

Detroit Free Press

Belle Isle vision: Restaurants, camping ... a hotel?

Rochelle Riley, June 2, 2015



The Belle Isle grand prix site under construction. (Photo: Brian Kaufman, Detroit Free Press)

Imagine Belle Isle State Park with restaurants, a hotel, kiosks and camping lodges for overnight or weekend stays.

Imagine new pavilions to hold ceremonies and weddings, which now occur up to five times a day on weekends on the island.

Imagine the conservatory, aquarium, zoo and the Dossin Great Lakes Museum becoming a connected cultural campus that would explore the park's historic role as a stop for slaves headed to Canada and a place to witness international river trade.

Michele Hodges can imagine it and more.



Michele Hodges, president of the Belle Isle Conservancy, leads the effort to revitalize Belle Isle. (Photo: Mandi Wright, Detroit Free Press)

Hodges is president of the Belle Isle Conservancy. Two years after a testy battle between the city and state over ownership that left the state leasing and operating the park, it is now the conservancy's mission to find money to maintain, enhance and market the island as a state and regional treasure.

The board had its first meeting last week with a redevelopment and architectural consultant to redefine the island as a one-of-a-kind destination that celebrates the unique culture of Detroit.



Michele Hodges, president of the Belle Isle Conservancy, leads the effort to revitalize Belle Isle. (Photo: Mandi Wright, Detroit Free Press)

New York-based Biederman Redevelopment Ventures has been given carte blanche to create a strategic plan reimagining what the entire 982-acre island can be. The company, whose signature success is New York's Bryant Park, home of Fashion Week, has four to six months to complete the plan.



Crowds of spectators watch films on a giant screen during the HBO Bryant Park Summer Film Festival in New York, Germany, on June 16, 2014. (Photo: Britta Pedersen, Associated Press) "We're talking bricks and mortar," Hodges said in an interview. When asked whether that included residences, Hodges said that wasn't likely, "but those are complicated questions that require a lot of concentration."

She said the conservancy is more interested in a hotel and camping possibilities on the island. Dan Biederman, president of the firm working on the plan, said his team left Detroit on Tuesday with a list of at least 18 items to focus on, including how to:

- Create a public-private partnership to govern the park that includes the city and the state Department of Natural Resources, which operates the island and helped fund the strategic plan.
- Ensure the continued running of the Chevrolet Detroit Belle Isle Grand Prix.
- Find companies or donors to adopt park facilities such as the aquarium and conservatory.
- Make the island a self-sustaining, public park that would need no public funds from a city coming out of bankruptcy.

The Biederman plan is the third for the island since 1997 and comes as Detroit rebounds from bankruptcy with a fierce reclamation rivaling the auto industry's comeback. The mayor is trying to rid city residents of the so-called Detroit tax by developing lower-cost insurance. (Detroiters have among the highest auto insurance rates in the world.) The Zagat dining guide named

Detroit the "third-hottest up-and-coming food city in America." (Seems a new restaurant opens almost every other week).

FROM WHITE SWAN ISLAND TO BELLE ISLE

Interesting facts about Detroit's 130-year-old island park.

BEFORE IT WAS A PARK

American Indians sold the island to a British businessman for five barrels of rum, three rolls of tobacco, 3 pounds of red paint and a belt of wampum. Wampum? Beads made from shells used as a medium of exchange and as ceremonial ornaments.

White Swan Island was the American Indian name for Belle Isle.

Ile aux Cochons (Hog Island) is the name the French gave it when it was used to graze cattle and hogs. It was renamed Belle Isle in 1845 after the youngest child of Detroit politician Lewis Cass.



DETROIT FREE PRESS FILE PHOTO

1879: Detroit acquired the island

The city bought the island from a family in 1879 for \$200,000. A bitter battle leading up to the purchase lasted three years. Opposition centered on high costs.

SOURCE: The Friends of Belle Isle

CASSANDRA SPRATLING and MARTHA THIERRY/DETROIT FREE PRESS

From White Swan Island to Belle Isle. (Photo: Detroit Free Press)

The planning also represents a step up for the conservancy, which comprises four formerly independent bodies (the Friends of Belle Isle, the Belle Isle Botanical Society, the Belle Isle Women's Committee and the Friends of Belle Isle Aquarium). Besides coordinating financial support, the conservancy also markets the park's attractions and recruits thousands of volunteers to contribute time, talent and money.

