

## **ESSEX COUNTY EXECUTIVE DIVINCENZO OPENS MODERN**

### **CHERRY BLOSSOM WELCOME CENTER IN ESSEX COUNTY BRANCH BROOK PARK**

**Newark, NJ** – Essex County Executive Joseph N. DiVincenzo, Jr. officially opened the new Cherry Blossom Welcome Center in Essex County Branch Brook Park in Newark on Tuesday, November 21<sup>st</sup>. The modern, 12,000-square-foot building that features high ceilings, natural light and updated amenities for guests replaces the old cinder block building. This is the sixth new community center that DiVincenzo has opened in the Essex County Parks System.

“Every spring, Branch Brook Park bursts to life with the blossoming of our 5,300 cherry blossom trees. Even though we host a variety of events to celebrate the trees, the small size of the old Cherry Blossom Centers limited what we can do indoors and year-round to maintain interest in the park and trees,” DiVincenzo said. “This new state-of-the-art building will help us expand our year-round programming in the park and will provide the public with an up-to-date facility to gather and hold events. It is another way residents will be able to enjoy our historic parks system,” he added.

“This place is so extraordinary. It is an intergenerational hub where people can gather and make memories for generations to come,” State Senate Majority Leader and Deputy Chief of Staff Teresa Ruiz said. “This building speaks of what government can accomplish for the community and its residents,” Assemblywoman Eliana Pintor Marin said.

“The park always has been a great space for families to spend time and now we have this new building, which is the crowning jewel in Branch Brook Park,” said Commissioner Vice President Carlos Pomares, who was accompanied by Commissioners Patricia Sebold, Brendan Gill and Len Luciano.

“This is just another example of the beautiful community centers that Joe is building throughout the county in the Essex County parks,” Sheriff Armando Fontoura said. Prosecutor Ted Stephens described the Welcome Center as a “fantastic structure.”

“This is a beautiful community center that is a tribute to the people who will use it and make it their home,” Newark North Ward Councilman Anibal Ramos said. “This has always been a special place for the community, and we thank Joe D. for giving us this state-of-the-art building,” Newark At-Large Councilman Luis Quintana said.

“Thank you for making this dream happen. This is a tremendous gift for all of us. This place is a testament to where gather and place where more memories will be created,” said Thomas Dougherty, President of the Branch Brook Park Alliance. “The new Cherry Blossom Welcome Center is beyond expectations and is one of the most beautiful facilities in Essex County. Without Joe D., this would not happen,” said Barbara Bell, retired President of the Branch Brook Park Alliance.

“This park has been a destination for so many people for so long and we thank Joe for continually making it better. This is another attraction where people can spend time together and come together as a community,” said Jackie Jay, President of the Forest Hill Community Association.

The centerpiece of the building is a large community room with a capacity to seat about 250 people. There also are a kitchen, restrooms that are accessible from inside and outside of the

building, coat rooms, and storage rooms. The lobby area is equipped with gallery and display cases, and a mural occupying one wall provides a history of the Cherry Blossoms in Essex County Branch Brook Park. There also is an imitation cherry blossom tree that will enable visitors to experience a cherry blossom in bloom with pink petals throughout the year. The one-floor building is handicap accessible.

The front of the building has a covered entry way and driveway that will make accessing the building easy. A large patio on the rear of the building overlooks the three baseball/softball fields in the meadow behind the building. The two bocce courts have been repositioned on the right side of the building; one of the courts is located under a pavilion to enable play during inclement weather. A variety of site improvements also have been made, including enhanced landscaping, planting new trees, installation of benches and trash receptacles, and water fountains.

The new Cherry Blossom Welcome Center was designed similarly to recent community center projects completed in Essex County Cedar Grove Park, Essex County Watsessing Park in Bloomfield, Essex County Weequahic Park and Essex County West Side Park in Newark, and Essex County Glenfield Park in Montclair. Other community centers currently under construction are the D. Bilal Beasley Community Center in Essex County Irvington Park and the Sheriff Armando and Mary Fontoura Community Center in Essex County Independence Park in Newark.

DiCara Rubino Architects from Wayne received a professional services contract for \$562,500 to design the new building. Tsivicos Enterprises from Neptune City was awarded a publicly bid contract for \$9,890,000 to construct the new building. The Essex County Department of Public Works monitored the project to ensure delays were avoided. The project was funded with grants from the State of New Jersey, the American Rescue Plan and the Essex County Recreation and Open Space Trust Fund. Work started in March 2022.

