

Years in the making, \$24 million Esplanade pavilion project with café nears finish line

By [Alexa Gagosz](#) Globe Staff, Updated June 30, 2026, 2 hours ago



The Charlesbank + Smith Family Pavilion is anticipated to open at the Charles River Esplanade by the end of 2026.

RENDERING COURTESY THE CHARLES BANK CAMPUS + SMITH FAMILY PAVILION

After more than two decades of planning, a corner of the [Charles River Esplanade](#) near the [Museum of Science](#) is expected to reopen this fall, transforming a once-vacant former pool site into a year-round public hub.

The \$24 million Charlesbank and Smith Family Pavilion has been funded entirely through private donations [in what has been long been considered the largest-ever private gift for a state park in Massachusetts](#). The construction project, which began last June, will convert a long-vacant former site of a public pool into a roughly 9,000-square-foot hub with a café, the Esplanade's first year-round public restrooms, and other amenities intended to make the waterfront usable throughout the year.

“Right now, water and facilities are closed between mid-October and mid-April, so we’re really a six-month-of-the-year park,” said Jen Mergel, the executive director of the [Esplanade Association](#), the nonprofit organization that has long stewarded the land and raised the funds for construction. With the opening of the pavilion, “we will become a year-round destination for people from more Greater Boston neighborhoods and for tourists.

“This combination of amenities will be a game changer,” she added.

[The Esplanade](#) is a state park, first created in 1910, that draws nearly 4 million visitors annually and is world famous as the scene of [Boston's July Fourth celebration](#). It extends along the Boston shore of the Charles from the Museum of Science to the Boston University Bridge that carries Route 2.



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The two acres that will reopen as part of the project have been closed off since the mid-1990s, said Mergel, who said she herself remembers swimming in the old Lee Pool complex, which was built in 1951, and then sat unused until it was eventually demolished in 2019.

“Those two acres... now 30 years later will reopen as a recreational, cultural, and social connection point,” said Mergel. “We’re hoping that it’s a great hub and gateway people to not just discover the Charles River Esplanade, not only as a pass through, but as a destination for more people from more places.”

