

Quietly Making a Difference

BY SHARON BOSWORTH



Barracks Row Members join with Ward 6 Councilmember Tommy Wells to open the new parking lot located on Eight St. SE under the highway. Photo: Andrew Lightman

two guys around the corner were doing for our neighborhood right here on Capitol Hill.

In mid-June, Barracks Row Main Street cut the ribbon on a new parking lot on Eighth Street SE under Interstate-295-395, celebrating the arrival of 54 new parking spaces for the corridor. Right next to the new parking lot, tucked up to the freeway, we noticed a garden that stretched for an entire block. Even in the heat of summer it was lovely and well tended, with lush grass and blooming flowers. At Barracks Row Main Street, we work hard every day to beautify the corridor; the Capitol Hill Business Improvement District cleans the sidewalks, plants and maintains the tree boxes throughout the area. But neither of our organizations could claim this pretty park. We wondered who was making it happen.

They Made a Pact

Meet Bert Randolph and Jeff Gannon. Neighbors on I Street SE for the past five years, their front windows both overlooked a dull triangular field across the street that ran for the block

SE and along I Street SE. The triangle was populated with typical city-issue cobra light poles ringed with weeds. Unlike many of the quiet, quaint streets of Capitol Hill, I Street SE on their block would be most accurately described as a freeway entrance road. All day long in front of their houses, cars and trucks lined up to get on to the freeway ramp a few blocks to the west.

It was exactly the ugly urban landscape we train ourselves not to see. But Bert Randolph saw it. "I had just moved here from Potomac, and I was actually kind of embarrassed by it," remembered Bert. He met his neighbor, Jeff Gannon, and discovered they both

felt the same way. Jeff said he knew about a program where they could get some low cost mulch and supplies. And they made a pact. They would adopt the triangle. Bert would cut the grass and trim the trees, and Jeff would plant flowers and bushes and do the weeding. That was four years ago, and they're still at it.

The Key to the Problem

I called to congratulate Bert on his civic gardening and to thank him for his hard work (Jeff was traveling at the time). That's when I found out about the problem. To keep the garden alive during previous summers, the pair had actually toted water buckets and watering cans from their houses. Then this year they ran a hose across I Street to water the plants. "But when the water bill came last month, we realized the hose was not going to be the solution," said Bert. Both men have developed back problems, so they can't use the bucket brigade anymore.

"I love gardening and yard work," said Bert. "I'm willing to invest the time and energy to make the park look good. I'd love to plant more fescue so the grass will be deep green, but I have to have water." What's so frustrating is that there is actually water access right in the Seventh Street area of the triangle park, but the pipe is capped. Often seen in golf courses, cemeteries and city parks, there are keys that can be fitted to capped-off water lines to allow occasional access. That is what Bert and Jeff are hoping for, but they are getting desperate.

"We want the park looking its best for the Fourth of July parade in a few weeks, but unless we get help fast, the sun is going to win the battle," said Bert. He further noted that they plant hearty, sun tolerant varieties, but getting the grass, flowers and plants regular water is of paramount importance.

So the race is on. Calls and e-mails to Ward 6 Councilmember Tommy Well's office are promising. No one is saying no, but no one is saying yes. No one is sure which department can solve this problem.

But a new white knight has just entered the scene. Yesterday, when they learned of water crisis



Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country." JFK's 1961 inaugural address galvanized a generation of college seniors. Suddenly they were inspired to spend a few years after graduation doing good before being swept up in their careers. But almost 50 years later, most of us who heard Kennedy that day are content to pay our taxes, obey the law and worry about the economy. Though we may support a religious organization or a favorite nonprofit, very few of us are still stirred to give back with vigor, to put sweat equity into doing something noble for our city, state or country. At least that's what I thought until I realized what

at the park, Patty Brosmer and her team at the Capitol Hill Business Improvement District (BID) agreed to water for a few weeks until the city can help with a permanent solution. The plants in our little park now have a reprieve because of this generosity, but the clock is ticking.

Thanks to Bert and Jeff, from Barracks Row

Hundreds of us who plan to be in town over July Fourth will march in the Fourth of July parade – the Capitol Hill Village, the Congressional Dog Walkers, the Capitol Hill Restoration Society, the Eastern High School band and loads of kids in wagons and on bikes and floats of all description. Every year the marchers form up in the park that Bert and Jeff keep up, sitting in the cool, fresh cut grass, waiting for their group to be called. Because of the last minute help from the BID, the grass will be green as we roll out the red, white and blue, but who knows where the water will come from later in the summer. We promise to follow this situation and report back next month.

But, to Bert Randolph and Jeff Gannon, many thanks from all of us in the Eighth Street corridor for a job well done! The ideals of JFK are alive today, just blocks from the steps of the Capitol where we first heard that remarkable challenge.

For more information about the DC's partnership program which helped Bert and Jeff begin their gardening work on the triangle of land at Eighth and I Street, contact the Department of Parks and Recreation Office of Partnerships and Development at 202-673-7647, dpr.dc.gov.

Sharon Bosworth is marketing manager at Barracks Row Main Street. Call 202-544-3188 or visit www.barracksrow.org for more information. ★

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