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Bill Robinson: Benderson Park offers new events and opportunities for the public

By Bill Robinson, Guest Columnist

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In a matter of a few years Nathan Benderson Park has become a world-class rowing and events venue that is capturing the attention of sports organizations across the globe, bringing an international cadre of athletes, visitors and tourists to the area. But, that's certainly not all NBP represents. It has become a fantastic community asset owned by the residents and taxpayers of Sarasota County. It is a wonderful place for the entire community to gather and enjoy all that it has to offer.

2015 was a great year for the park. We are pleased to report that more than \$5.3 million was raised through the Nathan Benderson Community Park Foundation and the funds will be used to improve and grow the park. We held more than 30 international, national, statewide, regional and local events that have generated over \$25 million in economic impact and notoriety for our area. We also played host to many different teams training here and welcomed hundreds of visitors daily. Every day, countless people can be seen running, walking their dogs, pushing strollers, fishing, picnicking and enjoying life on the water.

While last year presented some challenging public relations and management issues for us to resolve, we also welcomed new management to our team. Nicole Rissler joined Suncoast Aquatic Nature Center Associates — the nonprofit that runs the park's operations — as the chief operating officer, Meredith Scerba came on board as the event director for the 2017 World Rowing Championships, and we hired three new staff members — Melissa Mitchell, Zack Hilferding and Jessica Shorin — to help streamline day-to-day operations and facilitate more events and activities at the park.

All that said, 2016 promises to be even better. As the new year begins, so will new opportunities at NBP.

In the spring, you will see continued progress on the development of the park and its amenities, high-profile events and training occurring on a regular basis along with new everyday community activities.

Besides bringing more visitors to the area from across the country and around the world for our world-class events, we are committed to community outreach that allows local residents to experience firsthand what NBP offers. This will be done by planning and implementing more programming and activities that appeal to a much broader and more diverse audience. Programming you can expect to see in place will be learn-to-row and paddle classes such as dragon boat and stand-up paddle board, as well as yoga and aquatics camps.

Furthermore, as you drive past the park, you will see significant changes in the landscape. It's going vertical. Public restrooms are being constructed near the event garden on the northwest side of the park and at the 500-meter mark on the west side of the lake. The restrooms are projected to be completed this spring. The finish tower project is estimated to be ready for use by the fall. The planning for the multi-purpose boat house is underway. We also anticipate a children's playground to be

installed in 2016.

Finally, we are eagerly anticipating 2016 US Olympic Team Rowing Trials, the state rowing championships, USRowing Southeast regionals, and the Modern Pentathlon World Cup final in May, which will all help set the stage for the 2017 World Rowing Championships. All these will be exciting for the participants and the spectators from near and far who come out to cheer on their favorite teams.

We encourage the entire community to come experience NBP. Take advantage of the programming, enjoy the assets, watch Olympians and future Olympians compete in your backyard, sign up to volunteer or share your NBP story on social media using the hashtag "#myNBP." Remember, it's your park so take advantage of all it has to offer.

Bill Robinson is the SANCA board chairman.

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