

DIGGING DEEP

# PROJECT NEW LEAF: MANAGING THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE DURING A MAJOR CONSTRUCTION PROJECT

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In July of 2018, after three years of planning, design, and construction, Cantigny Park, in Wheaton, Illinois, outside of Chicago, reopened more than twenty acres of new and renovated gardens and landscapes, representing the most significant renewal of the park since it was designed in the 1960s and '70s. The opening marked the completion of Phase 1 of an ambitious three-phase process called Project New Leaf, a comprehensive planning effort aimed at breathing new life into this beloved museum and garden property.

In addition to the obvious garden design and budget concerns that define a major capital project, a critical aspect of

Cantigny's planning has been the management of the visitor experience during a multi-year construction process. During Phase 1, extensive infrastructure, road construction, and earthwork operations occupied key visitor arrival areas and garden features, posing challenges to the quality of the visitor experience as well as visitor safety.

Prior to construction, detailed specifications were developed to control noise, dust, traffic, contractor hours of operation, and contractor behavior (for example, no smoking) while on the Cantigny property. Furthermore, the construction documents specified early completion dates for key paths and garden areas that required completion prior to major museum openings or were essential to visitor wayfinding.

Utility outages were planned for non-critical times, and decorative construction fencing was installed at key venues to preserve garden scenery. Cantigny staff were instructed on how to explain the construction activity to inquisitive visitors, and weekly meetings were held with the construction manager to review the upcoming week's operations and mitigation measures for the public impacts. For each major construction event, a plan was devised to provide alternative means of visitor access and circulation to open gardens.

Executive Director Matt LaFond notes that the most important aspect of managing the experience of Cantigny's members, visitors, and staff has been well-planned and timely





Opposite: The restored display gardens include a new white garden (left side of photo) and rose garden (right side of photo). These gardens are proximate to the Le Jardin dining facility, making them attractive event venues.

Here: Cantigny Park's Executive Director Matt LaFond joins member Janice Dugan to formally reopen the display gardens in July 2018. Improved access for persons with disabilities was a major achievement of the garden renovations.

CANTIGNY PARK IS A 140-ACRE PUBLIC GARDEN AND MUSEUM PROPERTY LOCATED IN WHEATON, ILLINOIS. CANTIGNY WAS THE SUMMER HOME OF *CHICAGO TRIBUNE* FOUNDER JOSEPH MEDILL, AND LATER THE HOME OF HIS GRANDSON ROBERT R. MCCORMICK, EDITOR AND PUBLISHER OF THE *TRIBUNE* DURING THE EARLY AND MID-20TH CENTURY. WHEN MCCORMICK DIED IN 1955, HIS WILL ESTABLISHED THE ROBERT R. MCCORMICK CHARITABLE TRUST AND DESIGNATED CANTIGNY AS A PARK FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION AND RECREATION. THE PARK OPENED IN 1958. CANTIGNY IS NOW PART OF THE ROBERT R. MCCORMICK FOUNDATION AND IS ENJOYED BY MORE THAN 400,000 VISITORS EACH YEAR. IT IS HOME TO THE ROBERT R. MCCORMICK HOUSE MUSEUM, THE FIRST DIVISION MUSEUM, AND EXTENSIVE GARDENS AND GROUNDS.

communications. Once the Cantigny design consultants and construction managers developed a plan for construction phasing, Cantigny undertook a parallel effort of crafting messages to constituents and disseminating those messages via local press, television, its website, social media platforms, and email communications to members. Compelling renderings of the planned changes accompanied the verbal messages.

Equally important were the regular coordination and planning sessions between the construction manager and Cantigny's major departments: Food and Beverage, Visitor Services, Facilities, Horticulture, and the Museums. Weekly construction update meetings, with a detailed look into daily and weekly accomplishments, kept all the park departments informed of work progress. Much of the construction was concentrated during weekdays to allow for minimal weekend guest disruption, times when park attendance is usually at its highest.

Establishing a long-range calendar and plan for events and museum activities, and sharing it with contractors, was critical in managing expectations from a wide variety of groups, including couples planning future weddings and receptions, school groups planning field trips, and military history enthusiasts seeking to visit the park's First Division Museum.

Weather delays became inevitable but building flexibility into the scheduling allowed for construction teams to respond to cold weather or rainy days without throwing the overall project off schedule.

While attendance dropped by about 25 percent during Phase 1 construction, it rebounded quickly to pre-construction levels following completion; a result, says LaFond, of "keeping our constituents informed and involved throughout the process."

Phase 2 is now under construction and scheduled for completion in 2020. Planning for Phase 3 landscape improvements and the renovation of the historic McCormick House is underway, with final project completion scheduled for 2022. 🌸

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Matt LaFond is the Executive Director of Cantigny Park, part of the Robert R. McCormick Foundation. LaFond's career with Cantigny spans more than 30 years, with experience at all levels of the organization.

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