

Atlanta Business Chronicle

Historic Fourth Ward Park on its way

Wednesday, October 15, 2008

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Atlanta leaders broke ground Wednesday on their newest park -- the Historic Fourth Ward Park just south of City Hall East.

It took the vision and work of dozens of people to launch the \$50 million park, many of whom stood on the podium under an unseasonably warm fall day.

But three other players, who were instrumental in creating the vision for the park, stood among the 100 or so people who came for the ground-breaking event.

One of those players was Bill Eisenhauer, a citizen leader who has been advocating for the use of parks as a way to help Atlanta solve its combined water and sewer system and its storm water overflow.

Back in May 2003, Eisenhauer took me on a tour of vacant land around the city that he believed could become new green space and help address Atlanta's sewer problems. He showed me one of the most exciting possibilities -- a park that would stretch south of North Avenue and turn acres and acres of decaying parking lots into green space and water features.

Another visionary was Jim Langford, the former head of the Trust for Public Land in Georgia. Langford was able to buy property for the park as part of a vision for the BeltLine before it was bought by land speculators and developers.

The third visionary was Markham Smith of the Smith Dahlia architectural firm. The firm's office overlooked the possible park, and he worked painstakingly with other property owners in the area to help assemble the land.

The new park is a testament to Eisenhauer's vision of tackling water and sewer problems with green space rather than with expensive tunnels.

As people on the podium said, the cost to tunnel the property would have been \$40 million, and the cost of creating a water feature and a park to do the same job was \$30 million. The BeltLine Partnership raised \$10 million to help build amenities for the park with \$8 million coming from the Robert W. Woodruff Foundation. The remaining \$10 million came from the city's opportunity bond program.

Creating the park also will have another significant impact. The city's anticipated sale of City Hall East to developer Emory Morsberger can't go forward until the park and its storm water feature is developed.

Whenever there's a major storm, the basement of City Hall East gets flooded despite having large water vaults to capture the water. The flooding of the City Hall East and the storm overflow problem is why that sale has not yet materialized.

Morsberger spokeswoman Amanda Brown-Olmstead said now the sale is expected to conclude in 2009.

Lastly, Wednesday's ground-breaking also launched the Historic Fourth Ward Park Conservancy, which will oversee the development, maintenance and security of the new park.

The idea for the conservancy developed from the Park Area Coalition, a group of 12 developers and property owners who supported the creation of the park.