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Saviors of Virginia Key (April 1, 1999 Miami Herald)

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The moment Athalie Range approached the podium and began to speak, it was all over. Anyone at Miami City Hall who had been hoping for an uneventful meeting and a quick vote was about to be sorely disappointed.

The 83-year-old matriarch, who in 1965 became Miami's first black commissioner, returned to Dinner Key this past March 10 to address a meeting of the Waterfront Advisory Board, a group that makes recommendations to the city commission regarding use of publicly owned land. The subject that Wednesday night was Virginia Key, the bedraggled 1000-acre island between the mainland and Key Biscayne. More specifically the subject was a preliminary proposal for commercial development of portions of the land.

But Range, whose pioneering contributions to public service have included appointments to important state and federal posts, wasn't there to offer her opinion on zoning changes, use permits, or lease agreements. She was there to reminisce. After some official business and a presentation by representatives of a Virginia Key advisory committee, the waterfront board chairman respectfully acknowledged Range's presence in the audience and invited her to be the first to comment on the committee's presentation.

"I knew it as Bear's Cut," she said. "As a child here in Miami, when segregation was at its very peak, there was an understanding that the races did not mix. So there was no waterfront for us." Thus began a stirring personal recollection by one of Miami's most respected civic leaders of the days when South Florida blacks were universally prohibited from setting foot on public beaches.

And thus ended any thought of proceeding with a development plan for Virginia Key that did not pay homage to its unique heritage. In 1945 after a group of black residents staged an unprecedented act of civil disobedience by trespassing on whites-only Haulover Beach, the Dade County Commission designated an oceanfront park on Virginia Key as the only beach open to black people. A county brochure later touted "Virginia Beach" as being "exclusively for Negroes."

The esteemed Ms. Range was followed by other citizens who spoke eloquently in favor of an idea that lately has captured the local imagination. As one person phrased it, this was nothing less than a battle "to reclaim Miami's forgotten past." The once-segregated Virginia Beach may not hold the archaeological import that rallied thousands to save the mysterious Miami Circle, but with the same newfound respect for history, it has inspired its own circle of impassioned advocates.

And now, after it appeared there would be no stopping a controversial plan to allow commercial development on that part of Virginia Key, there seems to be no stopping a burgeoning movement to preserve that land and create on it a civil rights park, a lasting monument to the national struggle for equality as it played out here in Miami.

As this movement has gained momentum, the wider planning process for Virginia Key has virtually ground to a halt, an unexpected turn of events that has pleased environmentalists and parks advocates who long have fought to protect the island from commercial development.

For those who have sought to exploit the key as a revenue source for the financially beleaguered City of Miami, the injection of race relations into the debate has changed everything. They now find themselves in the precarious position of appearing bigoted if they raise objections.

And in an ironic twist to a tale that is full of them, all this drama surrounding the fate of Virginia Key has been orchestrated not by concerned black Miamians, but by a small cadre of white activists. Athalie Range herself appeared at the March 10 meeting only after one of these activists contacted her and explained the proposal for a civil rights park.

While earnestly hoping to deflect any perception of having cynically manipulated a sensitive black issue, the activists cannot escape this further irony: Overwhelmingly white as a group, their cause -- preservation of Virginia Key -- owes this boost in its fortunes to the very people who suffered from the discriminatory practices of white society.

Before Athalie Range spoke, the Virginia Key Ad Hoc Citizens Committee presented a set of recommendations regarding commercial development on the island. For eight months committee members had worked diligently preparing their suggestions, a project that had been prompted by the city's continuing interest in the island's earning potential. Committee members were appointed by the mayor and commission (with an additional member coming from the Waterfront Advisory Board), and over the months they considered options for two specific areas of Virginia Key: the dilapidated Miami Marine Stadium and its adjacent waterfront, and the old county park along Bear Cut. (The county deeded the parkland to the city in 1982 with the stipulation that it be kept open and maintained as a park, though since then it has only been open for special events.)

