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Opinion: Time to save Moccasin Bend. Again

December 16, 2023 at 12:00 p.m.

by Sally Robinson

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Panorama of Chattanooga and the Tennessee River from high up on Lookout Mountain

(Editor's note: Sixth in a series)

Chattanoogaans made a discovery in 1982-85 about how to foretell the future. This remarkable feat started with a simple request for a recommendation about the best use for 600 acres on Moccasin Bend jointly owned by the city of Chattanooga and Hamilton County. The local economy was stagnant, and it was proposed that the property be developed as an asphalt processing plant. Plant boosters pointed out the benefit of economic development and, besides, the city and the county already owned the land.

But city and county elected leaders hesitated. Instead, they appointed a five-citizen group to evaluate options. The newly formed Moccasin Bend Task Force was thus given the assignment to examine several proposals and recommend the best choice to the city and county. The task force wanted the public to be informed, and deliberations and meetings were shared with the state of

Tennessee, Moccasin Bend Mental Health Institute, the media, American Indian tribes, National Park Service and the public. Transparency was assured every step of the way.

This planning process took three years. In 1985 the task force published the Tennessee Riverpark Master Plan. Their plan would take 20 years and \$20 million to complete. It was unanimously adopted by both the city and county commissions.

The very first thing the task force did was to say "no" to the proposal for an asphalt processing plant on Moccasin Bend. The recommendation was that the jointly owned property be conveyed to the National Park Service. Furthermore, Chattanooga's congressional leadership successfully secured National Historic Landmark status for the Bend. Chattanooga became the only city in the United States to have a national park in its urban core.

Let lawmakers know what you think

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With Moccasin Bend's 600 acres now part of the National Park Service, the task force focused on a bigger question: What could be achieved if we all put our collective shoulders to the wheel to plan the future for Chattanooga's riverfront

and the Bend as an integral part of our city? What would attract our citizens and visitors to enjoy a vibrant new downtown? To formulate such a plan, the task force held community meetings at school auditoriums, church fellowship halls, the Convention Center and Chattanooga Public Library. Round tables were supplied with magic markers and maps of our center city. How could our local economy grow? What would promote downtown revitalization and riverfront development? Attendees voted with their colored stickers to choose the best ideas to put forth.

The plan then took flight as a blueprint for our future. So far, we have achieved about half of our citizens' and the task force's vision. To date, the city, county, state, federal government, foundations and private enterprise have adhered to the Tennessee Riverpark Master Plan. They created the Riverwalk extending from the Chickamauga Dam past Ross' Landing (still in progress), the Hubert Fry fishing pier, picnic tables and playgrounds along the riverwalk (including Coolidge Park, carousel and water park), boat launches, Walnut Street pedestrian bridge, and the Holmberg bridge connecting downtown with the Hunter Museum and the Bluff View Art District.

The riverfront district has been further transformed with the Children's Creative Discovery Museum, Bijou Theatre, Ross' Landing festival grounds for year-round events, Chattanooga Lookouts baseball stadium, and Chattanooga's crown jewel, the Tennessee Aquarium.

The Westside and Southside are now poised to nearly double Chattanooga's downtown footprint along the Tennessee River. This new and ongoing development includes industry, mixed-use retail, unparalleled economic investment, housing, recreation and education facilities. A new generation will carry the torch that awaits their new visions and plans.

Numerous impediments and crossroads have been encountered in what has become a multi-generational quest because our work is not yet complete. The plan called for the elimination of nonconforming uses still on Moccasin Bend park land (the police firing range and mental health institute).

Today, as before, we find ourselves being called to action. One of our community's treasured crown jewels is in jeopardy. It's Moccasin Bend. Again. The obsolete state mental health facility currently located on the Bend is to be demolished. Clearly the new mental health facility must not be located on Moccasin Bend. Our challenge this time is for us to urge our elected state representatives to choose another site for the new state facility and make our Moccasin Bend National Park whole, as promised.

Sally Robinson, a former Chattanooga City Council member, served on the Moccasin Bend Task Force.

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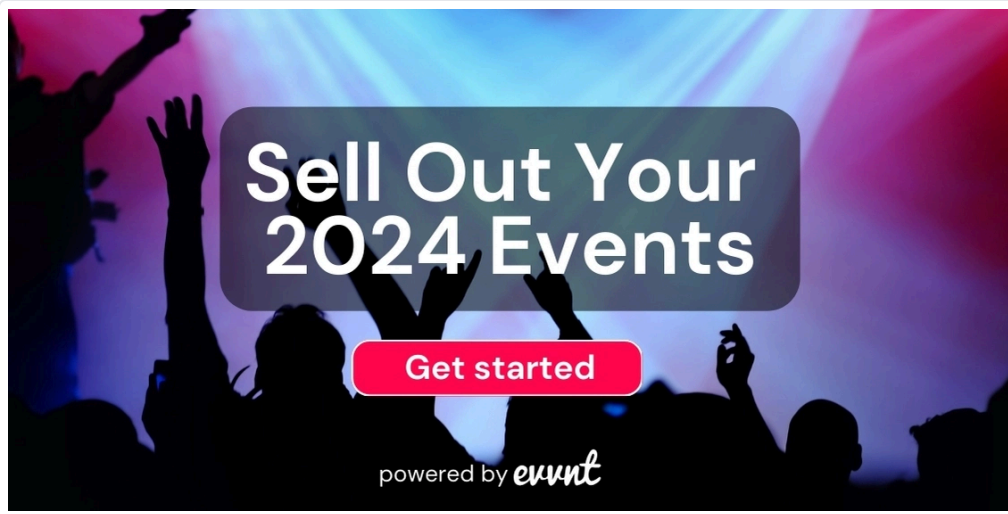
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