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# THE ELM STREET PARK

For many years, the Elm Street, Oakridge and Lynn Civic Association (EOL), though technically in Section Eight, was the fighting edge of Chevy Chase Section Four. It was there that the action began, as high rise development threatened on the west from Wisconsin Avenue, and from the north beyond the B&O tracks. In our own backyards, we fought to keep the muddy runoff from big building construction from turning our stream, Coquelin Run, into a swirling torrent of erosion. In our front yards, we fought to keep Elm Street and Oakridge from being widened to major thoroughfares. And in between, we fought to save all the houses and grounds between B-CC High School and Leland Junior High School from being leveled for a common sports field and playground serving both schools.

None of us will forget the "Last Leaf Upon the Tree" garden party in the late 1960s, at which residents along the proposed right-of-way for Project 80 demonstrated what would happen to their trees and gardens if the required 50 feet on either side were carved away to make room for a 60-inch water pipeline from Bethesda to Silver Spring. All the trees were decorated with tombstone signs, e.g. "This Elm, sprouted in 1920, will die if Project 80 comes this way." TV and press had a field day. EOL won.

But the big onslaught from commercial development came after the erection of the Air Rights Building on Wisconsin Avenue astride the B&O, when it was discovered that the developers had purchased a long thin strip of land on the south side of the tracks as far down as 44th Street, with the intention of continuing buildings and a roadway in that direction some day. The residents, who had used that ground unchallenged for 20-30 years for gardens, badminton courts, and tree houses, brought adverse possession (squatter's rights) suits against the developer and won the land.

In the meantime, on the west along Wisconsin Avenue, houses were deteriorating as commerce crowded in. The idea for a park to cut off the residential from the business area came from Marjorie Sonnenfeldt of Thornapple Street in Chevy Chase Section Four, who made the suggestion as a member of the advisory committee to the B-CC Master Plan. It was put on the map as a floating symbol by the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission (M-NCPPC). The suggestion was activated on March 9, 1972, when EOL president Nicholas Read showed slides of the deteriorating neighborhood at the Montgomery County Council's

Capital Improvement hearings, and persuaded the council to vote initial funds for a park.

Between 1973 and 1975, the Capital Improvement Budget included \$2,000 to design the park and \$48,000 to develop it. No estimate was put on the cost of acquiring the land and the houses that were on it. Nick Read wrote to Dickran Hovsepian, then president of the County Council, asking for an early starting date. He pointed out, "the longer you wait, the higher prices will go," a prophecy that turned out to be only too true.

There were delays. The Board of Education came into the picture and turned the park around. Instead of the park's paralleling Wisconsin, the designers were persuaded to run it down between Willow and Elm toward Leland Junior High School, the idea being to develop a park that could become an extension of the school and thus provide more area for school recreation. This unfortunately would have cut the neighborhood in half rather than buffering it from the business district.

Meantime, there had been an upswing in real estate values, and each of the 12 homes that had to be demolished to make way for the park went up 25 percent or more in price. EOL had voted to oppose efforts to take property from any resident owner at less than fair value—defined as the amount required to buy a similar home of equivalent size and quality in the same or a similar neighborhood. A persuasive point in EOL's argument was that the school plan would have taken one more home. EOL won. The park was turned back around.

But scarcely had that threat been overcome when the park changed shape again. Early in 1974 the County Executive impounded funds to cut the park in half and limit it to the side along 47th Street, leaving the side along 46th in the hands of the private owners, one of whom was even then negotiating with developers to build town houses there.

More meetings were held. More testimony was given. By a 5 to 1 vote, the County Council overrode the County Executive.

It wasn't long until the park was in jeopardy once more, when the State Board of Public Works withdrew all funds for urban parks. But the Park and Planning Commission vowed that work would go forward! In December 1974, the first house was demolished, and by 1978 all 12 houses were gone and the land was vacant.

Then a threat came from the Department of Transportation, which wanted to use the vacant land as a parking

lot. EOL turned this down. So did the Park and Planning Commission; but they ran no chances, and without waiting for a final park design, they planted grass and put in temporary park benches and tables to discourage any takeovers.

In 1976, the Bethesda Sector Plan was approved, and the park became official. EOL, under the leadership of Presidents Dean Cress and later Erwin Vollmer, negotiated the annexation of Section Eight into Chevy Chase Section Four, which then appointed its own park committee, with EOL continuing in a supportive role.

With inflation, the cost to design and develop the park had gone from \$50,000 to \$165,000, not including \$811,000 spent for the purchase and demolition of the houses. It was the most expensive park, per square foot, in Montgomery County. But today, Park and Planning says it is the best-used urban park in the County. It is used by office workers from the business district as well as by the neighborhood. And it certainly fulfills its purpose—which is to cut off commercial expansion from Wisconsin Avenue.

Even as late as 1979, there were problems. At one point, the County Council disallowed the Park and Planning Commission's request for more maintenance crews, and M-NCPPC said it could not provide maintenance for the new park. The Town of Chevy Chase came to the rescue and offered to take care of it.

Finally, in June 1980, just eight years from the start, when abandonment hearings were to close off Elm Street, some residents of Leland Street, who had been putting up a fight to close off Leland in order to eliminate traffic between Wisconsin and East-West Highway, tried to stop proceedings until Leland could be closed as well. They were unsuccessful, and upper Elm became part of the park.

On May 2, 1981, the Elm Street Urban Park was dedicated with speeches and ceremony. John Kimball was master of ceremonies. Both Dr. Royce Hanson and

Norman Christeller, the former chairman and the chairman of the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission, were there. Nicholas and Dallas Read presented a bronze sculpture "Girl with Hoop," done by their daughter Jenny Read, for a centerpiece.

*Dallas Johnson Read*



*Jenny Read's "Girl With Hoop" in Elm Street Park*

*PHOTO BY LAURA RIVERS*