In the years following Hurricane Andrew, which severely damaged the marine stadium, both areas have been eyed hungrily by city officials. But an earlier offer to lease the marine stadium drew no private-sector interest, and voters narrowly rejected a 1995 ballot measure calling for a \$12 million "eco-campground" on 153 acres along the Bear Cut shoreline, land that included the old county park.

The ad hoc committee was somewhat vague in its endorsement of commercial development at the marine stadium site, but was more specific in resurrecting the idea of a (scaled-back) eco-campground. It would be owned and operated by a private business; it would aspire to ecological sensitivity; and it would spread over some 80 acres of the very same land Athalie Range would so movingly describe.

Not only would that proposal seem disrespectful of South Florida's black heritage, but the committee itself drew criticism at the March 10 meeting. Its members were exclusively white and middle-class -- no Hispanics, no blacks, no poor people. Worse, in their months of deliberations, they hadn't even considered anything like a civil rights park, and their presentation to the waterfront board made no explicit mention of it.

In fact Virginia Key's history as a refuge for South Florida's blacks became an issue for committee members only after it was forced upon them this past January by two outspoken

citizens, Greg Bush and Nancy Lee, who are as white and as middle-class as the committee itself.

Bush, a 49-year-old associate professor of history at the University of Miami, had taken a sabbatical for the 1998-1999 school year. With an abiding interest in public parks generally and Miami particularly, he had intended to use his time off to work on an oral-history project exploring local residents' relationships to their parks.

Instead he found himself fighting for parks, not chronicling their history. First came his involvement in the failed effort to save from development the Coconut Grove property known as Commodore Bay. Then he jumped into the fray over the Miami Circle, a move that coincided with his becoming president of the Urban Environment League of Greater Miami, a nonprofit organization that seeks to promote enlightened city planning.

Just as the archaeological site began garnering publicity, Bush and some like-minded cohorts formed the Public Parks Coalition of Miami-Dade County, an offshoot of the Urban Environment League, whose mission is to "preserve, beautify, maintain, enhance, promote, make usable, and secure urban public parks in Miami-Dade County." With that objective in mind, Bush began attending meetings of the Virginia Key Ad Hoc Citizens Committee this past January.

"I'd been reading [FIU professor] Marvin Dunn's book *Black Miami in the Twentieth Century*," Bush recalls. "I've done oral histories of black Americans for many years, so I was aware of the history of Virginia Key, and I was aware it was overlooked by the ad hoc committee. That angered me. I knew others had worked very hard to try to preserve that public parkland, but nobody had put an emphasis on creating a space that would preserve the old African-American beach." To Bush it looked like another attempt to "dispense with a piece of public land without understanding its historical relationships."

Bush huddled with Nancy Lee, a noted Virginia Key preservationist and avid windsurfer whose activism was sparked by the January 1997 closing of that portion of the island's beach favored by windsurfers, which the city did in order to save money. (Virginia Key is considered to be one of the best windsurfing spots in the world.) Lee, too, was keenly aware of the area's place in local black history and shared Bush's belief that it should not be ignored by the ad hoc committee.

Bush insists his push for recognition of Virginia Key's black heritage arose from his interests as a historian, not from strategic political concerns he may have had as a parks advocate. "It was not simply a desperate move by environmentalists," he says. "It was something more than that; it was a genuine idea that came out of my head: Such land simply should not be disposed of without thought and consideration.

"Here's a city that has had Lummus Park [downtown along the Miami River] closed since 1992," he continues. "Bicentennial Park is closed. Virginia Key has been closed how many years? Is there a pattern here? People's memory about those parks could grow dim. Perhaps some officials hope they grow dim so they can sell them off. But a number of African Americans do remember and say, 'We don't want this sold off.'"

Among those taking an interest was Dorothy Jenkins Fields, founder of the Black Archives History and Research Foundation of South Florida. "Mabel Miller had mentioned it on and off over the last several years," Fields recounts, referring to one of Virginia Key's staunchest

defenders. "But the real impetus came from Greg Bush recently. I had no idea there was an advisory committee in place. I was just asked to support [the idea of a civil rights memorial on Virginia Key]. I took it to my board, which is made up of individuals who have lived in Miami as adults 50 years or more. Of course it's very important and needs to be preserved and identified as a civil rights site."

