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We Just Wanted to Have Our Park

Foundation Stories behind the Murphy-Trainor Memorial Park

On January 6, 1990, Elizabeth Camp and David Talen arrived at the mayor's office in downtown Providence and patiently waited at the door. Camp felt nervous and excited. She thought it would be the big day that they had been waiting for a long time: the major would sign and approve their proposal to create a new 4.6-acre park bordering Mashapaug Pond in the Reservoir Triangle area. It was the last day that Mayor Joseph R. Paolino Jr. would be in office. As Camp and Talen watched, Paolino used one hand to hold the phone while talking and the other hand to sign documents. People shuffled in and out.

"It was like he was trying to get everything done, all that he wanted to do, before he left," recalled Camp.

Finally, the mayor waved Camp and Talen in and asked why they were there. Camp explained their proposal for the city to create a new park on the southwest shore of Mashapaug Pond. "Oh, I don't know much about that," Camp remembered Paolino saying. "I don't think that's going to happen." The phone rang again. The mayor picked up the phone and waived his guests out.

Being dismissed by government officials was nothing new for the two members of the Mashapaug Pond Action Committee. The mayor's abrupt no was just one episode in an almost five-year fight with developers, the state government and city officials to give Providence a new lakeside park. To Elizabeth Camp and Rose McCarthy, the co-leaders of the group, what they went through from 1989 to 1994 was "horrendous".

"I don't know if I can do that now," said McCarthy. "It burnt us out. It really burnt us out."

But the fruit of the effort, Murphy-Trainor Memorial Park, was worth it. Thanks to their efforts, the parkland was purchased at a cost of $600,000, with 75 percent of the money coming from the state's open space bond issue and the rest from the city, and built with around $180,000 from city. The park is simple: naturally landscaped, with no benches, playing courts or play equipment. But the stories behind the park is not, and has been rarely told.

It is a window into how much determination, perseverance and patience it took for a community to overcame the bureaucracy, indifference and inefficiency of the state and city government for years to preserve a piece of open space.

“It was a good group of residents. A lot of times residents just give up after a while,” said Robert McMahon, the superintendent of the Parks Department of Providence. “But they didn’t. They hung in there.”

“I knew it was going to be a long process,” said Camp. “My husband said ‘This is never gonna happen.’ And I told him ‘You know me. When I decide I’m gonna do something, it’s gonna get done.’”

“We were treated terribly when we were doing this,” said McCarthy. “For a little project it was a lot of work. I cannot even imagine how people try to get something really big done. They didn’t make it easy for us. And they made a lot of work for themselves. They did.”

Shocking news and the formation of the committee

It was a “gorgeous and sunny” day in the summer of 1989 when Camp took her son for a walk and heard Councilman David Dillon calling her name.

“Liz, Liz, come here!” he shouted, according to Camp. “You gotta hear this!”

The Councilman was going door to door in the neighborhood to spread the news that a developer was about to build about 25 houses on the woods between Ocean State Job Lot and Molter Street.

“Dave came with a petition,” recalled Camp, “he asked people if they were interested in fighting the development and he said we needed to have a meeting. I replied immediately ‘I’m going to the meeting.’”

When Dillon came to McCarthy’s door, she was angry at him. “How could you let this happen?” McCarthy remembered her questioning Dillon. But later she realized that Dillon was “the only one who did stick his neck out” among the politicians who helped with the project. “He was with us through the thick of it,” said McCarthy.

“It was fear, definitely fear,” Dillon remembered his feeling when he himself first heard about the development plan on the property. “It has been open space as long as people can remember.”

The developer was Jeffery Van Liew, president of Van Liew Development Corporation. The city had offered him $400,000 for the parcel. But Van Liew was asking for $750,000. Van Liew first purchased the land from Temple Beth El in 1987.

One week after a meeting with 30 residents of the area, Van Liew said to Providence Journal in July, 1989 that the homes he would build would be sensitive to the neighborhood and to the architecture of the area, which would make the area “look very country.”

Dillon was concerned that the low-end houses would devalue the properties in the area and he believed it was also one of the concerns of the residents. According to Dillon, most of the houses in the area were single-family and owner occupied homes. Most of the people had been there for a long time and their whole life was invested there. But the low-end housing

would have taken everything away.

The first community meeting at the casino of Roger Williams Park was very unproductive and disorganized. During the two-hour meeting, everyone was reacting to the news and venting emotions. People wanted different things. Some said they wanted to preserve the land for wild life or for wetland, and some said they did not want to see heavier traffic.

“But that was a good way for the community to start,” Camp said. “We got to know each other and got to know what was important to each other. That helped with galvanizing the community into a directive purpose.”

Camp and McCarthy met each other for the first time in that meeting, though they lived three houses away from each other.

