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Opinion: Moccasin Bend vision endures; let's complete it

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by Eleanor Cooper

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Staff file photo by Ricky Young / The site of the Moccasin Bend Mental Health Institute is seen from Point Park in November.

(Editor's note: One in a series)

If you've heard the story of Chattanooga's transformation, you probably heard about the city's dirty air and Walter Cronkite's reporting about it on CBS News, but you probably didn't hear anyone mention Moccasin Bend.

If truth be told, Moccasin Bend triggered Chattanooga's renaissance in the 1980s.

Dalton Roberts, then Hamilton County executive, and Pat Rose, Chattanooga's mayor, formed a task force in 1982 to respond to the challenge laid out by the Urban Land Institute identifying Moccasin Bend as "the focal point" for Chattanooga's identity.

The Moccasin Bend Task Force extended its scope to include the riverfront from the Chickamauga Dam to the county line, with Moccasin Bend "as the central and motivating component."

Task force members made the planning process public, transparent and engaging, holding 65 meetings over a period of three years. Steve Carr, principal planner with Carr Lynch Associates, frequently presented the emerging plans to the public. The media covered it extensively. It was a big deal.

The final announcement at the Trade Center in March 1985 revealed the Tennessee RiverPark Master Plan. We know it today as 20 miles of Riverwalk, the Tennessee Aquarium, the Walnut Street Bridge, and all of the other developments that have emerged from it.

But Moccasin Bend, which inspired all of this, has not been completed.

As the largest piece of land in public ownership along the river, Moccasin Bend's development into a Southeastern cultural heritage park could include a living history complex, archeological museum, amphitheatre, Civil War museum, central lake, and park with trails.

Let me give you an idea of what was planned for Moccasin Bend. Maybe you will see what excited the public then and still needs to be done.

"The central feature of this park will be a high quality living history complex," to be on the scale and quality of Plymouth Plantation in Massachusetts, Williamsburg in Virginia, or Oconaluftee Indian Village in Cherokee, N. Carolina ... each of which attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors each year."

The archeological museum would include ongoing archeological sites and research while at the same time preserving unprotected areas. The artifacts and exhibits from these sites would cover life of early inhabitants since the Paleo-Indian period more than 10,000 years ago. Twenty village sites of the Woodland period (700 BC--1000 AD) have been identified. A Cherokee town of the 1700s would be part of the living history complex.

In addition, the Civil War Museum would feature Moccasin Bend's strategic location when the "Cracker Line" was broken, and there would be a short hike up Stringer's Ridge to the earthworks.

The amphitheater would offer opportunities for original theatrical work about our region, similar to "Unto These Hills," as well as a place for concerts and performances.

These plans were not made in isolation, but were part of a comprehensive Tennessee Riverpark Master Plan that has been only partially realized. They were not made behind closed doors but were approved by the city and county governments and reinforced by public support in Vision 2000 and again in Revision 2000 in 1993: "Preserve Moccasin Bend in its entirety as a National Park with the themes of preserving the Native American village sites, Civil War features, and the natural and scenic areas."

Our opportunity today is not just about a place but is part of a much larger awareness of the importance of the river to our identity, a renewal of our commitment to the outdoors, and the restoration of natural areas with trails and parks.

Our opportunity today is not just for Chattanooga. What is envisioned for the bend will add to Tennessee parklands and would be the nation's first archaeological park inside city limits.

Our opportunity is not just for now but for the future. It will be a worldwide treasure and will attract international visitors as well as scientific and archeological research.

In 2003, under the leadership of then-U.S. Rep. Zach Wamp, legislation was passed to recognize Moccasin Bend as a National Archeological District. At that time a promise was made by the state to move the Moccasin Bend Mental Hospital.

Many people who have dreamed of saving Moccasin Bend have passed away, but the dream lives on.

One part of our vision remains incomplete -- that is, Moccasin Bend.

The people of Chattanooga and Hamilton County, living and dead, hold this area in trust to the past as well as to the future.

A petition (<https://nppcha.org/savethebend>) was launched to convince state officials to honor our request to relocate the mental health hospital off Moccasin Bend. Almost 1,700 people have signed it. I urge you to learn more, sign the petition and let your voice be heard.

Eleanor McCallie Cooper, past executive director of Chattanooga Venture, is former community liaison for the Moccasin Bend Task Force. Contact her at eleanorcooper@epbfi.com.



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