The conservancy also has hired Albert Kahn and Associates to plan a cultural campus that primarily focuses on the island's current attractions: the Belle Isle Aquarium, the Belle Isle Conservatory, the Belle Isle Nature Zoo, and the Dossin Great Lakes Museum. The goal, Hodges said, is to allow people to explore the park's place in nature as well as its historic role as a stop for slaves headed to Canada and a site to witness international river vessels moving up and down the river.

ISLAND LANDMARKS

1923: MacArthur Bridge was built

Initially, the island was accessible only by boat or ferry. In 1889, the first wooden bridge was built. A fire destroyed it in 1915. A temporary bridge was constructed in 1916. A permanent concrete bridge was built in 1923. Its official name is not the Belle Isle Bridge. It's the Gen. Douglas A. MacArthur Bridge, named for the World War II leader.

1925: Scott Memorial Fountain was built

The fountain was built with \$500,000 left by James Scott, who died in 1910. He wanted a fountain built after his death. Some business and civic leaders didn't want to accept the donation because Scott had a reputation as a notorious gambler. It was built in 1925. It's made of Vermont white marble. With its 109 water outlets shaped like human heads, dolphins and turtles, and water that changes color.

No longer there

A zoo and a riding stable from which Shetland ponies provided buggy rides.

An infant rest area. It was staffed by a nurse and used by mothers and children younger than 6 years old. There were cribs, refrigeration and electricity for heating and cooling milk, and toys and swings.

SOURCE: The Friends of Belle Isle

Still on the island

Popular features include the conservatory, the aquarium, picnic areas, a golf course, a nature zoo and the Dossin Great Lakes Museum.



The Scott Memorial Fountain



The Belle Isle Aquarium

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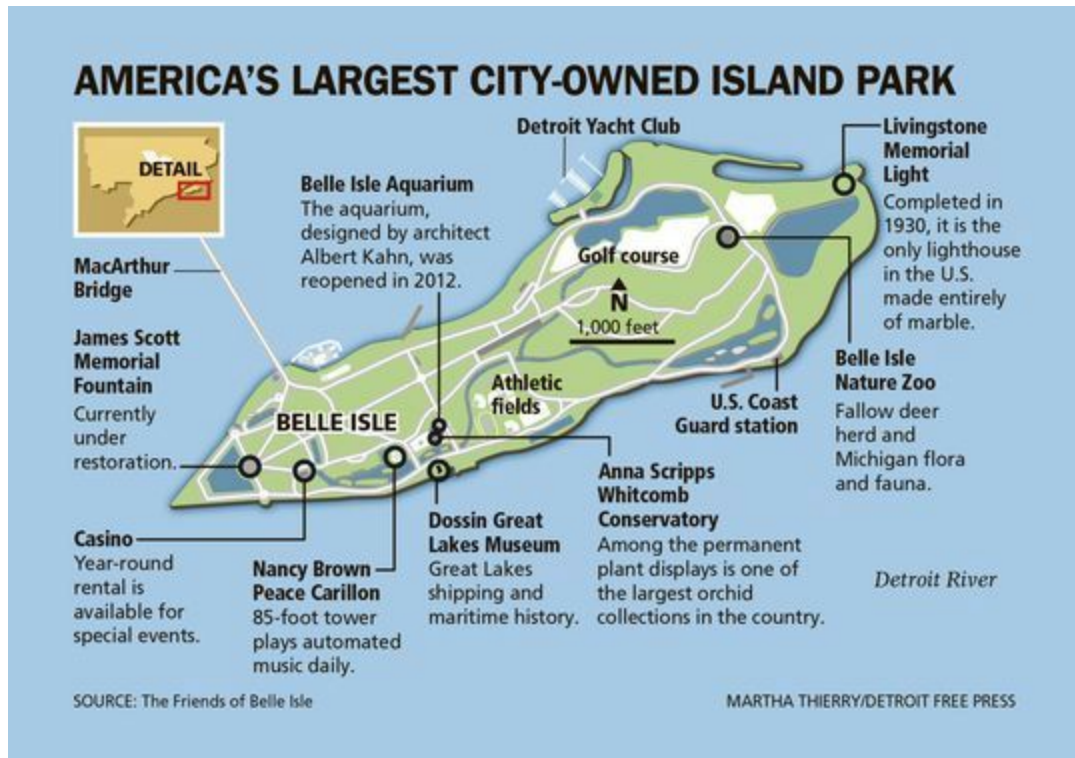
Island landmarks (Photo: Detroit Free Press)