“When we talked we both spoke the same language. I remember we were both talking about you could hear the birds singing. It was all about the nature,” recalled McCarthy. “Every neighbor in that area know that undeveloped property in Providence is sacred. It is important we remain it in that way.”

At the end of that night, Dillon asked people if they would like to form a committee to work on this issue. “Me!” “Me!” “Me!” Camp remembered people saying and raising their hands one by one.

Soon Mashapaug Pond Action Committee with nine key members was formed. They met on a regular base at Camp’s home to discuss strategies and tactics.

With the State Representative Jeremiah Murphy’s suggestion, Mashapaug Pond Action Committee would first try to get a grant from the state open space bond issue to buy the land, if the bond issue would be approved in the ballot in November.

At the same time, Van Liew had applied to the state department of Environmental Management for a wetland permit to start construction. The permit would take 90 days.

Pushing the state

The state bond issue was approved. Some community residents came to Parks Department and told McMahon their wish of getting a grant from the bond issue for building a park. McMahon drafted an application for the grant in January 1990. He did not submit the application until May, 1990, according to the correspondences between McMahon and Dillon. In the application, the estimated cost of purchasing and developing the park was $600,000. The application proposed the state to grant $412,500 and the city $187.500.

Attached to the application were thirteen sheets of paper with about 240 signatures collected by the Mashapaug Pond Action Committee through door-to-door solicitation in the neighborhood.

The committee decided to mount a phone calling campaign to push the state to respond to their request and “keep this in the eye of people,” Camp said, “because things are so easily dropped by the city or the state, by any government, unless you push it.”

Motivated by the committee, about twelve people called the state governor and asked to have the property turned into an open space.

According to McCarthy, calling the governor was because they were not getting any attention from the governor. She said she would never forget the day Liz and she both took time off their work and went to the State House to meet the governor. The meeting was set up by Murphy. But it turned out to be the assistant of the governor who came to meet them. “I remember being very upset,” said McCarthy.

“So the calling campaign was to be in their face,” said McCarthy. “Call them. Call them as

many times as we could because we wanted them to know we were not going away."

Camp remembered when she called, the person who answered the phone said: "Oh, you're Liz Camp! You gotta stop people calling. You people are driving us crazy. Alright, we're gonna do something."

"That was very interesting to find out how so few people could influence the government," said Camp.

On August 20, 1990, a $450,000 grant from the open spaces bond issue to the city Parks Department was approved, leaving $250,000 for the city to fill to complete the purchase.

The new developer

The Ahlborgs, Glenn Ahlborg and Eric Ahlborg, bought the parcel from Van Liew for about $200,000, according to Camp, in the spring of 1990.

Camp remembered she went with seven other neighbors and Dillon to the Ahlborgs' office.

"You guys want it? You can buy it," Camp recalled Glenn Ahlborg saying, "I want a million dollars."

"It was a win-win situation for them," recalled Camp. "They could put 25 townhouses there and sell the houses. But the interest rates were very high and it was hard to sell houses. Or they could sell the property to the city and turn it around for quick profit."

Camp suspected the Ahlborgs purchased the property because they had known the state Department of Environmental Management and the community wanted it to be open space. "They knew they could play both sides," she said.

“I don’t believe the Ahlborgs were ever gonna develop it,” said McCarthy. “I think they were playing a game.”

In October of 1990 some bulldozers drove into the wooded land, moving dirt around and taking down trees. The neighborhood residents were livid, according to Dillon. Dillon received a couple of phone calls from people saying “Can you hear what I’m hearing?” when there was the background noise from the bulldozers.

“That wasn’t the best day in my political career hearing people saying that,” said Dillon. He remembered that was about three weeks before the city election.

The city and the state were not doing things to move the project along, that was why the Ahlborgs brought in the bulldozers to push the city and the neighborhood, according to Camp.

The Parks Department of Providence had begun the process of hiring surveyors and professional appraisers, “but all these took a while,” said McMahon.

Dealing with the city

Both Camp and McCarthy could not remember how many times they stood in the hallway in City Hall and waited for hours outside the Property Committee meeting in 1990.

“It was always cold I remember,” said McCarthy. “There was no place to sit. We would be walking around, walking around. But we were not going away.”

Dillon would bring the Mashapaug Pond acquisition project onto the Property Committee meetings’ agenda and ask Camp and McCarthy to attend. The meetings were usually at night. Camp remembered sometimes they had to wait for over two hours.

“We would just stand there, stand there, stand there, and wondered when we were gonna get called,” recalled McCarthy.

Sometimes Camp and McCarthy were finally told: “We don’t have time today.” So they had to leave. Sometimes they got called in. But they were usually given only 10 minutes.

“We would say ‘Hi, thank you for seeing us.’ and that was about it,” recalled Camp. “And then they would start arguing about the price.”