### ***Revitalizing Essex County's Branch Brook Park***

The Branch Brook Park Alliance has been the primary partner with Essex County to revitalize Branch Brook Park, which opened in 1895. More than \$50 million of upgrades have been made throughout the Park through this partnership. Park enhancements have been supported with grants from corporations, the New Jersey Green Acres program, the Essex County Recreation and Open Space Trust Fund, philanthropic organizations and community members. In addition, the Alliance has sponsored a variety of programs to clean the waterways, spruce up the park, maintain the cherry tree collection, develop an urban farm, among other activities.

The historic Ballantine Gates off of Lake Avenue were rehabilitated and preserved in 2021. The Branch Brook Dog Park was A new synthetic grass surface was installed on the Robert Clemente Baseball Field in 2019. Synthetic grass surfaces were installed on the Ray Dandridge and Jerome Greco Little League Fields in 2018. A bronze bust of Frederick Law Olmstead was dedicated in 2018 and a bronze bust of Mendelssohn was restored and rededicated in 2017; both are located in the Prudential Concert Grove. A playground designed with a cherry blossom theme was opened at the Essex County Cherry Blossom Welcome Center in 2015. The Barbara Bell Coleman Welcome Center and Concourse Hill upgrades, along with the opening of a two-mile, synthetic surface walking track, creation of a children's garden at the Cherry Blossom Welcome Center, renovation of a well in the Park's Northern Division, the rehabilitation of the Reservoir Walls in the Park's Southern Division and modernization of the Clifton Avenue basketball courts were completed in 2014. The bronze statue honor the late tennis legend Althea Gibson was dedicated

and the 20-court tennis complex named in her honor received a complete makeover in March 2012 and the field house in the tennis complex was renovated in July 2012.

A multi-phase project to upgrade the lakefront in the Southern Division was completed in April 2012. It included the restoration of the historic Prudential Lions statues and balustrade, the rehabilitation of two buildings for restrooms and public meeting space, updating the music court with new pavers and landscaping. The music court overlooking the lake was dedicated as the "Prudential Concert Grove" to recognize the corporation's ongoing support to restore the Park, and a memorial cherry tree grove was rededicated in honor of Kiyofumi Sakaguchi, who was President and CEO of Prudential International Insurance at the time of his death.

The renovation of the historic Octagon Fieldhouse in the Essex County Stephen N. Adubato, Sr. Sports Complex was completed in April 2011. Completed in 2010 were a project to pave the park roadway, upgrade walking paths, and install historic lighting in the section of the park from the Cherry Blossom Welcome Center to Heller Parkway, the planting of 600 Cherry Trees and other trees throughout Branch Brook Park and the paving of the park roadway from Mill Street to Washington Street.

In September 2009, the Middle Division Recreation Complex was renamed as the "Essex County Stephen N. Adubato, Sr. Sports Complex," in honor of the founder of The North Ward Center and Robert Treat Academy. In August 2009, a synthetic surface football/soccer field was constructed and named after NFL Hall of Famer and Barringer High School alumni Andre Tippett. Earlier in 2009, a "demonstration project" in the Branch Brook Park Extension enhanced landscaping, added Cherry Trees, improved pathways and modernized entranceways into the park from Franklin Avenue. The Bloomfield Avenue Bridge that passes over the Middle Division was rehabilitated in 2009.

A replica of the historic Octagon Shelter in the Southern Division of Essex County Branch Brook Park was built in 2007 and the baseball field complex known as the "three diamonds" was upgraded in 2007. The baseball/softball complex in the Branch Brook Park Middle Division was reopened in April 2005 after a remediation and modernization project, and the historic restoration of the Park Avenue Bridge was completed in 2005. Entrance enhancements, new fencing and landscaping along Clifton Avenue and Mill Street, and a major improvement project along Lake Street have made the park more inviting.

The Essex County Park System was created in 1895 and is the first county park system established in the United States. The Park System consists of more than 6,000 acres and has 23 parks, five reservations, an environmental center, a zoo, Treetop Adventure Course, ice skating rink, roller skating rink, three public golf courses, two miniature golf courses, golf driving range, five off-leash dog facilities, a castle and the Presby Memorial Iris Gardens. Branch Brook Park was created in 1895 and is the first park in Essex County's system. At 359.72 acres, it is the largest county park in Essex.