

Wilton Riverwalk Gazebo Grand Opening – Saturday, October 14th, 2023

Remarks by Economic Development Team Chair, Jennifer Beck

This project took a village of volunteers and town employees. A personal shout out to Mike Tetro and Brian Adams and the DPW crew for the site work that was way more than they expected but they adjusted their schedules to meet our goals. And David Descheneaux our building inspector made sure everything was according to code and in compliance. And Eric Window, our finance director, kept the project on budget and tracked all expenses – none of which were tax payer dollars. I was actually pretty worried about the gazebo construction team – a group of volunteers who were all talented craftsmen in their own right – but had never worked together. But they operated like a seasoned crew. The structure went up in three days. And then there's my husband, Edson Skinner, who worked solo for another few weeks, on our handicap ramp and platform. It was a challenge to meet code with a 12 foot ramp and stay within this very small footprint. It was a true labor of love.

Then the crowning touch – the copper roofed cupola and heron weathervane. As Edson and I unpacked the boxes, the Great Blue Heron did her flyover – real low – over the river, landed a few times and then circled us and took off up river. I couldn't believe her timing. But then, she keeps showing up when we do something new to her environment.

The reason we got this AARP grant to build this gazebo is because it's also the observation platform for our new Senior Citizen Science Program. There are program brochures here, so check it out. We launched the program in July and have about 25 members. I see some of you here today. If you're of a certain age – and you've witnessed any of Wilton's wildlife and told someone about it – you qualify. It's not much more complicated than that. We're using iNaturalist, a free app on your phones, to take pictures and log where and when you saw something. It might be downtown or in your backyard, or anywhere else you wander in Wilton. There are already over 500 species of animals, plants and insects logged in the database. It's pretty cool when the biologists and scientists come back and confirm your sighting as "research grade". You can do old school too and just write it down and send it to me and we'll log it for you. All your information goes into a global database and we pull the data for Wilton to use in our Natural Resources Inventory. That gives us location, species and seasonal data that helps us figure out how we can protect their habitats and identify wildlife corridors.

So keep watching. Edson saw the bald eagle just last week. He also counted 21 turkey vultures circling overhead. And 2 red tailed hawks dive-bombed the crew when they were putting on the roof.

Lastly, I have an announcement. The Economic Development Team and the Conservation Commission are holding a naming contest for our Great Blue Heron that fishes this river, and for the beautiful weathervane that represents her. She's been a good omen and a mascot for the Riverwalk project. And I'm pretty sure she's a female. Details on how to enter will be published on the website soon and through social media. The prize? Your name and the heron's, with her photo, will be on the cover of our new Natural Resource Inventory Report published this year.

So for me, this is all worthwhile if I overhear this from our residents

"Meet me at the gazebo – maybe we'll see the Great Blue Heron!"