, Neff Productions, New London Historical Society, New London Landmarks, New London Music Festival and the Custom House Maritime Museum.

"We're hoping this will become a significant area for a wide range of activities," Celli said.

About \$1 million of the cost was dedicated to enhancements that highlight the city's past.

Plaques will describe various historic aspects of the city, and provide directions on where to find more information. A whale tail fountain will be installed at a later date.

The mayor said what's important is the space is wide open and available to all residents and visitors.

"Hopefully, Saturday is not just a one-day event," Pero said. "This is the beginning of the city's partnership with our historic partners."

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