The Property Committee would say the price was still too high. Dillon would say the property was worth it. Then John Lombardi, the head of the Property Committee, would say “well we’re going to think about this. We are going to table this now,” recalled Camp. “Though he had tabled it for a hundred times.”

“We didn’t really get to say anything,” she added.

“I was so frustrated, so annoyed. Why weren’t we getting anywhere?” said Camp. “But we had to go to the meetings. We had to show our faces to let them know that we were not going away.”

McCarthy said city officials talked down to them.“You knew they were rude to you on purpose,” she said. “It’s like you don’t mean anything; this project is nothing. They think they are gonna weigh you down.But we stayed. We never left.”

Dillon said Lombardi was just a sticker about details and the council’s process but Lombardi was not against the project.

“I think everything was in order. They were just legal steps that you had to go through that they took a long time,” said Dillon. “If you get three or four things on the agenda, you don’t know how long some of the meetings are gonna take. So sometimes people end up waiting

there for a long time. But they hung in there. And council people noticed that. It helped."

Buying parkland, instead of fixing parks, would take more time for the city government to approve it, according to McMahon. "The city government is always overwhelmed with a million things," he said. "Like the Parks Department, we have a hundred parks to maintain. There were always 20 or 30 big projects joggling in one time in the department. You can't just spend your time on one project and see it all the way through. You gotta put it down and go to something else."

The Mashapaug Pond Action Committee had also rallied people to show up in the meetings with government people in the church The Mediator and the city council meetings.

"We needed people to show up in the meeting to show them we are serious," said McCarthy, "because number speaks. And there would be no room. There would be people standing. We got support even from outside Reservoir Triangle area."

"It makes a difference when you are trying to get it passed in the city council," said Dillon. "It makes a difference if they know there are people behind this. It's easier to get things passed, and it's easier to get things moving more quickly."

The city's resolution

In November, 1990, the new mayor mayor of Providence Vincent A. Cianci, Jr., known as Buddy Cianci, was elected. Dillon thought he would not be able to work with Cianci to get the park project done because he and Cianci did not get along well when they were both in office between 1978 and 1983. So Dillon tried to get outgoing Mayor Paolino to finish the project before Paolino left office in January.

In the end, before leaving office, Paolino signed the sales and purchase agreement with the Ahlborgs for the parcel in January, according to the Triangle Newsletter issued on April 13, 1991.

Given her meeting with Mayor Paolino, Camp was confused by the mayor's cooperation. She guessed the mayor just signed whatever people brought him to sign on his last day in office.

"Mayor Paolino was terrible to us. He had no interest in us," said McCarthy. "He later got forced to sign because we were relentless. We did not let up."

To their surprise, the new mayor, Cianci, was easier to talk to and he supported the project. According to Dillon, Mayor Cianci was very different in the second term. Dillon and Cianci got along much better than before.

However, Mayor Paolino's signature turned out to be insufficient to push through the final acquisition. In February 1991, Dillon was told the purchase still needed to be approved by the city council. Therefore the Mashapaug Pond Action Committee had to go back again to attend more Property Committee meetings.

In March, 1991—over a year after Mayor Paolino signed the papers— the city council announced that the city had decided to purchase the land. Camp remembered she was very calm when she heard the news. "This is great news," she said to the people in the City Hall meeting room. "We're glad to hear the decision."

"It was hard to get excited because you never know what they were gonna throw at you next," said McCarthy. "We were always skeptical no matter what we heard because there were so many times we thought we were there but we weren't. But at the time we knew we were absolutely done, we were elated."

When they walked out of the city council meeting, Camp and McCarthy jumped into the air and high-fived each other. "Yes, we did it!" they shouted. "We did it!"

Eric Alhborg, who was also in the meeting, approached the two elated women in the hallway.

“They want us to pay taxes on this property,” he said according to Camp. “I’m not sure if we should pay that. Maybe we’ll fight that.” Camp replied: “Go ahead fighting it. We’re not fighting for you on that!”

The ever-coming money

But their wait was not over. Around March, 1991, the Mashapaug Pond Action Committee was informed that state funds for all projects were frozen.

Finally on May 14, 1991, State Senator Robert Kells told the committee the state Budget Office had agreed to unfreeze the $450,000 open spaces grant to the city, according the Triangle Newsletter issued on issued in June, 1991.

R. David Cruise, the Chief of Staff to Governor Bruce Sundlun, confirmed in a September 30, 1991 letter that the state monies on the Mashapaug Pond acquisition project would be forthcoming if the city fulfilled three requirements: submission of title commitment for property based on perimeter survey, condemnation of certain losts, and abandonment of certain existing streets.

One year later, the city had still not met the state’s requirements, according to a September 1992 letter from Cruise to Mayor Cianci.

It also took the city time to pay its portion of $250,000 to complete the Mashapaug Pond acquisition project. The city had to takeout a loan to get the money, according to Dillon. The city was still working on drawing up a loan agreement in November, 1992, according to a letter from McMahon to the Department of Planning & Development.

