

## Clearing the way



The arboretum master plan is well underway at Fort Williams Park in Cape Elizabeth, including the removal of invasive plants and the addition of a natural amphitheater. (Michael J. Tobin photo)

# Work on Fort’s arboretum project moves along; master plan approved

By Michael J. Tobin  
Staff Writer

Fort Williams Park in Cape Elizabeth was built to protect Maine from foreign attack from 1899 to 1963.

However, during the past few decades, the park has fallen victim to an attack of a horticultural kind and a plan to eradicate invasive plants is well on its way to completion.

The arboretum master plan, approved by the Town Council Oct. 19, is based on several objectives that support the Fort Williams Master Plan. The park’s master plan calls for the removal of invasive plants, including sumac, bittersweet, black swallowwort and Japanese knotwood, which have overgrown the 90-acre site.

“They are taking over much of the park,” said Lynn Shaffer, chairman of the Arboretum Master Plan Committee. “The alien plants choke out native species, like a young oak smothered in a tangled web of bittersweet. Fauna also suffer. Monarch butterflies, for instance, will confuse black swallowwort for the milkweed plants where they normally lay their eggs. The black swallowwort doesn’t have whatever the milkweed has that nourishes the larvae that hatches out of the eggs and so they die.”

“Those invasive plants are being replaced with a collection of native trees, shrubs and some nonnative plants and trees that are compatible, including a



Cape Elizabeth Town Council approved the Fort Williams arboretum master plan Oct. 19. (Michael J. Tobin photo)

nut grove, a fruits region and a children’s garden,” Shaffer said. “The plan will also restore native wildlife habitat, enhance the outdoor recreation experience, and identify educational resources and opportunities.”

In the park’s cliffside area a grass amphitheater has been created where volunteers spent the past several months removing invasive plants. Open areas, educational gardens and a clear trail system will enhance the landscapes and provide greater accessibility are being designed.

Many of the plants that will go in the area aren’t scheduled to be planted until next spring and a stone wall won’t go in until later this fall, weather permitting.

A gravel walkway that links the Cliff Walk to a view of the ship channel, once obscured by a wall of shrubs, have been freed from undergrowth and vines.

“Most of the visitors who come to Fort Williams each year had no idea that the tangled brush along the Cliffside Path was actually harmful,” Shaffer said. “Now, with

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# Arboretum

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all this work our volunteers are doing, we are taking care of this beautiful park for generations to come.”

Fort Williams is home to Portland Head Light, one of Maine’s biggest tourist draws. The town bought the fort from the federal government in 1964 for \$200,000 and in 1979 designated it as a park. Annual estimates of the number of visitors are as high as 1 million, according to the town website.

The ultimate design by professional landscape architects Bruce John Riddell and Terrance J. DeWan and Associates in Yarmouth will consist of 15-planted landscapes connected by a perimeter pathway. The steering committee has developed a phased approach for project implementation. The objective is to complete one significant phase that will be used as a model for future landscapes.

“The first phase, the Cliffside site, mostly involves removal of the invasive plants,” Shaffer said. “Phase two will involve the stonework, creating the steps and walls. Phase three will be the planting of native and sustainable species designed to preserve the park’s landscape.”

As part of the Fort Williams Foundation, the arboretum at Fort Williams Park is a volunteer project, supported by the Cape Elizabeth Town Council, Planning Board, Fort Williams Advisory Commission and Fort Williams Charitable Foundation, a nonprofit created in 2000 to establish an endowment for park maintenance. Funding is provided through private donations and public grants.

Clearing and sculpting will cost about \$100,000, Shaffer said. Full rehabilitation, to include installation of stone retaining walls, steps and pavers, as well as replanting of native species next spring, is expected to cost \$350,000. The town budgeted \$288,000 for maintenance this year, not counting capital improvements or the cost to run Portland Head Light. The full arboretum project is projected to top \$3.5 million.