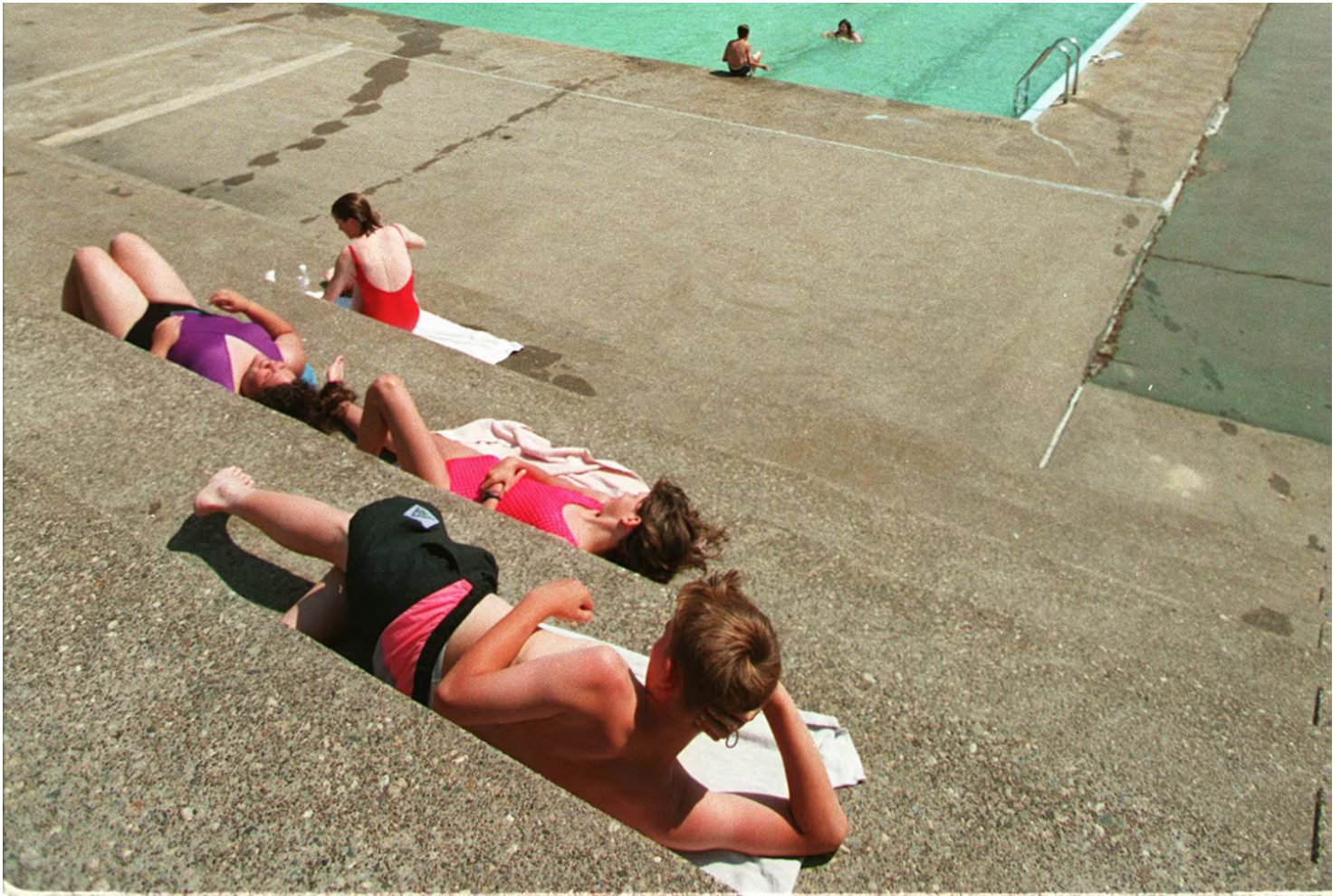
After a competitive bidding process, the Esplanade Association chose Max Ultimate Food, a Dorchester-based catering company, to run the pavilion’s new café. Bobby Perino-Thompson, Max’s vice president, said the café’s menu is still being drafted, but

to expect breakfast and lunch items, along with coffee and smoothies.

“You’re not going to get a \$12 latte. ... It’ll be affordable,” he said in an interview. “The Esplanade is a public good. We want the café to emulate that.”

Until this pavilion opens, the Esplanade has largely been a place to run, bike, and attend public events. While the Esplanade Association describes the project primarily as a year-round public amenity, its hospitality partner also sees significant opportunity in private events, which were uses that weren’t previously possible on the riverfront. Mergel said the campus can be closed to the public for private events for up to 15 days a year under its lease.





Bostonians sunbath on the concrete bleachers at the Lee Memorial Pool at Storrow Drive in the summer of 1994. TOM HERDE/GLOBE STAFF

While a project for an all-season pavilion has been discussed by the Esplanade Association going back to the early 2000s, Mergel said the nonprofit lacked the funding needed to move the project forward. Come 2019, it had proposed raising \$12 million for construction. Since then, inflation and tariffs have moved those goal posts, she said. To date, the nonprofit has raised more than \$23 million toward construction, and still needs roughly \$1.5 million to finish its capital campaign.

“We’re confident we can close that gap,” she said.

In less than a week, nearly a million people are expected to gather on the Esplanade for [Boston’s iconic Fourth of July celebration](#), listening to live music at the Hatch

Shell or by floating on kayaks on the river ahead of the fireworks. By next summer, many of those visitors will find something that's never existed before: a year-round café and a public pavilion overlooking the Charles River.

"I come from New York City," said Perino-Thomas. "It's like, how important is Central Park? The Esplanade is just as important to us here in Boston."

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