

ALLSTON-BRIGHTON

The Boston Globe

Open space advocacy group hopes to bridge 'green gap'

By Avi Steinberg, Globe Correspondent | February 13, 2005

It just got easier to be green in Allston-Brighton.

The Allston Brighton Green Space Advocates, a new umbrella organization for local parks and open spaces advocacy groups, held its first event, a "Green Gathering," earlier this month, bringing together more than 50 activists and community members from all corners of the two neighborhoods to share information and begin discussion of a unified agenda for the year. The group's second event is scheduled for Wednesday.

Brighton's EF International Language School, the choice of location for "Green Gathering," represented the type of neighborhood relationships that many local advocates hold up as a model. EF has worked with open space advocates on a deal that would allow the school to expand its current building in exchange for an agreement to protect 12.6 acres of land around the building, the majority of which is considered to be an "urban wild."

"Holding the meeting here helps send the message that cooperation on development projects is possible and that it actually benefits everybody," said veteran activist Charlie Vasiliades, 47, of Brighton.

At the first gathering, attendees discussed issues such as cleanup efforts in neighborhood parks, possible land acquisitions to preserve dwindling urban wilds areas, environmental management, and concerns over city and state budget allocations for green spaces. Speakers included Boston Parks Department Commissioner Antonia Pollak and the president of the Boston Natural Areas Network, Valerie Burns, as well as leaders of the Allston Brighton Community Development Corp.

Burns discussed data from a survey conducted by her organization revealing that Allston-Brighton lags well behind the city average of 7.4 acres of protected open space per 1,000 people, with a figure of 4.7 acres per 1,000. Cognizant of the decline of protected lands over the past 20 years, many advocates fear that without a unified and sustained community response, Allston-Brighton's green gap may widen, said Vasiliades.

For some of the attendees, the gathering was a chance to meet other neighborhood advocates and discuss common issues.

Harry Mattison, of Allston, said he met some peers he'd known previously only from phone conversations. "I didn't realize that there were so many people involved in this -- I think it's going to be really helpful for everyone to meet each other," he said.

Mattison, 31, was one of the younger advocates who made a presentation at the meeting. With the aid of photo slides, presenters introduced and briefly discussed the issues and successes of each of Allston-Brighton's major parks, green spaces, and community gardens. For Mattison, the meeting was a chance to highlight a problem close to home and tap into expertise of veteran advocates.

"I live down the street from a very neglected piece of land," he said, referring to the Lincoln-Cambridge Street greenway. "The city, turnpike, and the state all refuse to take ownership of it; I've had a very difficult time just figuring out who to turn to about this. The land is a place where people throw their Dunkin' Donuts cups and cigarette packs while waiting for the bus. It's really a shame," he said.

Although he has lived in Allston for 10 years, said Mattison, it was his marriage and the recent birth of his first child that deepened his commitment to the welfare of his neighborhood.

Mattison is exactly the type of advocate that Allston-Brighton's elder activists love to see. "We live in a neighborhood with a high percentage of transient residents who are, for the most part, not involved in the community," said Wilma Wetterstrom, 59, of Brighton. "It drags us down in the sense that we don't have as

much political clout as a community in which higher numbers of people are involved," she said. "So I'm thrilled to see younger people here."

Neighborhood advocate Tamara Daly, 46, of Brighton, explained that parks, which have always been valuable to cities, are becoming essential for fostering civic-mindedness in residents who are increasingly detached from one another.

"Often, neighborhood kids, even kids who live on the same street, don't go to the same schools and simply don't know each other. The parks and other spaces give them a place to interact and to connect with each other and their neighborhood -- this is only one example," she said.

"These spaces are the commons, the nondenominational meeting ground, the hubs of the neighborhood. This is everybody's issue."

The next meeting of Allston Brighton Green Space Advocates will take place Wednesday at 7:30 p.m. at the Allston Brighton Community Development Corp., 15 North Beacon St., Allston. ■

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