

Opinion: Too soon for Atlantic City to try to make the most of Gardner's Basin

Many who have visited Gardner's Basin consider it a hidden gem of Atlantic City. Looking at its waterfront and lovely views, they often wonder why the tourism destination city hasn't done more with it.

Such wondering surged again after the city recently resumed control of Gardner's Basin from a private company it had contracted a year ago to manage it.

Standing in such a beautiful spot or remembering a fun day during a food festival there, it's easy to dream about its potential. But there are serious limits to what can be done with Gardner's Basin that won't be eased soon.

Since the city purchased the property in the 1970s with state and federal open space funding, commercial use is strictly limited. Even the 10 tiny shops of Crafter's Village that had a successful business run of several summers were tossed out after state officials belatedly discovered they were there.

The whole of Gardner's Basin is only 22 acres — small for a park even without any development. Its parking lot has 200 spaces, limiting the size of events that can be held there.

The location is great and difficult. Once you're there, it's beautiful and serene in any season. But it's about as disconnected from the rest of the city and its flow of tourists and residents as can be, at the rear of the city's northern inlet. A drive away from other attractions through a questionable neighborhood is required to get there.

Nothing will change the size and development limits.

But if Atlantic City's rebirth succeeds, the Tourism District is cleaned up and the Inlet neighborhood eventually reaches its obvious residential and commercial potential for oceanfront living, park access and use would improve.

At that point Gardner's Basin should be optimized for the base of users sufficiently big to sustain it.

Meanwhile, the overly indebted and struggling-to-revive city must think seriously about stabilizing the park at minimum cost.

The state has made clear the limits on development and activities, allowing things like public use of the open space and adjoining waters in nature-related ways. Perhaps something small — such as a boat and kayak rental — could be added to the existing seasonal restaurant, boat slips and aquarium.

With so many other areas ripe for development and demanding attention, the current goal for Gardner's Basin should be preserving it for a future and probably quite different Atlantic City.