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After Almost 50 Years, New Harlem Piers Are Rising

By [TIMOTHY WILLIAMS](#)

Maritta Dunn remembers, as a child in the 1950's, walking with her family to the Harlem Piers to watch ferries travel across the Hudson to Palisades Amusement Park. Although her family was not allowed into the amusement park because they were black, they liked to go to the piers to watch people board the boats.

The Harlem Piers, once a bustling transportation center and recreation attraction at the western end of 125th Street, were demolished nearly 50 years ago. But after years of plans to revitalize the area, construction is under way on a new set of piers on the Harlem waterfront scheduled to be completed next spring.

For Ms. Dunn, restoring the piers has been a lifelong campaign.

"I've been waiting 45 years for this to happen and I wasn't going to die without seeing this through," said Ms. Dunn, the former chairwoman of the local community board and one of the project's chief advocates.

The \$18.7 million publicly financed project calls for two piers to be built on the Hudson River between St. Clair Place and West 135th Street. One will be used as a dock for excursion boats and water taxis, while the second will be reserved for recreation, like sunbathing, and for fishing.

In time, regular ferry service, a kayak launching area and a small restaurant may be added, officials said.

Until construction started late last year, much of the area near the piers was a city-owned parking lot for several years, though it remained popular with fishermen.

Eliminating the parking lot, said Adrian Benepe, the city's parks commissioner, will allow the bicycle and pedestrian paths to link the Harlem waterfront with other riverside parkland. "It's a huge deal," Mr. Benepe said. "This is the big missing link in the Hudson River greenway on the West Side of Manhattan."

The other gaps in the greenway are between 135th and 145th Streets, where a bike and pedestrian path will be completed by the end of May, and between 83rd and 91st Streets, where work on a bike and pedestrian path is scheduled to start this fall and be finished in 2008.

The lack of convenient access to the waterfront has been a sore point in Harlem since sections of what remained of the piers collapsed into the river in the 1960's and 70's. But even without serviceable piers, the area — still called the Harlem Piers by some residents — remained a local attraction. During the 70's, the Apollo Theater held summer concerts on the waterfront. And as the meatpacking plants that once dominated the neighborhood began to relocate to Hunts Point in the Bronx, developers proposed an entertainment pier for the area called Pier 1, though it was never built.

Other plans also came and went: a marina; a sports pier similar to Chelsea Piers; a series of floating piers that could be used by sailboats; luxury housing; a floating theater on a barge; a bald eagle sanctuary; a floating parking lot; and a 35-story hotel that would have included a museum of Harlem history, a concert band shell and a dinner theater operated by Sylvia's Restaurant.

"It wasn't easy because it's not that big a property and everybody had different ideas," said Representative [Charles B. Rangel](#), whose district includes the area.

The community rejected various plans, in part out of fear that waterfront access would be limited to those who could afford the attractions.

"We didn't want to make this something for the haves, and the have-nots would have no access," Ms. Dunn said.

So along with West Harlem Environmental Action, a private, nonprofit group, the local community board in 1999 proposed a waterfront park open to everyone, including fishermen, who have dropped their lines in the area for decades.

The city's Economic Development Corporation agreed to use the community plan as the basis for redevelopment, and more ambitious and expensive ideas were scrapped. Financing was provided by the city and state governments and federal empowerment zone money.

After making its way through the legislative approval process, however, the project was delayed for about a year by the Army Corps of Engineers out of concern that the new piers would disrupt fish spawning and migration routes. As a compromise, 50 "reef domes" — concrete structures five feet in diameter and four feet high with holes cut out to allow fish to swim in and out — will be placed at the bottom of the river near the piers.

Jordi Reyes-Montblanc, the chairman of Community Board 9, the local board, said the completion could not happen soon enough.

"It's been a long, long struggle," he said.

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