

ST. JAMES

# CAUSE TO CELEBRATE

Town's newest park caps off completion of hamlet's Lake Avenue revitalization

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Smithtown's newest park — a roughly half-acre downtown St. James plaza called Celebrate Park — formally opened this week.

The park was built on the site of a former bar, Irish Viking, that closed years ago and was seized by the county for nonpayment of property taxes. The site occupied by that derelict building off Lake Avenue between Fourth and Fifth streets is now set off by a massive arch that opens into a bright patch of artificial turf ringed by a stone walk. A gazebo and pergola give shade, and visitors can sit on a low stone wall, benches or tables under the pergola.

The \$1 million project caps the town's rebuild of Lake Avenue, finished in 2020, that included the installation of sewer and water pipes with road and streetscape improvements. The sewer line has yet to connect to a treatment plant, though Town Supervisor Edward Wehrheim said at a Tuesday park dedication ceremony that hookup was near.

"This is what revitalization really looks like," Wehrheim said to a crowd of hamlet residents and merchants. Dozens of vacancies once dotted the mostly commercial half-mile stretch of Lake Avenue where the park is located; new businesses have filled almost all of them, he said.

Patricia Clark, president of Celebrate St. James Past-Present-Future, the civic and arts group that pushed for the park and raised \$200,000 toward construction, said the park will host small concerts and cultural events, and likely a Christmas tree and menorah lighting ceremony this winter. Much of the use so far is more



Officials including Smithtown Supervisor Edward Wehrheim, left, at the ribbon-cutting ceremony.

### Celebrate Park

- Cost: **\$1 million**
- **\$800,000** town funding
- **\$200,000** from more than **700** donors

informal. "We'll often see people at tables in the morning with their coffee, reading the paper," she said. "It's also a social place — you see people with kids."

Group founder Natalie Weinstein, an interior designer, collaborated with hamlet residents Michael Morbillo, an architect, Robert Retnauer, a landscape architect and Matthew Calado, a senior town planner, on the park layout.

One of the chief challenges was adding 33 new parking spaces — needed to ease what some merchants said was a dire shortage — next to the recreation area without disturbing

the park's tranquility. The solution was extensive landscaping and a well-placed wall recognizing park donors and buffering recreational from utilitarian uses, Calado said.

"This was a blend of a community project, a government project, and a capital improvement project," he said. "It took a lot of volunteers."

Town Councilwoman Lynn

Nowick, a St. James native who often walks along Lake Avenue, said he was thrilled to see the park replace the empty bar, which she called a "disgrace."

The new park is one of the town's smallest, but Nowick saw in it a potential "bonanza" for nearby businesses. Among them: Mickey's Ice Cream Kitchen, which opened last year across the street. "You'll see a lot of our customers enjoying ice cream on our patio but then they go across the street," said owner Brendan Fleming. From his window, he has seen children playing on the turf and young families rolling past. "We're excited," he said.

PHOTOGRAPH BY NICHOLAS SPANGLER FOR NEWS-DAY; PHOTO: OCTOBER 21, 2022

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### Celebrate St. James Past-Present-Future

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