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Treasured island: Merger of interests to benefit Belle Isle

DENNIS ARCHAMBAULT | TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 29, 2011



VANCE PATRICK, FRIENDS OF THE BELLE ISLE AQUARIUM PRESIDENT - PHOTO BY MARVIN SHAOUNI

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Collaboration and shared commitment are a growing part of the future in Detroit. For Belle Isle, the future is now.

The island jewel of the city and region has benefited from the philanthropic and volunteer efforts of several groups and interested private institutions through the years. Now, four of the groups have found commonality and the synergistic potential of acting as one. The Belle Isle Women's Club, the Friends of the Belle Isle Aquarium, the Belle Isle Botanical Society, and the Friends of Belle Isle have agreed that their shared commitment to restoring Belle Isle to the prominence designed by historic landscape architect [Frederick Law Olmsted](#) in the 1880s is worth setting aside special interests.

Before the clubs agreed to merge last month, they studied cities in which Olmsted-designed urban parks were funded through conservancies, which are private organizations that raise funds, develop

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programs, and promote park assets.

Sarah Earley, who was elected chair of the [Belle Isle Conservancy](#), has studied landscape architecture and notes the significance of Belle Isle being the only island park designed by Olmsted. "He was the father of American landscape architecture," Earley says. "He

believed that as the country was moving from a rural society to an industrialized society -- people were living in tenements and working in factories -- that there needed to be green space in the city where people could get respite from the day and be one with nature." The Belle Isle groups studied Olmsted parks in Boston, Louisville, Chicago, San Francisco, and New York's Central Park. In each case, the conservancies are able to get greater private and public support, not just in funds but in recruiting volunteers and leveraging other kinds of support than individual entities can achieve.

Maud Lyon, a consultant from the [Cultural Alliance of Southeast Michigan](#), coordinated the study and the coming together of the organizations. A longtime city advocate who was executive director of Detroit 300, which resulted in Campus Martius Park among several initiatives, Lyon says the Conservancy "will provide a greater opportunity for people who are passionate about

Belle Isle to contribute in any way they can -- volunteering, being a member (of the Conservancy), giving money. Right now there isn't a central vehicle to be able to do that and there isn't a central vehicle to market what's going on the island. ... This has been a very thoughtful process. It's about creating something more powerful from what already exists." She emphasizes that the Conservancy is in a supportive role only, not owning or managing the island. That remains the city's domain.

With the Conservancy as a core, collaborations with other organizations, such as the Friends of Belle Isle Rowing, which supported the merger, the Dossin Great Lakes Museum, Greening of Detroit, and the Detroit Riverfront Conservancy, will not only help improve the island, but will result in greater synergies along the riverfront.

What's not lost in what could be viewed as a "bigger-is-better" scenario is the role of hundreds of individuals who have a small stake in this special urban space. "One of the great opportunities of this organization is to have an organization that captures both the grassroots spirit of people who have time and talent to contribute and also people who use the island for daily recreation -- and there are many who do -- and combine that with the people who may be able to give more of their treasure and less of their time, but care just as passionately about the island even though they don't visit it as often."

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Organizations develop organically, usually focused on a specific cause. Some organizations have decades of history invested in their cause. For example, people passionate about the Belle Isle Aquarium volunteer and raise money to restore that building. The challenge in negotiating this merger has been in convincing individual groups that their interests will be respected in Conservancy decision-making, but that the greater good of the island park takes precedence.

"As with any merger, you want to thoroughly understand the different organizations and what they're bringing to the table," says Lyon. "What they're bringing to the table is their assets, their experience, their connections, but they're also bringing their own culture, point of view, and ways of doing things. Some of that time inevitably has to be spent understanding what it is the different organizations do and how they have evolved over time.

"In this merger, what you have is three successful grassroots organizations and one organization that was started -- the Belle Isle Women's Committee -- with the idea of being a fundraiser for the island, and has been extremely successful. That's part of the merger...best of all worlds."

For groups committed to a single cause, like the Friends of the Belle Isle Aquarium, it wasn't an easy sell. A former Aquarium board member and longtime advocate of Belle Isle, Harriet Saperstein says she had to "challenge myself and others who have their hearts and heads into both protecting the building and the concept of an aquarium, to continue to be there, to understand and work for the whole island."

There's no question this is the best direction for Belle Isle, Saperstein says. If the Conservancy had been in place two years ago, "hundreds of thousands of dollars" could have been invested in Belle Isle through the Michigan Land & Water Fund, she adds. "Instead of competition for funds (supporters) can collaborate in new ways, and, hopefully, work with private and public agencies to bring funds and best practices to this island jewel." She's concerned that supporters could become complacent, "that the community that has cared about and cared for Belle Isle for so many years could step back, and that will be the challenge for those of us who represent different community concerns."

The composition of the Conservancy board of directors will be diverse, Earley pledges. "Today we have a balance (on the Conservancy board). We are very careful and very aware (of diversity)." The diversity will reflect race, geography, age, and constituency, she says. The Conservancy board will have five city representatives, as well as representatives from each of the founding organizations. The remaining members -- up to 35 -- will be at large appointments.

Earley is not supportive of a Belle Isle fee, one of the island's perennial issues linked to funding. "Our hope would be not to have a fee just because it's a park. You'd like to have it free for all."

Perhaps the greatest lesson in this merger is the value, even necessity, of

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collaboration. "This is pretty extraordinary to get four nonprofits to merge to do something bigger than each one is doing individually," Earley acknowledges. "I can't stress enough the work that went into this, on the part of each of these four organizations. It's taken time. The important is that the people involved have built a great deal of trust in one another and that what we all are doing is for the greater good of the park."


Photos:

Vance Patrick, Friends of the Belle Isle Aquarium President

Roberta Henrion, Friends of Belle Isle President

Jan Ellison, Belle Isle Botanical Society

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Sharif Friendster

As a nearly daily user I was not impressed with the campaign style yard signs placed all over the island to announce this merger. I hope more thoughtful execution is considered in the future. Olmsted wanted us to get away from all that afterall....

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