

From Eyesore to Eye-catching: River Bend Community Park Transforms a Neighborhood

With the cooperation of several government agencies and one very committed group of neighbors, the site of a former prison off Route 25 in the northeastern section of St. Charles, was transformed into a future paradise.

Situated on nearly 50 acres just east of Tekakwitha Forest Preserve and Anderson Elementary School, the River Bend Community Park occupies land once owned and operated by the State of Illinois Department of Corrections as a youth prison. When the State decided to close the facility in 2002, the St. Charles Park District, along with the Kane County Forest Preserve and the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR), banded together with residents of the adjacent community to create a neighborhood park.

And what a park it is! With softball and soccer fields, biking trails and picnic groves, it has all the athletic and aesthetic amenities that are the trademarks of a St. Charles Park District facility. It also has some that are not so common – such as the District’s third dog park, third skate park and third community garden area. Add a fishing pond and playground, basketball and tennis courts, hiking paths and native landscaping, and you have everything the neighbors could ask for.

In fact, that’s just what they did.

“We had a wish list,” says Chuck Ingersoll, president of the River Bend Community Group, a volunteer association representing approximately 900 homeowners whose properties surround the newly-created park that bears the organization’s name. Working closely with John Hoscheit, president of the Kane County Forest Preserve, the group expressed their concerns about the land the State left behind. The Forest Preserve was a good organization to approach, says Hoscheit, because it is

always looking for infill parcels of land in the urban corridor to provide amenities that didn’t previously exist. Turning the youth prison into a neighborhood park certainly seemed to fit the bill, and five years after the State walked away from the land, the Forest Preserve acquired it as part of their 2007 referendum.

But obtaining land is one thing, improving it is another — especially when that land housed more than a dozen decrepit buildings that had to be demolished, and thousands of yards of buckled and crumbling sidewalks and parking lots that had to be removed. For that, yet another agency stepped in, IDNR, in the form of a Kane County Community Development Block Grant that furnished the money that helped fund the Forest Preserve’s extensive demolition efforts. And then the Park District was successful in being awarded still another IDNR grant, completing what Hoscheit calls a “significant neighborhood transition.”

While the diversity of the park’s elements and the area’s need helped win points in the grant process, the Park District’s green approach to the design were equally regarded by IDNR. Where feasible, the design preserved and incorporated portions of the site’s existing parking lots for re-use; an existing storage building was saved and has been repurposed and restored as the facility’s maintenance building; and native vegetative swales and bio-basins were established to manage runoff, improve water quality and assist in stormwater management.

“There was razor-wire fence that virtually hung over the garages of many



of the individual property owners,” says Hoscheit. “It was an eyesore.”

To transform that eyesore into a thing of beauty, the Forest Preserve turned to the Park District. Together, they have a history of effective community partnership, dating back to such projects as the East Side Sports Complex, in which master plans were formulated and community input sought. That same successful formula was employed in the design and development of River Bend Community Park. Dozens of area residents gathered at Valley View’s Bethel Baptist Church to hear presentations from officials of both organizations, who were, to say the least, enthusiastically received.

Said then-Superintendent of Parks and Planning, Dennis Ryan, “It was the first time I ever did a presentation to a group where we got a standing ovation.”

During that initial meeting, Park District and Forest Preserve officials could only give the River Bend residents a broad overview of what was possible.

To get specifics, they broke the group of some 60 residents into smaller factions, each one meeting with an agency

representative to brainstorm ideas for the future park.

“If you really want to know what we came up with as far as suggestions, all you have to do is look at the park,” says Ingersoll. “We wanted dog parks and walking trails and ball fields, and the Park District took all this information back and designed a plan that showed just what we wanted.”

River Bend Community Park has been developed in two phases. The northern section sports basketball courts and a skate park, a community garden area and picnic groves nestled among existing shade trees, a spacious dog park, and a new fishing pier erected over an already-existing pond. Ample parking can be accessed off Illinois and Geneva Avenues, while hiking trails meander through the grounds. The park’s bike paths connect to the nearby Fox River Bike Trail, making the park a delightful destination for bikers who want to pack a picnic lunch and enjoy a day’s outing.

With its baseball/softball fields, soccer fields, and multipurpose athletic fields, the southern section will be open for

use in 2012, according to Park District officials. Additional hiking/biking trails will connect to those in the northern section, while the District’s horticulture and naturalist staffs will work to restore the existing savannah and install a native landscape buffer in areas that used to be delineated by the aforementioned razor-wire and boarded-up fencing.

River Bend Community Park officially opened on June 20, 2012. More than 100 neighbors attended the festivities including a basketball contest, pickleball demonstration, and various games suitable for the entire family. The Park District also offered picnic-style refreshments provided by WBK Engineering, and skateboard lessons by Choice Skateboards.

The Greater St. Charles Convention & Visitors Bureau participated by having Molly, the Pet Travel Specialist, on site and promoting pet-friendly activities in the area. Midwest Groundcovers donated a variety of native landscaping materials and a tree for the park entrance.



This park represents community activism and government responsiveness at its finest. And while Hoscheit credits the River Bend Community Group for really looking out for their neighborhood and how it could be improved, he also credits the Park District for creating the kind of facility that neighborhood wanted.

The “before-and-after” aspect of the park’s development has been inspiring to see. Even once the buildings were gone and before any improvements were made, just the impact of taking out the razor wire fences and allowing a prairie-like setting to develop had tremendous impact in the neighborhood, says Hoscheit.

“In the last twenty years, in my mind at least, this is by far the most significant improvement to that neighborhood,” says Hoscheit. “It will be a beautiful park.”

Ingersoll agrees. “What more could the Park District do? Gold paving on the parking lots? They’ve done a fantastic job with everything. We’re just thrilled.”

River Bend Community Park is a one-stop destination for all kinds of recreation opportunities.



Pictured from left to right: Chuck Ingersoll, President of the River Bend Community Group; Ray Ochromowicz, Director of St. Charles Park District; Bob Thomson, Park Board Vice President; James F. Cooke, Park Board Commissioner; Gloria Klimek, Park Board Commissioner; Denny Ryan, former Superintendent of Parks; Nancy Cox, Park Board Commissioner; John Wessel, Assistant Superintendent of Parks; Jim Breen, former Park District Director; Laura Rudow, Superintendent of Parks; and John Hoscheit, President of the Kane County Forest Preserve District.