

Work that’s its own reward

West Central Park is an oasis in the heart of Olympia’s Westside

SW neighbors and park volunteers past and present

For years it was home to an abandoned building. In 1997 the City paid to demolish the building, leaving the lot vacant. It was the last unoccupied parcel located at the intersection of two busy arterials on the Westside—Harrison and Division. Early one May Day morning, guerilla gardeners from TESC transformed a corner of the lot with plants and flowering shrubs. The City's Public Works Department bulldozed them the next afternoon.

How about a convenience store, then?

For the next 15 years, people in Olympia's Southwest neighborhood fought off proposals for gas stations, minimarts and drive-by banks. The intersection was dangerous without adding more traffic. Then, in 2011, Olympia's Community Planning staff approved a 7-Eleven with cars entering and exiting from two streets. It promised to generate money—development fees plus property and sales taxes for the city; profits for the foreign owners of the 7-Eleven chain. But this was not to be.

Instead, people in the neighborhood organized and succeeded in reversing the city's approval.

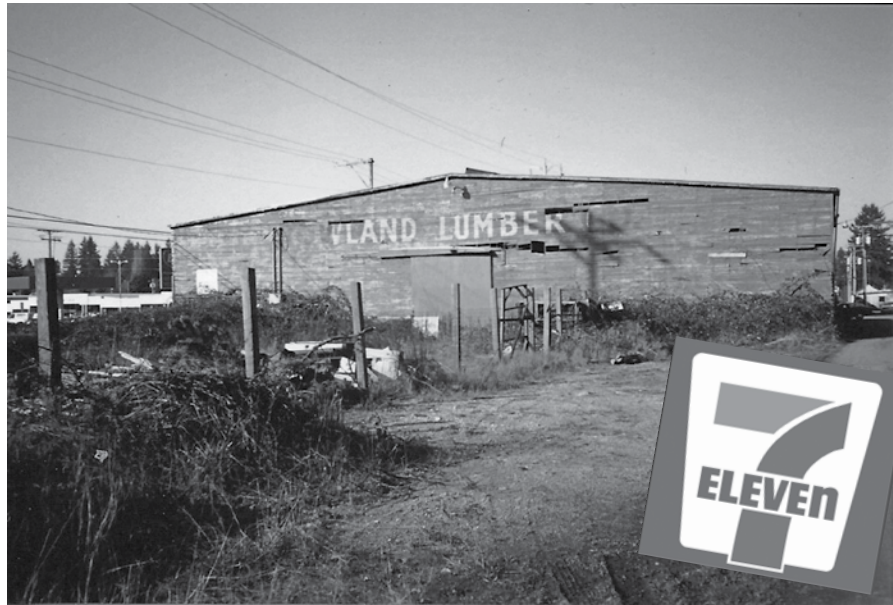
How was this possible in our world where investors call the shots and “development” trumps all other land uses?

Making the neighborhood safe for community

Confronted with the “done deal” of the 7-Eleven, residents set to work to show how the Planning Department ignored City rules when it approved the store. After an appeal to the Hearing Examiner—who predictably ruled for the staff—the neighbors raised \$8000 for another appeal. With the help of a local attorney working for free, they took their case to Superior Court where Judge Lisa Sutton found that the community was right—the City had failed to abide by its own Municipal Code.

The possibility of a green and welcoming space

The neighborhood won a second time in December 2012 when a Westside resident, Alicia Elliott, purchased the property and turned it over to the community to create a neighborhood park.



Today “West Central Park” is a neighborhood oasis. Stroll along one of the pathways and take note of the shrubs and plantings offering color and texture even on the rainiest cold winter day. Take note



of the innovative: pervious surface the Park Board chose for all driveways and parking areas.

Rain gardens bursting with texture suck up water that used to flood nearby sidewalks. There's fanciful path lighting, a chess table, and

picnic areas. In the summer all kinds of vegetables are there in raised beds for anyone to harvest. During the years (before the pandemic) there were concerts, workshops, movies and seasonal events free to everyone.

How did this come about with no employees and limited funds?

It started with the founder and an initial board of talented volunteers who took on the formal task of creating a nonprofit organization—filing for tax exempt status, keeping records, developing an initial vision for the park.

That first board started by creating a structure to attract and support the volunteers who would be needed to create and maintain the park. From the first year, regular Sunday work parties have been the way people gave their time and ideas to the park. As one volunteer said, “I needed to collaborate with people in my community on something positive and growing and beautiful...beyond the day-to-day cares of my own situation.”

Coming together from 10 to 2 every Sunday for hands-on work out-of-doors not only built and maintained the park, it allowed for relationships to develop and ideas to bear fruit. Volunteers who have been involved from the first day

had the pleasure of seeing the park take shape as the product of many hands and heads. Here's a little of what they experienced, taken from weekly newsletters that yet another volunteer sends out:

11/2013—We are over half way to our goal of planting the whole Eastern side of the park. Come Sunday to help move dirt and mulch and turn sod into new beds.

12/2013—We plan to file our 501(c)3 application. This should improve our chances to raise \$120,000 toward building our permanent park.

2/2014—We'll be painting, digging another irrigation trench and continuing work on the permaculture seminar area. The weather should be great

6/2014—If you're an artisan, a musician, a crafter, a food vendor, a local cause...sign up for the June Jubilee with its focus on demonstrations of old skills and crafts.

1/2015—At the weekly work party we'll be completing work on the arbor and putting on a few more labels to identify plants. Looking to add new board members.

4/2016—Still a few spaces left for our Mini Bird and Bee House workshop.



8/2016—Time for mowing, weeding, raking, torching, picking up litter! Building new turf with 30 yards of soil just delivered! We hope to get to the seeding too. Some volunteers will be working on a low berm to create amphitheater seating for Monday Movie Madness.

