

Determined 'Friends of Frances Park' plan a makeover for 100th birthday

Written by Gretchen Cochran

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Frances Park, like most of Lansing's 90 parks, is in disrepair. It counts among its tony neighbors the governor and the sprawling golf greens of Lansing Country Club. Still, its grounds have long been minimally maintained, a victim of city budget cuts and attention diverted elsewhere.

But two genteel though steely-eyed women are well on their way to change that.

J. H. Moores willed the 60-acre park off Moores River Drive in southwest Lansing to the city in 1908 and dedicated it to his wife, Frances. There is contention about the age of the park because the city did not begin developing it until 1913. However, the gritty Judy Filice and June Knostman have declared the park's centennial will be next year.

Knostman is in a hurry. The 86-year-old two-time cancer survivor is running out of time.

"This will be my swan song," she says fiercely.

Students offer vision

Twenty would-be landscape architects from Michigan State University presented their visions last week for a re-energized Frances Park. A number of Lansing officials showed up for a meeting of the Friends of Francis Park at the Lansing Center. But the MSU students addressed their comments primarily to Filice and Knostman, who sat in the front row. They prompted the students' project, and if their pasts beget its future, the park's renovation will take place, sooner rather than later.

Filice and Knostman live three doors from one another. Both view the park from their homes' windows. Filice, a retired Lansing middle school teacher, served for 20 years on the city's park board. Knostman is a three-decade member of the Garden Club of Lansing and an international flower show judge. They've worked the trenches and now endeavor to develop a 50-year master plan for the park to be in place in a year.

Filice started the Friends of Frances Park group two years ago. Members include neighbors, an up-scale bunch, including Mayor Virg Bernero and Councilman Brian Jeffries. The two women are planning a blow-out celebration in May 2008, positioning Frances Park as "The Capital City's Park."

More than a year ago Knostman sought the help of Jon Bryan Burley of the Landscape Architecture School of Planning, Design and Construction at MSU. This year, the students interviewed users, groups of children and others about their desires for the park that Moores intended would be "the jewel in the Lansing Park System." They walked the woodland trails and toured the rose



Judy Filice (left), Jon Bryan Burley of MSU's Landscape Architecture Department, and June Knostman at the Lansing Center meeting for renovating Francis Park. (Gretchen Cochran/City Pulse)

garden, once recognized “as one of the most reputable rose gardens in Michigan,” according to the Lansing State Journal in 1983. It was one of only two accredited All-American rose gardens in the state. The other one is adjacent to the MSU horticulture gardens.

The rose garden has fallen into such a shambles that two years ago an MSU horticulturist deemed it should be plowed under, Knostman harrumphed, happily saying that did not happen.

The huge elm trees surrounding the roses have not been pruned, turning the area into a shade garden, not good for most roses, she fumed.

The students found the park’s plants old and outdated and cited numerous design flaws:

- The main driveway bisects the park and should be rerouted.
- The parking lot is unsightly, the entry bland.
- It turns its back on the Grand River and impedes pedestrian entry from Moores River Drive.
- There is no uniformity of walkway material or architectural style.
- There are no places to sit and reflect.

Burley had instructed the student teams to dream big, and so they did.

Students’ vision

There were common themes in their suggestions: Visually bring the river into the park, create a design concept and carry it throughout, and enhance the park to promote more weddings.

At one time, Frances Park hosted 300 weddings in one year. Last year, nuptial vows were spoken there only 21 times. The city is raising the park rental for weddings to \$100, possibly enhancing Frances Park’s revenue to \$30,000 if it returns to its former popularity. The students had ideas to make that happen:

- Add three areas for weddings with more parking.
- Create grand bridal entrances.
- Widen roadways for limousines.
- Add a bell tower as a focal point for photographs.
- Develop spots for caterers and a place for bridal parties to dress.
- Create paved areas for spectator seating and to keep bridal gowns from dragging in the grass.

Some of the ideas were fanciful, like the little train that would circulate throughout the park and the children’s climbing structure replicating brain coral. But all of the suggestions, with the students’ drawings and scale models, will be hauled before as many groups as possible to develop a wish list. Then the list will go to the MSU horticulture department where students will designate specific plants for specific locations. Murdock Jemerson, the city’s parks director, figured that would take a year.

“We can have it done by fall,” said Knostman.

Filice has priorities of her own: She would find a way to make the park accessible all year round rather than the six months it is open now and enhance pedestrian safety with a walkway ultimately connecting to the city’s river trail.

Jemerson has requested \$30,000 in next years’ budget, beginning in July, 2007, to pay for a licensed landscape architect to finalize the Frances Park plan. But he cautioned that ongoing budget hearings might delete the item from the city’s final spending plan.

Knostman and Filice are seeking a way for the city to earmark funds raised for a specific park.

As it is now, funds donated go into the general parks department’s budget. “If you give them money now, you can kiss it goodbye,” said Knostman. “It’s going to be a knock-down-drag-out fight.

“We’ve sparked a flash of interest. Now the hard work begins.” ■