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Photo by Kevin Lorenzi

Times photo by KEVIN LORENZI A new playground has been installed in Monaca's riverfront park. The park is part of a \$500,000 redevelopment project for the area.

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Bill Utterback |

MONACA - As a tugboat pushed coal barges toward Pittsburgh on a sun-splashed March afternoon, its wake lapped against, and occasionally across, a partially constructed walkway at Monaca Riverfront Park.

Rivers shape communities, but don't always connect with communities. They can be unapproachable, lined with industry, highway and railroad tracks.

But Monaca is reconnecting with the Ohio River. A \$500,000 reconstruction project, imagined for eight years, has been launched at the park, which surrounds the Monaca pump house below Atlantic Avenue. The park faces the broad confluence of the Beaver and Ohio rivers.

When finished, the park is intended to help accelerate the redevelopment of Monaca's riverfront, a newly created zoning district that stretches from Ninth Street to the boat launch.

"We're hoping that it becomes a venue that attracts people of all ages, from children to older people, to anyone in the community who wants to spend time near the river," Monaca Manager Mario Leone said.

The following items have already been installed, and visited by children and dogs:

- Two rainbow-colored pieces of climbing playground equipment and two swing sets, each surrounded by a soft rubber safety flooring.
- Three small pavilions, equipped with grills and capped with distinctive copper-colored roofing. Leone said two additional pavilions will be added.
- A stone and grass amphitheatre, which descends to the river's edge.
- Benches, facing the water at street level on Atlantic Avenue, and at various locations on the lower level.

A quarter-mile paved walking loop, circling the amphitheatre and two of the pavilions at the river's edge, has been started, but is not yet completed. Landscaping, including trees and flowers, has also begun.

"It's looking real nice," Leone said. "It was pretty run down."

The park's proximity to the water may occasionally create challenges. This week, as the water level in the Ohio rose after heavy rains, one of the pavilions, the stage area at the amphitheatre, and a long stretch of the walkway, were underwater for a day.

Leone said the structures were built to withstand the water and that a power spray assault on the residual mud will make everything seem new again.

The stone block pump house was built in 1895 and reconstructed as a Works Progress Administration (WPA) project in 1940. Leone said the land surrounding the pump house has existed as a park for years, at one time housing a basketball court.

Borough council launched the current reconstruction project in 2002 and financed it all through grants, including a Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources matching grant and several smaller grants.

In September 2010, council created a "planned river-oriented development district" ordinance aimed at attracting "high-density" housing, such as high-rise, mid-rise and garden apartment buildings, as well as restaurants and business or professional offices, according to the borough website.

"(The park) is going to be the cornerstone for the redevelopment of that area," Leone said.

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