

LOCAL

After a disheartening turn, renewed hope for Sandy Hook memorial

Rob Ryser Dec. 12, 2019 Updated: Dec. 12, 2019 8:53 p.m.



An aerial rendering of "The Clearing," a permanent memorial to the victims of the Sandy Hook massacre, designed by San Francisco-based SWA. Photo: contributed image



2of8A rendering of the paths in the Sandy Hook memorial, designed by San Francisco-based SWA. Photo: contributed image



3of8A rendering of the deck over the east pond at the Sandy Hook memorial, designed by San Francisco-based SWA. Photo: contributed image

NEWTOWN - When seven years of hard work to build a memorial for the Sandy Hook shooting victims stalled this summer — volunteers despaired.

They worried there would be no monument to mark the 7th anniversary of the tragedy this Saturday - and that it might not be built at all.

“We were really quite disillusioned,” Alan Martin said of the dilemma, feeling they could neither ask Newtown taxpayers for the memorial’s \$10 million cost, nor pare down the design without destroying what made it everyone’s favorite.

It turns out that what seemed hopeless was merely the latest hardship volunteers have had to overcome in their quest to honor the 26 first-graders and educators slain at Sandy Hook School on Dec. 14, 2012.

“We could not afford to do the grand design, but we preserved the centerpiece element we loved so much - a delicate and respectful memorial to the slain youngsters and adults we lost on that day,” said Pat Llodra, the former First Selectman and a volunteer on the memorial committee. “We haven’t lost the essence of the design because the treatment of the land is so beautiful.”

As a result, families of loss and fellow Newtowners still have the design they chose over 188 submissions from across the country and abroad: the simplicity of a walk through nature to a 'sacred sycamore,' growing in a reflection pool.

Should Newtowners approve the project's budget - now at \$3.7 million - the memorial could open Dec. 14, 2021, in a secluded 5-acre field slightly north of the new Sandy Hook School.

[CLICK HERE: Sandy Hook Memorial Timeline](#)

Between now and then the volunteers have plenty of work to do with the San Francisco-based architecture firm SWA. They will help refine the final design, engage the public in community meetings, seek land-use approvals, and bid out the project should it be approved by voters in November.

The town's top elected leader said pushing back the monument's opening was preferable to risking a rejection of the project at the polls because it was too expensive.

"We are still a community first and foremost of families who have suffered a horrific loss," said First Selectman Dan Rosenthal. "If we had moved in haste - and in no way would I describe seven years as haste - by putting a design out there with a price tag that had no realistic pathway of getting funded, it would have been unfair to our community."

News that Newtown is making progress on a permanent memorial comes as the town prepares to mark the anniversary with solemn services on Saturday.

An interfaith service is planned for 9 a.m. at Newtown Congregational Church and a memorial Mass is planned at 9:30 a.m. at St. Rose of Lima Church.

Overcoming obstacles

The seven-year effort on behalf of the victims represents the third major building project Newtown has undertaken in its recovery from the worst crime in Connecticut history.

In 2016, with \$50 million from the state, Newtown opened the new Sandy Hook School on the same campus where the old building was razed following the shooting. The school, which was designed to achieve a balance of warmth and security, was also an important symbol of renewal for Newtown and for everyone touched by its irreplaceable loss.

And in July, with \$15 million from General Electric, Newtown opened a new community center on the Fairfield Hills campus. The GE gift was given to Newtown after the Sandy Hook massacre to help bring the town together by building something for everyone that did not already exist.

To get to this point, volunteers on the memorial committee have had to go back to the drawing board three times when sites they had their eyes on didn't work out, finally settling on a field with two ponds that was initially ruled out because it seemed too close to the new Sandy Hook School.

The volunteers also had to overcome a scandal in 2018 when their former chairman Kyle Lyddy was arrested on fraud charges related to his work. Lyddy resigned as the chairman of the Sandy Hook Permanent Memorial

Commission six months before he was accused of stealing \$500,000 from a Norwalk marketing firm where he worked.

There was no evidence that Lyddy misappropriated money meant for the memorial, according to police and Newtown leaders. He was accused of using the stolen money for personal expenses and for charitable causes, including costs related to the Sandy Hook memorial.

“Losing Kyle was a big loss, but we worked through it,” said Dan Krauss, the volunteer chairman of the Sandy Hook Permanent Memorial Commission.

“One thing that I have always been very proud of is we have always done things via consensus,” Krauss said about the commission, which includes family members who lost children in the massacre. “It has been hard work, but we stuck through it together.”

Among the adjustments in the memorial design that brought the cost down was eliminating a pavilion, replacing bridges over the ponds with walkways, narrowing path widths, and limiting paved surfaces.

“The heart of the memorial is still the sycamore tree with the water around it and the names of the victims inscribed on the side of the water,” Krauss said. “You still have the engagement with the water and the peacefulness and reflection of walking along side of the ponds.”

Krauss added that pushing out the opening date of the memorial two more years was less important to him than making sure it was what Newtown wanted.

“I am perfectly fine taking our time to do it right,” Krauss said.

rryser@newstimes.com 203-731-3342

[Rob Ryser](#)

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Rob Ryser is a career journalist with a rare flair for storytelling. He specializes in City Hall coverage and general assignment features.