

May 16, 2020

Dear Board members of the Bellevue Botanical Garden,

This communication is long overdue. I've been retired for over twenty years as Director of Parks and Community Services for the City of Bellevue and I'm just astonished by how the Botanical Garden has evolved over that time. I just want you to know how enormously pleased and proud I am of the marvelous work you've done in collaboration with the Bellevue Parks Department. This garden has become a world class attraction and a testimonial to what can be achieved when motivated and accomplished citizens decide to make a positive difference in their community.

I suppose I'm as impressed as I am because I was there at the inception. Over a period of many years, the City had assembled over one hundred and thirty acres on Wilburton Hill from a variety of land owners, including seven and a half acres from Cal and Harriet Shorts. The Shorts offered to donate their spectacular estate to the City with the proviso that an adjacent ten acres would be acquired by the City and utilized for park purposes. Fortunately, the City Council, after considering a variety of uses for the assembled property, from a governmental center to a high school stadium, had the wisdom and foresight to reserve the remaining acreage for park purposes.

About this time, the Parks Department was aggressively advocating for a Lake to Lake Greenway that would connect Lake Washington to Lake Sammamish, a "pearls on a string" concept borrowed from Frederick Law Olmsted and immortalized in a variety of park systems, from New York City and Boston to Vancouver BC and Seattle. So, clearly, our vision was at the macro level. We wanted to connect spectacular park sites and preserve our natural assets from waterfront, urban forests, critical wetlands, wildlife habitats and historical landscapes.

So, we were at the embryonic design stage at Wilburton, trying to decide how to specifically develop this unique park site in a manner that would be consistent with our over-arching vision. Funds had recently been earmarked for the development of Wilburton Park from a prior park bond issue and we were at that critical juncture where we were about to present a series of design alternatives to the Park Board and City Council. Just at this critical moment, Bob and Iris Jewitt, waltzed into my office one afternoon with an exotic proposal to set aside the Shorts donation and some adjacent acreage for a botanical garden. To put it mildly, botanical gardens are not standard components of suburban/edge city park systems and my first reaction was to pat these well-meaning folks on the back and thank them for the suggestion. While we always intended to preserve the Shorts donation as undisturbed as possible, a botanical garden was certainly not a part of our thinking.

We really didn't know anything about botanical gardens or appreciate their significance. We suspected they would be expensive to operate and incompatible with the balance of the park. We didn't want any part of the park to be walled off, with entry fees, because this would be inconsistent with the Greenway concept. But, the more we contemplated this idea, the more attractive it became. We asked to Jewitts to demonstrate that there was community support for this concept and this became the genesis for the Botanical Garden Society. The Jewitts also approached Cal and Harriet and received a very enthusiastic endorsement. So, with that very humble beginning, the Parks Department included the botanical garden as a component of all three design alternatives for Wilburton Park and the idea was enthusiastically embraced by the Wilburton community, the Park Board and City Council.

Frankly, we just envisioned a nice little series of gardens in and around the Shorts property that would be a nice feature of Wilburton Hill Park. We certainly didn't visualize anything remotely close to what the Garden has become today. The Bellevue Botanical Garden is an absolute masterpiece and the credit belongs to all of you who have worked so long and tirelessly to make this Garden what it is today. You had the wisdom to work within the construct of a very enlightened partnership agreement with the City of Bellevue. You've raised enormous amounts of money to expand the garden, you are actively involved with stewardship and planning, you provide interpretive support, you conduct classes and special events and you are terrific political advocates. The Garden is a testimonial to your passionate advocacy.

The results of your work have been stunning, a confirmation that talented citizens can accomplish wonders if they are motivated and given sufficient support and encouragement. In this regard, I would also like to acknowledge the role that the Park Department leadership has played in the Garden's development---particularly that of Nancy Kartes. A special partnership demands a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities and Nancy has represented the City admirably in this regard. I remain very impressed by how well both parties to this agreement have set aside egos and territorial imperatives to achieve a greater good. Please accept, once again, my sincere congratulations on a job well done. You are an example to park agencies everywhere and I'm proud of the very small and insignificant role that I played in the evolution of this extraordinary public space.

Sincerely,

Lee Springgate