

Friends of the Parks' plan endangers street-end beaches

By PENELOPE ROSEMONT

Wednesday, March 26, 2008

Soon it will be the 40th anniversary of "May 1968," the mass student demonstrations that brought down Charles De Gaulle and the government in France. One of the slogans of the day was "Under the pavement, the beach!"

The truth behind this statement is that what folks really love is a beach. Nothing is closer to the Garden of Earthly Delights than a beach. And our Rogers Park beaches according to a visitor from Scotland, are "The very best in all Chicago!"

We have Bosnian girls in bikinis, Russian chess players, African Kite-flyers, Pakistani volleyball players, Caribbean soccer players, exuberant African-American children, Mexican birthday parties, well-mannered dogs, seagulls all facing the same direction, even a snow goose, fishermen, baseball players, bicyclists, Artists of the Wall, Beach Poets, Heartland-on-the-Lake, kayaks, and sand, sand, sand. On the sidewalks older folks stroll back and forth. Every weekend in summer some bawling 6-year old is led away, between sobs crying, "I don't want to go home, I want to stay at the beach!"

But somewhere plans are brewing for our beaches. The Friends of the Parks hosted two meetings for Rogers Park residents. On March 8, Michael Chrzastowski, a coastal geologist informed us that Lake Michigan might be permanently lower. More beach got an enthusiastic response.

Then, meeting facilitator Eleanor Roemer told us of a plan to extend the parks from Hollywood to Juneway Terrace. On the surface this did not seem to be the worst idea. However, she seemed to be totally unaware of the 2004 and 2006 referendums that 49th Ward residents

passed voting against the expansion of Lake Shore Drive and against landfill.

She then proposed a bike path. It became apparent that the "bike path" would be paved, 16 feet wide and there would be additional "access space" needed and a retaining wall, cement, etc. Something this large would wipe out Rogers Park's small street-end beaches. One of the neighbors brought up the fact that as soon as a "right-of-way" is created legally, the city can put Lake Shore Drive on it, or condos or islands or whatever it likes. A young woman questioned the priorities of the entire project, "No money for buses, no money for schools, no money for health care, but...."

On March 13 a second design charrette was held and we were shunted off into separate groups to discuss designs for the lakefront. The Friends of the Park brought eleven people, none of whom live in the neighborhood, to guide us. The group I attended was very united in their opposition to any meddling with the beaches.

Rogers Park lake front activist Jane Alexander called for "wilderness beaches" and we all liked that. However, every time we said, "It would be great to fix the broken benches," the architect would say "And add a retaining wall here." He actually suggested that we replace the long cement pier with a bridge-like structure as if it were something that could be accomplished in a few days. This would be a huge job, cost a couple of million dollars and be a major disruption, for what? We got the feeling that we were being spoon-fed someone else's ideas.

Putting the bike path on Sheridan Road was brought up but we didn't get to discuss that very much. Nor did we get to discuss many other suggestions listed by the Neighbors for a Green Park such as an ecology center for the Leone Park Beach House or a children's band and music program because we were too busy fending off retaining walls. It was like talking with an orthodontist.

I visited two other groups in which neighbors were doing their best to fend off landfill. The last group's map had a bike path from Hollywood to Morse Avenue along the lake front. The architect there said that the folks in Edgewater had no objection to a landfill or bike path in

front of their property. He seemed to think that we were being difficult. Somehow I wonder if the Edgewater residents are happy with this plan.

Yet another Friends of the Parks' meeting is scheduled for 7 p.m. June 12 at Loyola Park. I've talked to plenty of people in the neighborhood about the lake front and their main concern seemed to be the broken pavement. Folks are worried about breaking arms, and legs, and heads. They thought the garbage should be picked up more often and an effort should be made to keep noise down from blasting car stereos in the parking lot. They didn't want to mess up our great beaches whose opening we anticipate with such pleasure, the most loved feature of Rogers Park.

Most of us think of ourselves as stewards of the beaches. We worry that a high-rise condominium building proposed for Evanston has some relation to this right of way. We even have the best mud puddle ever. It's prominently placed, about ten feet long and reliably there all summer. It is a magnet for toddlers.

I was sitting on a bench enjoying the view of the mud puddle, the trees, the beach and the lake in that order when a young woman strolled by with her 3-year-old and her mother. She was talking with her mother so she didn't notice that her little son had headed into the mud puddle. She looked down as he struggled to free himself from the mud and emerged from the other side. "Oh, no!" she exclaimed in horror. But her mother burst into the most genuine and hearty laughter. As they say I wished I'd had a camera. Maybe we need to keep the mud puddle, too.

Penelope Rosemont is a long-time, Rogers Park resident and passionate steward of the neighborhood's street-end beaches.

Related Links

Content © 2008 Chicago Journal

Software © 1998-2008, All Rights Reserved