

DAVIDS ISLAND: SAVING DAVIDS ISLAND AN ACTIVIST HISTORY

Davids Island, a 78-acre island in the western Sound, has been saved from over development several times – only to be threatened again. Following a 25-year battle, New Rochelle now has agreed to transfer the island to the County for use as a park. We must see this done and preserve this unique resource for the enjoyment of all.

Following its history as home to native Americans, an army base, and a Con Edison nuclear power plant proposal, the modern day battle over the future of Davids Island began. Although a Sound wide study in the 1970s proposed federal government acquisition of the island for open space, New Rochelle's elected officials were not interested, expressing the view that Davids Island's value lay in its potential for massive private development connected to the mainland by a bridge. Thus began the lengthy tug of war between those who saw the island as a site for private development and those who saw it and its surrounding waters as an unique public natural resource poorly suited to intense development and destined for public not private use.

The debate over the future of Davids Island spread from New Rochelle to White Plains, from White Plains to Albany and finally from Albany to Washington, D.C and all around the Sound. Davids Island became a vivid and concrete example of the growing threat to the nation's estuaries from unwise coastal development; an important part of the national debate over how best to manage and protect the nation's coastal resources. Increasingly people realized that if we were to save the Sound, we would have to 'Save Davids Island'.

Xanadu

In 1981 New Rochelle signed a development agreement with a private developer; Xanadu, to develop a 'mini city' on Davids Island. Despite the serious flaws in its plan, over the next 10 years Xanadu came very close to winning all the federal, state and local governmental approvals necessary to build a private residential community on the island for upwards of 4000 residents in structures up to 50 stories high, with an 800 boat slip marina and helicopter landing site at the end of an enormous breakwater, connected to the mainland by a bridge through Glen Island Park. By the mid 1980s it seemed the city was solidly behind the Xanadu plan and its friends in White Plains and Albany were lined up to make it happen.

However, in 1986 Xanadu's momentum was slowed by the decision of the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation to impose a moratorium barring sewage from new development from being treated at Westchester County's New Rochelle Sewage Treatment Plant. This occurred just as the Coast Guard, acting as lead agency under the National Environmental Policy Act, released the Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the project. This DEC moratorium checked Xanadu's progress because its proposed plan, and the Coast Guard's Draft Environmental Impact Statement that Xanadu and City officials said showed no adverse impacts from the massive development, based on its proposal to send sewage from the island development (approximately 500,000 gallons per day) to that plant for treatment before discharge to the Sound. Xanadu was forced to revise its plan to provide for a sewage

treatment plant on the island. This revision in turn required the preparation of a Supplemental Draft Environmental Impact Statement.

All of this took time; time during which people became increasingly aware that treated sewage was a major contributor to the Sound's environmental problems; time the opponents used to organize, increase their ranks, and raise money for lawyers and expert witnesses.

Thus, when the Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement was issued the opponents were better equipped to reveal the continuing flaws in the plan. In July 1990, these efforts bore fruit and Xanadu's forward progress was stopped dead in the water when the New York Secretary of State, Gail Shaffer, courageously enforced the State's Coastal Management Policies against Xanadu's plan. Secretary Shaffer determined Xanadu's plan was not consistent with the State's coastal policies. In the context of these important state policies, she said the plan "makes no sense." Xanadu's progress was frustrated further by the County Board of Legislators' growing opposition to the use of part of Glen Island Park for the bridge to the island with its consequent adverse impact on the park.

Xanadu never effectively recovered from these blows. Finally, in 1992 Xanadu ran out of time when the New Rochelle City Council, recognizing the futility and foolishness of the Xanadu plan, refused to extend the term of its development agreement.

United Opposition

The massive island development that had once seemed an invincible 'dreadnought' quietly sank below the waves. How did this happen? It was the united and determined efforts of residents, environmental groups, politicians, lawyers and experts that defeated Xanadu. It was a striking example in this area of citizen efforts causing government to pay better attention to environmental consequences in decisions affecting land use.

The opposition to Xanadu's proposals crystallized in early 1987 after the US Coast Guard released the DEIS and held public hearings. The Save Davids Island for the Citizens Committee was formed in early 1987 just after the first series of public hearings on the DEIS which had been issued late in 1986. Save Davids Island was formed by representatives of Federated Conservationists of Westchester County, the Sans Souci Homeowners Association and the Huguenot Yacht Club, together with 20 or so individual concerned residents. Save Davids Island quickly reached out to the elected officials and received support. Through the intensive organizing efforts coordinated by a small band of residents, Save Davids Island was able to extend its contributing membership to over 900 individual supporters/contributors from around the Sound and raise the sums necessary to hire able counsel and experts.

The list of regional and national environmental organizations that played key roles in the opposition includes virtually every organization of significance in this area: Audubon, the Soundkeeper, Riverkeeper, NRDC, FCWC, the Long Island Sound Task Force (now Save the Sound), SoundWatch, Sierra Club, Citizens Campaign for the Environment, Clearwater, Westchester Land Trust and Scenic Hudson all worked together in the effort to save Davids Island.

Trump Tries

In 1994, just after then County Executive Andrew O'Rourke had proposed a County park on the island to be accessed by ferries from New Rochelle and Playland, Donald Trump came to New Rochelle with other plans for the island. The city's leaders welcomed his attentions. The city negotiated a preliminary development arrangement giving Trump an exclusive right for a specified period to propose development plans for the island. His various "world class" plans calling alternatively for many hundreds of high-rise condos or 48 multi-million dollar mansions, the former with a bridge, the latter with a bridge or a ferry, seemingly never got past the 'artist rendering' stage.

The coalition that had opposed Xanadu opposed all Trumps' plans that called for massive development, a bridge and no public access to the island. Trump made little real progress and eventually he withdrew. It was assumed by many at the time that after careful investigation "the Donald" had concluded he could not make it on Davids Island.

Parkland at Last

Finally, at the end of 2001, the concerted efforts of the visionaries who had called for parkland on Davids Island, and the citizens who had fought for it, paid off. County Executive Andrew Spano and New Rochelle Mayor Timothy Itoni announced that they had reached an agreement that the city would sell the island to the county for \$6.5 million for use as a county park. A target date of September 2002 to complete the property transfer has been announced.

A County park on Davids Island will be, by virtue of its unique beauty and the invaluable and unending resource it will provide to the people of Westchester, the 'jewel in the crown' of our magnificent park system. It will, however, be even more than that. It will be the symbolic down payment by the people of Westchester on the public's reacquisition and restoration of Long Island Sound.

Citizens of Westchester, after having visited Davids Island Park, will have no doubt that the Sound is theirs and that they should work to protect it. Saving Davids Island was a long and precarious battle, but it exemplifies what organized citizens, with the help of effective professionals and enlightened public officials, can accomplish if they are sufficiently determined.

Such determined effort must now be brought to bear to complete the job and ensure that the acquisition is complete to secure the use of Davids Island as parkland by the people.

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