



The Chatterbox

Changes may be coming for Opal's Park

BY BETTY KAISER
For the Sentinel

In my so-called "Golden Years," constant change is frustrating. It seems I just get used to one iPhone, computer or television set and they change the format. I find doing business on the computer necessary but exhausting. Where are the humans? And the fact that my grandsons are starting to marry is mind-boggling!

I can handle the past better than the present. Perhaps that's why my aging brain starts many sentences with—"I remember when..." That was my first thought when I heard of possible changes to Opal Whiteley Park. I remember when we didn't have an Opal Whiteley Park/All-America City Square! And now we need changes?

I remember when the corner lot where the park now stands was home to several small shops. In fact, it was the original location of The Bookmine. I remember when the shops were torn down and a large building was designed for that space. I remember when the building permits were denied and the project stopped.

I remember when the lot became ugly and weed-filled. It sat there with no purpose and no future. I remember when residents spontaneously brought in soil and planted apple trees to soften the landscape. It wasn't fancy or committee generated, but it provided shade and shelter and peace.

I remember when world traveler Mary Peck made Cottage Grove her home. I interviewed her just before her 90th birthday in 2004. She and her husband traveled the world and pioneered in Alaska before it was a state. She held too many executive positions to mention and could shoot a bear! Here in C.G. she

threw herself wholeheartedly into projects that benefitted our community. She was a dynamo.

I remember when, near the end of her life, Mary purchased the then apple tree lot and deeded it to the city with the stipulation that it remain "an open space available at all times to the people." That space became the Opal Whiteley Park that we have today.

I was remembering all of this history on Tuesday evening, May 17, during an open house at the Cottage Grove Armory. A city press release had called a meeting to discuss possible needed changes and improvements at our now 10-year old Opal Whiteley Park to "sustain the park for future generations." Yuck. More changes.

I was running a bit late and arrived at the meeting just in time to hear Marston Morgan, AIA, the park's original architect, finish up his comments. His closing statement particularly struck home: "The park stands as a piece of sculpture by itself. It doesn't have to have people flowing through it all the time." Amen.

I love that image of a peaceful place. Do we always have to have perfectly orchestrated commercial spaces in the heart of a city? Why do we humans think that we have to make things bigger and better with more activity? Why can't we just enjoy the little gems of life without making them complicated? Grumble. Grumble.

Back to the meeting. As it turned out there was no public discussion. City Planner Amanda Ferguson had put together a charrette. A forum for ideas and immediate feedback to designers. And no, I didn't know what that meant either. It turned out to be a very clever way for a large crowd to share their thoughts. This is how it worked:

On the walls around us there were detailed sketches of the park. i.e. the mural, planter walls, plants, walking areas, etc. Instead of everyone taking a turn and orally vetting their ideas, we were instructed to grab post-it-notes, write down our ideas and place them on the appropriate space for changes, specific concerns, wishes, etc. Evidently they are now being scrutinized and rated for importance.

The wonderful Opal Whiteley mural, the kiosk, restroom and stage building will remain the same. The plantings, walls, flagstone steps and everything else is up for that dreaded word—change. Following are just some of the suggestions that were submitted.

CHANGE

Change the name back to only Opal Whiteley Park
Keep stones; replace cracked ones.

Change paving to sand finished concrete

Fix the bricks only
Trim plants to better see mural
Remove the center planter
Put back the tables
No smoking in park
Open Park to alley
Remove or re-design ramp

ADD

A water feature
More native plants
Install cameras
Games: large checkers game; hopscotch, bocce, 4 square
Commercial shops
Visitor's Center
More informative signage
An annual celebration event
Santa in the bell tower
Night lighting

WISH LIST

A clock at the top
Reflecting pond
Light mural from above
More garbage cans

Cig butt containers
No smoking
A place to eat lunch
Hire a gardener!
A shade tree or two?
Use recycled irrigation water
Put signs up explaining tower is for fire hose
Space for Christmas tree

LOVE THE PARK

Mural
Atmosphere
Volunteers: design, landscape and maintain
A friendly, welcoming, wonderful place
Flagstones

MISC. THOUGHTS THAT WERE SUBMITTED

"Bigger fish to fry than a park."
"Let a small town be a small town."
"It's not the Olive Garden!"
"Use Metal benches: they dry fast and are not good for sleeping."
"Use as free speech area i.e. Hyde Park, London; own soap box."
"(Street) lights are ugly; do not even resemble vintage."
"Alley is a potential gem."
"Open Park to businesses"
Last evening another meeting was held (after this column went to press) facilitated by David Daugherty, a landscape architect. It remains to be seen what (if any) of these changes are deemed necessary and if a grant is available to pay for them.
FYI: My husband says we need to repair and maintain. I say...Do we need change for change's sake? What say you?

Betty Kaiser's Chatterbox is about people, places, family, and other matters of the heart. Contact her at 942-1317 or via e-mail — bchatty@bettykaiser.com

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