

A coal dock transformed

Written by KRISTYN HALBIG ZIEHM
Wednesday, 21 August 2013 19:04

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Long a dingy repository for fossil fuel, the We Energies coal dock is now Coal Dock Park, a sprawling green space that offers spectacular views and unrivaled public access to Port Washington's lakefront

More than 10 years in the making, Coal Dock Park opened last Thursday.

Gone are the massive black mountain of coal where white gulls perched, the skeletal blue coal bridge and the huge freighters that docked in the west slip to fuel the power plant.

In their place is a calm, soothing peninsula filled with green grass and dotted with 150 trees. The rail on which the former coal bridge moved as it unloaded the fuel from ships has now been transformed into a long bench along the north side of the park.



Coal Dock Park is actually two parks — the 13 acre northern peninsula, a groomed park which opened to the public last week, and the seven acre south dock, a more naturalistic area that's home to a bird sanctuary and opened some time ago — bordered on three sides by Lake Michigan.

A decorative pedestrian bridge spans the power plant's intake channel, joining the two portions of the park.

Since the park opened, there's been a steady stream of visitors, curious about the area that's been under construction for the better part of the last year.

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Their curiosity has been rewarded with sweeping vistas of the city and lakefront.

“It gives people another perspective of the city, one from the lake,” City Administrator Mark Grams said. “It’s a view you didn’t get before unless you had a boat. I don’t think anyone will be disappointed when they go out there.

“It’s everything I thought it could be when we started this project.”

Mayor Tom Mlada said people who have visited the park have been effusive in their praise.

“It’s phenomenal,” Mlada said. “Everyone who goes out there loves it. It’s going to be a source of pride for the city for years to come.”

The transformation from an industrial behemoth to a recreational showcase expected to draw crowds from throughout the region has its roots in the history of We Energies.

When the Port Washington power plant was built in the heart of the Great Depression, crews dug 275,000 cubic yards of dirt from the south bluff to accommodate the new facility, using the soil to fill a portion of the lakebed and create the coal dock.

When the new plant opened in 1935 until the utility announced plans to convert the facility to one powered by natural gas, hundreds if not thousands of freighters stopped in Port Washington, dropping tons of coal at the dock with each visit.

Power plant officials estimate that every month from August 1932 until June 19, 2004, freighters took coal through the Great Lakes to the Port plant, depositing an average 18,000 tons monthly.

The ships’ visits were an attraction for residents and tourists, who would flock to the lakeshore to watch the coal being unloaded.

The towering coal bridge, which was used for decades to move the fuel from the freighters to the dock, was felled on Sept. 21, 1989, when self-unloading ships took over the lake.

We Energies’ decision to convert the power plant to a gas-fired facility paved the way for Coal Dock Park, a process that took more than a decade to complete and encompassed three mayor’s terms.

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