Back Channel paddle & pedal, April 28, 2018
By David O’Reilly

It’s surely a sign of health when ospreys and eagles, American shad and striped bass return to a once polluted waterway.

And for sure there are signs that the City of Camden, N.J., emerging from decades of neglect, looks for the emergence of new public parks along the urban waterfronts that once housed its prisons, tank farms, boat graveyards and trash dumps.

That’s just what 15 kayakers found recently as they paddled, then pedaled, along Camden’s little-known “back channel” of the Delaware River. Here, with the Philadelphia skyline as backdrop, the slender, 18-mile Cooper River meets the Delaware behind Petty’s Island on the city’s north end.

“It’s an excellent opportunity to tell the story of what’s here -- and to see the diamond in the rough that’s about to appear,” Don Baugh, president of the non-profit Upstream Alliance, one of the event’s organizers, told participants gathered around him at the county’s 15-acre Pyne Poynt Park. It was 9:30 a.m.

As “watershed moments” go, the four-hour paddle-and-pedal tour of Camden’s transforming waterfront was modest in scope -- just a glimpse of what’s coming. But a decade hence, when picnicking and paddling are as familiar here as a game of hoops, the blue-sky, breeze-kissed 28th day of April, 2018, will deserve to be remembered as a first of its kind. These paddlers were the first ever to tour the nascent 35-acre Cramer Hill Nature Preserve now in development.

Our kayaks sat at the start of the morning in a grassy field. To the east lay the traditional offerings of an urban park: a playground, basketball courts and a softball field. To the west beckoned the lagoon-like Back Channel, 400 yards wide and nearly two miles long.

“This is a big jump for Camden,” marveled 26-year-old Soley Berrios, a member of the city planning board. She had learned of this trip just days earlier, on a community website. “A lot of people don’t think we have nice things” in Camden, she said, “but we do.” This would be her first time in a kayak, as it was for several others.

This day’s adventure was planned by Discover the Delaware, an alliance of advocates for local recreational waterways. Its members include Camden County’s parks department, the New Jersey Conservation Foundation, the Camden-based Center for Aquatic Sciences at Adventure Aquarium, UrbanPromise, Cooper’s Ferry Partnership, Upstream Alliance, and Independence Seaport Museum in Philadelphia.

Discover the Delaware seeks to expand public access to healthy waterways and promote on-the-water recreation and educational programming.

After some brief safety instructions, the group lugged their bright yellow, two-person kayaks to
the water’s edge, then watched as Baugh and Maggie McCann, director of Camden County’s Department of Parks, briefly pulled a seine net through the channel’s murky waters to show the paddlers some of the life within.

“The Delaware is a critical nursery for the striped bass and the American shad” that live in the Atlantic but return here to spawn, Baugh told them. Moments later he and McCann pulled up a little spot-tailed shiner that serves, he explained, as food for stripers on their spawning runs. Then he pointed out a yellow-shafted flicker flitting in the nearby treetops. “It’s a sign of old trees,” he explained. “Pretty cool.”

After putting into the water about 10 a.m., the group made its way to a vivid symbol of Camden’s decades-long abuse. “Whoa,” murmured 23-year-old Katherine Soprych of Camden as they rounded a narrow point. There they found dozens of abandoned powerboats and sailboats leaning on their sides or partially collapsed on the mudflats. Showing rust through its red paint -- but still stately and upright -- sat the 129-foot lightship Barnegat, which for decades served as a beacon to ships off the Jersey Shore.

“They’ve been left here to rot,” explained McCann. She hopes the property one day will become a public marina. “I even have this idea of turning the Barnegat into a cafe,” she said.

A hundred yards later the paddlers paused at the mouth of the Cooper River, which snakes through the city for two miles to the concrete tidal gate known as Kaighn Avenue Dam. Built in 1938, the dam forms scenic Cooper Lake, the centerpiece of 347-acre Cooper River Park, one of the nation’s most celebrated venues for rowing regattas. McCann told them that the county is working to install a lock alongside the dam so that paddlers may traverse the Cooper’s full navigational length to Haddonfield without having to portage.

She then pointed inland to a long, flat hill of rough brown earth running north of the Cooper for several blocks. “This area two months ago was all wooded,” she said, but backhoes and grading equipment were today converting the former landfill into a “gorgeous, $20 million park” of 20 acres featuring a 70-foot hill “with a beautiful view of the city” and a pond with a kayak launch, picnic areas, hiking trails, and more.

A project of the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, the park is to be called the Cramer Hill Waterfront Park.

The last stop on the paddle was a narrow patch of sand, about a mile north of the Cooper, on the channel’s eastern shore, just shy of Petty Island Bridge. Opposite lay 292-acre Petty Island, for decades a storage site in Pennsauken Township for the petroleum giant Citgo. In 2009 Venezuela, owner of Citgo, agreed to remove its storage facility and donate the island to New Jersey as a conservation site.

It was all new to 26-year-old Kathleen Harmon of Camden, who spied a curious white dot in a tree on the island’s shore. Told it was the head of a bald eagle, she broke into a smile. “That’s the first one I ever saw” she said.

After beaching boats at 11:30 a.m., the group climbed up a weeded bank and made its way along a narrow dirt trail through dense woods, dotted with broken glass and litter, to a clearing, where they had lunch. Baugh then gathered them in a circle, showed them an oyster shell likely left long ago by Native Americans, and asked for brief impressions of what they had seen so far.
“It’s mesmerizing. I’m so impressed” said, Boe Daley. “I never expected anything like it.”


“Now we’re seeing progress,” said Tom Calisterio, program director of UrbanPromise, a non-profit that seeks to build character among Camden youth through the craft of wooden boat building.

“It’s amazing to think you’re in Camden, and it’s because we’re on the water,” said Brian DuVall, president and CEO of the Center for Aquatic Sciences at Adventure Aquarium. “The confluence of urban and natural areas here is phenomenal.”

Baugh then informed them they were standing in the county’s new, 35-acre Cramer Hill Nature Preserve, former site of a county sewage treatment plant demolished in 1990. “You’re the first people to visit this as a preserve,” he told them. “So, you’re making history.”

After hiking out to Petty’s Island Road, the border between Camden and Pennsauken, they paused for a photo by a sign announcing the new preserve. Two blocks later they met two Camden County police officers keeping eye on 15 city-owned bicycles. Escorted by the police on their own bikes, the paddlers then pedaled south along Harrison Avenue on the start of a three-mile, city-side tour of the park sites they’d seen from the water.

Stops included a restored creek in the county’s Von Nieda Park that regularly overflowed -- sometimes with sewage -- onto city streets after heavy rains. They then went on to a view from State Street of the construction work creating Harrison Avenue Park. A few blocks later they paused on old State Street Bridge overlooking the Cooper River, where McCann and Baugh again talked of plans to create a lock at Kaighn Street Dam for paddlers.

Then it was back to Pyne Point Park, where Baugh again gathered the group in a circle and asked their impressions of what they might remember of this day ten years hence.

“I feel I walked through a new door,” said Vince Daley, a retired school teacher from Haddon Township.

“I’m just so happy to know this is in my back yard,” said the planning board’s Berrios. “I can’t wait to take people out here.”

“I like it here,” said Yasiria Lopez, 16, of Camden. “This summer I’m going to tell my friends, ‘Let’s do this instead of playing games indoors.’”

Frank Duffy, a retired railroad worker whose home is Magnolia, stroked his chin before replying. “I’m 87, so I don’t know what I’ll be doing in 10 years,” he told the others. “But I do look forward to passing this along to my sons and grandsons and their friends. What an exciting adventure that will be.”