"It's important for people to know the role Belle Isle played on the Underground Railroad," she said. "Slaves referred to Belle Isle as Midnight. Their code for Belle Isle was Midnight because they had to get to midnight to see the dawn, which was Canada. I get goose bumps right now thinking about it."

Kahn has already completed a building assessment and determined that it will cost \$5 million just to do what's needed at the aquarium, Hodges said.

Whatever the conservancy does must be approved by the DNR, said Ron Olson, chief of parks and recreation for the DNR since 2005. But, he added, "we're in partnership with them. We'll have to all collaborate and decide what would be implemented."

The DNR also helped pay the \$225,000 for the plan, joining the Hudson-Webber and Kresge foundations in that.



America's largest city-owned island park (Photo: Detroit Free Press)

One addition almost everyone agrees on is a need for restaurants.

"Clearly, there's a need for food facilities on a 982-acre site," said Biederman, citing a user survey whose highest-ranked request was "someplace to eat." "People stay from one to three hours, and they don't want to bring their lunch in a paper bag," he said.

Olson agreed and said he'd like to see more than one. State park eateries aren't new. "We've had various concessionaires and buildings in state parks over the years," Olson said. "In fact, I have a restaurant as part of the marina at Presque Isle Park Harbor (the Portage Restaurant) that is leased on our property that works out really well. ... We also have a brew pub owned privately at Tahquamenon Falls State Park near Paradise, Mich."

Olson attended the meeting last week with Biederman and offered DNR's own recommendations for what needs to be done. The department's list read like the unfortunate things contractors find on house flip programs on HGTV — nothing sexy and all infrastructural issues such as old, leaking sewer and water systems.

"It's not so glamorous," Olson said, "but when you have water main breaks, it really affects the whole usability of the park."

The state plans to be involved as the plan evolves, he said. But, he added, "We'll definitely find ways to engage the city in the process."

To be clear, Hodges, the board and supporters who want the island polished, have a long row to hoe. Hodges estimates that the early visions that include restaurants and lodging "would be hundreds of millions of dollars."

But, she said, "We can do it because we're Detroit."

The conservancy first has to raise about \$330 million to pay for deferred maintenance costs and repairs.

"That would bring us to zero without any of this planning," she said. The new attractions and upgrades could be as much as \$250 million on top of that, based on estimates and wishes. "But nobody should be scared by that," she said. "They should get on board. Thank goodness we have lots of supporters."

Among them is the Kresge Foundation, whose president and CEO Rip Rapson said: "We are in."

Rapson recalled having to choose years ago between funding the island or the riverfront: The riverfront won and got \$50 million. But Rapson said Belle Isle's time has come.

"We've all been able to witness the riverfront revitalization," he said. "But the reclamation of Belle Isle could be an equally important factor in the city's return to health and vitality ..."

Biederman agreed. His team has already begun thinking of ideas that could find their way into the strategic plan, including, just maybe, an eco-hotel on the river.

"It's an amazing opportunity; the island is bigger than Central Park, and someday it will be fantastic," he said. "Detroit needs to do this in three to five years. Central Park took 15 to polish

...

Whatever the plan, Hodges wants Belle Isle to become a destination people clamor to enjoy.

"Is the aquarium someplace you'll likely see Nemo and a shark or an invasive species like the lampreys and zebra mussels?" she asked. "Everything's on the table at the moment."

That holds true for Detroit: Everything's on the table, and all hands should be on deck in the comeback.