Fields had a suggestion for Bush: Rather than designate the site as a memorial, why not simply call it a park, a civil rights park?

In late January Bush and Lee put together a presentation for the ad hoc committee that emphasized the endorsement of the Black Archives Foundation and suggested as a model the new, open-air memorial to Franklin Delano Roosevelt in Washington, D.C.

Although the two activists weren't thrilled with the committee's tepid response, they pressed on, and in short order attracted support from an impressive array of black leaders, environmental groups, and others: State Sen. Kendrick Meek; State Reps. Willie Logan and Frederica Wilson; the African American Caribbean Cultural Arts Commission; the black-oriented weekly Miami Times; the Tropical Audubon Society; the Sierra Club Miami Group, Friends of Virginia Key; Dade Heritage Trust president Enid Pinkney; even the Episcopal Diocese of Southeast Florida.

With the help of Bush and Lee, all these endorsements eventually found their way to Virginia Newell, chairwoman of the ad hoc committee. A retired commander in the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, she has for the past three years served as assistant dean for administration at the University of Miami's Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Science, which is located on Virginia Key. While Newell believes a civil rights park is "a wonderful thing to do," she also notes that the idea "came kind of late in the game." The committee, after all, had been meeting regularly and often since this past August. Still, she says, she welcomes all possibilities. "I don't see the two [a civil rights park and an eco-campground] as mutually exclusive," she notes. "Greg was looking at the FDR memorial in Washington as a model -- three or four acres. My idea of an eco-campground is that it would be totally open to the public. And I don't see why there couldn't be a civil rights park there."

Newell, whose committee came under fire at the March 10 meeting of the Waterfront Advisory Board, implicitly acknowledges some of the criticism. A summary of her committee's recommendations addresses two specific points: "Adjust membership [of the ad hoc committee] to increase diversity," her memo states; it also proposes more public hearings, cohosted by some of those groups most adamantly opposed to the idea of an eco-campground. "We've got a lot more work to do," Newell concedes. "We must resolve the issue about the old county park, either as an open space with no development or to go ahead with a request for proposals [for development] on the site. There has to be more input from the public. I'd say the input we got wasn't fairly representative of the city."

Those conciliatory sentiments will be tested in the coming weeks, as the gap that separates advocates of commercial development from island preservationists and proponents of a civil rights park remains as wide as ever.

Environmental groups will continue to resist commercial development in areas where none exists today; and they'll fight to constrain it in places where it already has a foothold, such as the marine stadium area. But they have their sights set on much more than just the old county park and a possible civil rights memorial. In effect they're seeking a sweeping review of the entire

island, beginning with a thorough environmental and biological assessment, especially of an abandoned 112-acre landfill, about which little is known.

Speaking for the Urban Environment League, Greg Bush outlines his opposition to the eco-campground envisioned by Virginia Newell. "We seek all the land in the old county park, all 77 acres, to be enhanced as a public park," he declares. "Why can't the community at large come up with wonderfully creative ideas for using that space? The land shouldn't be taken away just because the city is in the hole. Funding shouldn't be difficult for a major exhibition area for the struggle for civil rights."

As sincere as Bush may be, until some black citizens take charge of the movement to create a civil rights park on Virginia Key, the perception will persist that a bunch of white people have found a Trojan horse to carry them surreptitiously into enemy territory, where they'll vanquish those who would pave paradise in exchange for a couple of bucks.

Dorothy Jenkins Fields senses that perception and offers a few words of caution. "I understand what they're trying to do," she says, referring to the white activists championing a civil rights park. "But again, it's them trying to do for us, trying on behalf of the black community. That's something that has concerned me.

"A lot of the tension could have been averted had we been involved in the beginning," she continues. "There are lots of folk with deep feelings about Virginia Key. There are lots of voices out there."

This Saturday, April 3, the old county park will be open to the public from 10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.