6/2017—We need help to install steel edging along the Park pathways. The United Way team will be there for the Day of Caring if you'd like to plug in.

10/2017—We're hosting our third annual Harvest Fest with apple pressing, cider making, seed and veggie swap or share; mushroom cultivation workshop, hügelkultur workshop, edible landscape tour, natural beekeeping workshop and the incredible, edible, community stone soup!

6/2018—This Sunday, we'll be helping out at the Senior Services Garden. We planted the beds about 3 weeks ago and stuff is growing fast. Come to work and stay to play bocce ball.

9/2018—Friday around 4 o'clock we'll be hanging lights for the Equinox Dance Party. Grab a string of lights and some vines to help make the Park special.

Bee & Wasp Update—Thanks to everyone who helped make wasp traps last week. We put the traps in the park and nearby properties to help reduce the wasp population. We have a few containers of honeycomb left for sale from last year's hive.

10/2018—Just finished the compost system at the park in partnership with OlySunrise Compost Concierge! The new wire coverings will help keep the birds out and make the overall process easier for our crew of volunteers to maintain.

6/2019—Hügelkultur is a water-wise planting technique that acts something like a nurse log. Workshop with a master gardener—how to plant and the benefits.

7/2019—Movie Madness! Mondays in July and August from 8:45 to midnight. Come early for popcorn and slides from Park work parties and local business ads. Bring blankets, lawn chairs and your besties to snuggle in for your own walk-in theater!

And now it's 2021

The pandemic changed life at the park, but it's still there providing respite and community. The crew of dedicated volunteers turned to staggered schedules for safety and kept pruning, mowing, and weeding since last March.

Current board members are looking to scale up activities in the park as safety guidelines allow more people to gather. A major new structure—an open-air canopy—has just been completed, offering new ways to use the space.

Projects that were put on hold during the pandemic, will have priority along with new ideas that have been germinating—as always:

Starting in April the park will return to summer hours, with volunteers meeting from 11 to 1 every Sunday. It's beautiful in the spring, and here are some places to contribute:

Some volunteers are building new benches for more park seating. Love wood-working, or have ideas?

Donated sandstone is being cleaned and prepped for a spiral herb garden slated for a special work party this summer.

It's nearly time to plant the ADA accessible raised beds. Cathy Visser, who with her



husband helped build these beds, said “Gardening and nurturing this space beautifies the neighborhood and helps us to feel more connected to our community.” A class or group could adopt a bed—and food sharing is always possible.



Another goal is to bring more art and craft events to the park. Someone with a yen to

connect with artists or looking to organize events would be a welcome volunteer.

Until larger gatherings are safe, the park can be a venue for small events such as recitals and limited performances. Once concerts are back the search will be on for stage crew and support volunteers.

In addition to helping tend the park itself, there are many great projects waiting for the right people to help them grow. There is an opportunity for everyone to be part of programs, events, and projects that bring our community together in the park all year round.



Why not join us? We currently have openings for an additional board member, volunteer coordinator, and someone to help with outreach and program/activities. Except for gardening and landscaping tasks, most of the work is done virtually right now, making it accessible to everyone. We can provide supervision reporting for students and others who might need official volunteer hours. Shoot us an email or give us a call for more information.

info@westcentralpark.org Office phone: (833) 223-727

Thurston County Food Bank

Food Distribution at the Downtown, Client Service Center.

Regular distribution 11:00 am – 3:00 pm Mon, Wed, Fri

All food is prepacked and distributed through either the Drive-Up or Walk-Up distribution model.

Follow the signs for the vehicle line—please stay in your car—and friendly staff and volunteers will bring your food out and load it into your vehicle.

If you are on foot, line up along the Thurston Ave wall where there are marked spots to help with safe, social distancing. Your food will be brought out to you once you check in.

Office & donation hours

8:00 am – 4:30 pm Monday through Friday

For more information go to our website:

<https://thurstoncountyfoodbank.org/80-2/grocery-distribution/>

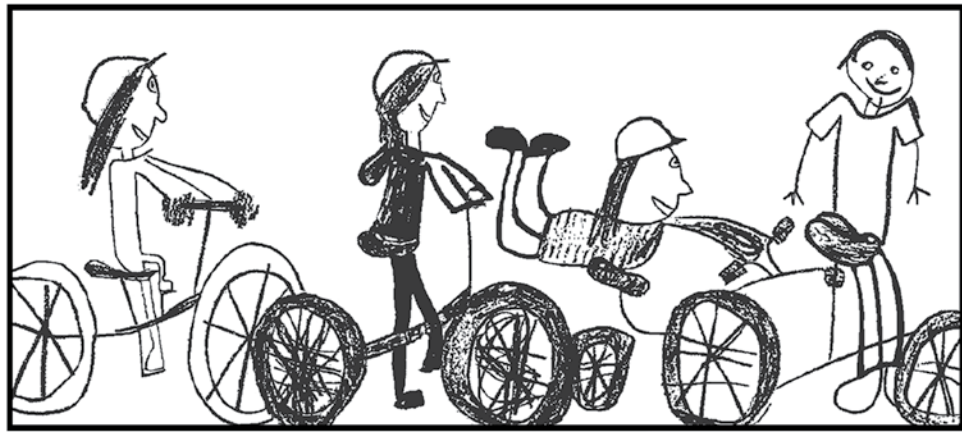
Working to end hunger in our community

220 Thurston Ave. NE • downtown Olympia WA

Bicycle for Joy!

in the Bicycle Commuter Challenge in May!

All Rides Count in 2021! Win Amazing Prizes! All Ages Welcome!



Art by Kennah, age 7

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