Finally on January 21, 1993, Mayor Cianci issued a newsletter announcing the ground breaking of the park that spring. “Cianci stepped in in a typical Buddy fashion. It looks like he did it,” recalled McCarthy. “It’s just so Buddy. He’s good at it.”

The real building work did not start until late summer in 1993, according to the Triangle Newsletter issued on March 24, 1993.

Construction was nearly completed in the end of 1993. Then the planting had to wait until the spring of 1994, due to the typical construction delay in New England where the ground would be too cold in winter, according to McMahon.

“It was a question of getting the money,” said McMahon. “It is a lot of money. From the purchase to the developing of the park, it was almost $800,000. With that money we could fix up ten parks and here we put it into one park. So it is a big commitment on the part of the city.”

The Opening Ceremony

Before the Parks Department designed the park, they listened to the community. The residents wanted the park to be as natural as possible. Camp suggested putting three birch trees at the entrance of the park in the memory of Jeremiah Murphy, the state representative who helped secure the open spaces bond issue from the state died before the park was completed.

Camp remembered Murphy once said to her when they talked about the park: “I’m very partial to birch trees, you know. If we can get some birch trees put in there somewhere.”

Joseph Trainor, lawyer at the state house, who gave the Mashapaug Pond Action Committee legal consultancy, also died before he could see the park built. So Camp and McCarthy named the park Murphy-Trainor Memorial Park and inscribed it on a plaque to pay tribute to the two men’s contribution.

It was a beautiful sunny day, almost 100 degrees, on June 25, 1994 when the dedication

ceremony of the Murphy-Trainor Memorial Park was held. About 50 residents and 8 government people attended the ceremony. Camp was the last to speak in the ceremony because “we were the least important,” she said.

“It took so much tooth pulling to get politicians involved, to listen and to get behind it. But when it came to the opening of the park, everybody wants to have a speech,” she remembered. “And people who have not been involved in any of it, they all had to have a comment and speak.”

“But I got the biggest hand,” she said, “because all my neighbors were there.”

Looking back, Camp felt the Mashapaug Pond Action Committee was used by the developers to get their property purchased at a high price. She also suspected the committee was used by some people in the city council to get concessions from Dillon who was the Councilman and Chairman of Finance Committee.

Dillon said he did not remember anything like that happens.

“There is another suspicion that some political stuff was going on behind the scenes,” said McCarthy. “Every project you saw in downtown, every state building being built, had the Ahlborgs’ name on it. They may be in bed with some of the politicians. But as the regime changed, some people stepped out of the office and some new people came in. The Ahlborgs got into a lot of troubles with the Labor Board and it hurt them. And they went under since then.”

“They had to go through bidding process just like everybody else. The state does not just hand pick contractors,” said McMahon. “We generally have to take the lowest-priced qualified bidder.”

Unfinished dream

People now use the park a lot. The neighbors always run into each other in the park. When McCarthy's husband was alive, he used to go to the park everyday.

The building of Murphy-Trainor Park coincidentally realized a 30-year old dream of Thomas Kelly, the former president of the Reservoir Triangle Neighborhood Association. He wished the illegal dumping into the Mashapaug Pond to stop and thought the city or the state should buy the property along the shorelines and develop it into a park, according to an article in The Evening Bullentin, November 5, 1979.

Now the park is built, but the Mashapaug Pond, the largest body of water in Providence, is still not clean.

"A magnificent lake which can be permanently preserved for public health and enjoyment by the control of a very narrow strip of land along the shore. An avenue bordering this strip would provide fine residence sties with a splendid outlook forever." It was how the *Report of the Metropolitan Park Commission* in 1905 described Mashapaug Pond.

However, the shores of the pond have been the home of a number of industrial concerns over the last 200 years.

Starting with a 600-spindle cotton mill established in the early 1800s, the pond was later home to a massive ice-making operation, the Gorham Manufacturing Company and the Huntington Industrial Park. With the dumping from the businesses, the quality of the water in Mashapaug Pond declined.

The government has been doing the clean-up of the pond. Mashapaug Pond now looks clean and tranquil, but it is suggested not to eat the fish from the pond or swim in the water.

"My father used to swim down there. He grew up with the industrial park," said Dillon. He

remembered the awful smell from the pond when he went by it as a kid. He recalled his father telling him “It does smell bad. But if they stop putting stuff into it, it will clean itself eventually.”

“Maybe someday there will be people swimming in there. The park would be a good legacy if that happens,” said Dillon. “Eventually that park relates to a lake where you could swim in the pond one day, that would be nice.”

Kelly said more in the 1979 news article. “You can go into some sections and see nothing but the pond and the woods,” she said. “You would never believe you were in the city. It’s just beautiful.”