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FEATURED

## Caroline's first visitor center opens

By ABBY ANDREWS [aandrews@carolinetimesrecord.com](mailto:aandrews@carolinetimesrecord.com) Jun 30, 2017



Gov. Larry Hogan, center, joined state and local elected officials Wednesday, June 28, for the ribbon-cutting and official opening of the Crouse Park Visitor and Heritage Center in Denton, Caroline County's first visitor center.

Photo by ABBY ANDREWS

DENTON — Almost a year to the day after Gov. Larry Hogan helped break ground for the Crouse Park Visitor and Heritage Center in Denton, he came back Wednesday, June 28, to cut the ribbon for its grand opening.

The 2,500-square foot, \$2.1 million building, overlooking the Choptank River, is Caroline County's first visitor center.

Paid for largely by federal and state grants, and owned and operated by the Town of Denton, it will serve as "the northern gateway for visitors," said Denton Town Manager Don Mulrine.

The center will offer not only town, county and regional tourism information, but also historical exhibits, covering Native Americans, the Underground Railroad, the Chesapeake Bay ecosystem and the Civil War, among other topics.

The revamped park surrounding the center will feature a nature trail, children's play area, rain garden, native plants and river access for water sports.

Though construction on the center took a relatively short time — the first piling was driven into the ground about nine months ago — the rest of the process to build it began 15 years, seven months and 27 days earlier, said J.O.K. Walsh, chairman of the Denton Development Corporation, the all-volunteer organization that led the effort.

"But who's counting?" he said with a laugh.

Walsh joked he had not managed to make much progress on the proposed center for 14 years until Hogan showed up.

"He came a year ago, stuck a shovel in the ground, and it's here," Walsh said.

Many of the comments leading up to the ribbon-cutting celebrated everyone — volunteers and elected officials alike, at both the local and state levels — who had a hand in making the visitor center a reality.

Hampered for years by funding and permitting issues, the project stalled completely during former Gov. Martin O'Malley's eight years in office, Hogan said. But when he took office, he said, he made sure the project not only got back on track, it got fast-tracked.

"We all (at the state level) jumped in and worked with the town and legislators to make it possible to officially open today," Hogan said.

The opening of this visitor center is just one step in a plan to revitalize downtown areas around the state, Hogan said.

"This is an important economic boon, by encouraging more people to visit Denton, Caroline County and the region," Hogan said.

Denton Mayor Abby McNinch said she was involved personally in the project for 10 years, initially as a project manager with the Denton Development Corporation.

"J.O.K. and the DDC are the relentless heroes of this project," McNinch said. "It has literally taken blood, sweat and tears to complete."

Residents should be proud of the visitor center, McNinch said.

"I hope that not only tourists, but also our own community frequents and enjoys it," McNinch said.

Walsh recognized Mulrine for all of his work related to infrastructure planning, permit updating, securing funding and managing the bidding and construction; and the Denton Town Council for all the hours and money it put into seeing the process through.

The ceremony had opened with a moment of silence in memory of Robert Clendaniel, former Denton mayor and town councilman, who passed away less than a week before the ribbon-cutting. His family was presented with a memorial tribute recognizing his work for the town.

"They always stayed the course," Walsh said of the town's staff and elected officials.

Richard Colburn, a former state senator, was key while in office, setting up meetings with state officials, Walsh said. When Colburn left office, Jeannie Haddaway-Riccio, then a delegate, took over, he said.

Walsh also recognized the contributions of the Caroline Economic Development Corporation, the Caroline Office of Tourism and the Caroline County Historical Society.

The project also had a lot of moral supporters, Walsh said. One of the biggest was his late mother, Mary Ann Walsh.

In her memory, Walsh and his brother, Q.R. Walsh, donated \$10,000 for further improvements to the visitor center.

The historical society also donated \$2,500 for improvements.

"This took a lot of years, and a lot of people," Walsh said. "The governor pulled off a miracle here by helping us with this."

To thank Hogan for all his work hacking through "red tape" to make the visitor center a reality, he was gifted a custom ax, courtesy of Lorry Industries in Denton.

"This is going in my office," Hogan said.

