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Downtown Express photo by Jennifer Weisbord

Cathy Drew

Project fears flow of river park's plan

By Ronda Kaysen

The unassuming trailer at the edge of a Tribeca pier is barely noticeable from the West St. bike path that runs alongside it. The old brick shed towering at the edge of the berth is as easily missed. But open the shed's heavy wooden door and peak inside to find one of Downtown's most beloved corners: the River Project, a ragtag marine science field station. This weekend, this cherished estuary teetering on the western edge of Manhattan will hold its final event at aging Pier 26, and head off to an uncertain future.

This fall, Piers 25 and 26, where N. Moore St. meets the Hudson River, will undergo an \$80 million restoration as part of the Hudson River Park development. The piers have been long awaiting their renewal — they are quickly deteriorating, with black and rotting wooden pilings jutting out into the river and a paved deck that is chapped and cracking.

"We knew this was happening, it's just part of what we've been planning all these years," said River Project founder and executive director Cathy Drew, in a telephone interview.

The small organizations that have called the aging piers home for decades will be displaced by the looming construction. On Saturday, the River Project, a 19-year old nonprofit organization, will hold its final event at the pier, Live! From the Bottom of New York Harbor, an interactive underwater exploration of the river.

It is not clear if the Hudson River Park Trust, which is in charge of the development, will invite the River Project back when the three-year

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“We’ve informed tenants operating interim uses in the park that they would not automatically be incorporated within the permanent park,” Noreen Doyle, the Trust’s vice president, wrote in an e-mail to Downtown Express.

Since its inception, the River Project has always held a tenuous place on the New York City landscape. Drew founded the project in 1986 after she noticed the abandoned space from her Vestry St. apartment window and asked the city if she could set up shop there. A marine biologist and oceanographer, Drew started the project after a diving accident left her with the bends, preventing her from pursuing coral reef ecology.

Drew has never paid rent for use of the pier, trailer or shed, which was once a produce warehouse for Washington Market. Aquariums filled with indigenous sea life line the walls of the cavernous shed. Tanks with sea horses, pipefish, grass shrimp, summer flounder and blue crab are piled high, one on top of the other. Open blue tubs filled with fish and crabs lie in the back for visitors — mainly school groups of children — to get a more hands on view.

“Don’t stick your finger in that one, they can bite it off,” warned Tad Barnes, a River Project spokesperson, when I leaned in too close to a tank of oyster toadfish. The toadfish wiggled its lips at me.

Two rowboats were moored outside, awaiting the late morning arrival of children to take them out for a spin. Rows of chord hung taut off the pier behind the shed. “For the crab pots,” Barnes explained.

The River Project has clearly made a home of the pier, but it might not be able to afford the upgrade to the new Urban Estuary Center when it opens.

The Trust has invited several organizations — including the River Project — to submit detailed proposals for funding and operating the new estuary, which the Trust estimates will “require millions of additional dollars to build and operate.”

Although no organization submitted a detailed proposal yet, the Trust is paying close attention to a nonprofit organization based in Beacon, New York, the Rivers and Estuaries Center. “If the Rivers and Estuaries Center is able to demonstrate that it has the capacity to finance and operate the facility on Pier 26 with a public sector partner like SUNY, we would bring the proposal to the community for review before bringing it to our Board of Directors,” wrote Doyle.

Rivers and Estuaries is a much larger organization than the River Project. Its steering committee is appointed by Governor George Pataki and two of the Hudson River Park Trust’s board members “are leaders in this initiative,” according to Doyle of the Trust. The governor appoints five of the Trust’s 13 members, including the Trust’s chairperson Charles “Trip” Dorkey.

More than \$25 million has been donated to Rivers and Estuaries, including a \$10 million donation from the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey and another \$10 million from New York Power Authority.

The River Project has a \$500,000 a year budget.

Drew said she is hopeful her organization will be invited back to the new pier, but “nobody’s able to make any commitments,” she said.

The Trust has “encouraged [Rivers and Estuaries] to contact the River Project to determine whether it would be possible for the organizations to collaborate

with each other," Doyle wrote.

Rivers and Estuaries did not return calls for comment.

But the River Project has immediate housing problems to address before it can focus on the long term. The price of relocating to a temporary pier is far costlier than expected. Consultants for the Hudson River Park Trust estimate it will cost at least \$1 million to move to a temporary home at Pier 40, bring the facilities up to code and build out the raw space, which currently lacks heating, running water and air conditioning. "It's very, very expensive to move," Drew said. "We've got some money from the state here, but nothing like that."

Although the Trust will donate the space, it will not finance the move. "We do not have any budget for relocating the River Project, and have not provided this type of assistance to any other tenants, including the Downtown Boathouse which must also relocate to accommodate Pier 26's reconstruction, and which last year had to relocate from Pier 66 to enable reconstruction there," wrote Doyle.

There is a certain homespun quality about Piers 25 and 26. A local youth group, Manhattan Youth, run by a Battery Park City resident, Bob Townley, has been using Pier 25 since 1994. And the Downtown Boathouse, which was also founded by Drew in 1989, shares Pier 26 with the River Project, its trailer stationed behind the marine center's trailer. The Boathouse is now steered by Jim Wetteroth.

For the groups that have weathered hot summers and icy winters on these berths, the renovation means repairing a structure that is rapidly disintegrating. But it also means the shed, one of the last vestiges of Washington Market, will vanish, and the organizations that thrived in its shadow might face a similar fate.

"Those are neighborhood people and these operations grew out of the community," said Drew of her neighbors on the pier. "The main fear is that it's going to turn into a corporate institution that nobody knows that's just run by a government agency."

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