

The Anacostia River Area and the City We Were Meant to Be

The Anacostia River runs through our city, figuratively and literally separating our people...as Mayor, I will make restoring the Anacostia and the surrounding area a top economic development priority...I support plans that protect the Anacostia's natural habitat and to make it available to all District residents. Tony Williams, summer 1998

Washington DC has always been a city like no other: planned, designed and built to be what today we would call “mission-driven.” In the second year of the French Revolution, French engineer Pierre Charles L’Enfant grandly designed America’s new capital to manifest the ideals of the American Revolution and the struggle for equality going on in his country. 223 years later, a brief walk on the National Mall conveys the unmistakable sense that the capital is meant to be a special place.

But the harsh reality is that the nation’s capital has never really measured up to those lofty ideals. Beyond the monuments and federal veneer, it is a city painfully divided between haves and have-nots.

For most of the last century, the Anacostia River and the immediate area around it have served as the District’s version of other cities’ infamous “tracks.” On the river’s west side are the National Mall and the magnificent monuments, the Capitol, White House and other federal government buildings, a vibrant downtown, beautiful parks, and several million dollar residential neighborhoods. More than 20 million tourists a year support local commerce. On the east side, there are a few pleasant middle-class neighborhoods, but no monuments, no grand buildings, and few tourists. Poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, blight and a litany of social problems are sadly common.

One of DC’s many oddities is that the river area that divides the city into two separate but vastly unequal parts literally belongs to the federal government. Far from manifesting American ideals, the Anacostia is one of America’s most polluted rivers. More significantly, nearly all the land around the Anacostia—1200 acres—is owned and managed by the federal government, and it does little to reduce the city’s division. Secure Army, Navy and Air Force installations take up most of the prime riverside real estate. An historic but scruffy golf course and an historic but largely abandoned football and baseball stadium ringed by 100 acres of empty parking lots are other principal features. Most of the remaining riverside land is a National Park Service managed park, but it is difficult to get into, confusing, badly underinvested, and features a motley collection of toxic sites, outdated administrative buildings, unused areas, rough athletic fields and a single trash-filled boat ramp.

In 1998, District voters, tired of years of local government scandal, elected Anthony A. Williams to be the city’s fourth modern-era Mayor. Williams, a wonky, Ivy League trained lawyer whose only previous elected office had been as a New Haven alderman. He had come to town just three years earlier to be

chief financial officer at the USDA. However, he ran on a platform of clean, smart, competent government and economic revitalization, and was overwhelmingly elected.

Mayor Williams understood the Anacostia as a both a blot on the nation's core ideals and a place of enormous potential for positive change, and he made transforming the Anacostia River area one of his top three priorities. He recruited top talent to create a planning department from scratch and gave it the mission of working with the federal government to re-plan the Anacostia River area. Following a xx-party Memorandum of Understanding signed aboard the naval destroyer USS Barry and then dozens of community meetings, a comprehensive plan for the Anacostia waterfront, known as the red book, took shape. The new plan had a clean and safe river, appropriate riverside economic development and a magnificent park system with arts, culture and recreational opportunities at its core.

To kick-start the revitalization, Williams and his planning team worked with the federal government to permit private-sector development of a 55-acre deteriorating federal parcel along the river that had once been home to the Washington Naval Gun Factory. Next, he and his colleagues persuaded Major League Baseball to relocate the Montreal Expos to Washington and built the world's first LEED certified stadium along the river, adjacent to the new neighborhood. To keep the momentum going, he created a new public-private institution, the Anacostia Waterfront Corporation, to implement the comprehensive vision of the red book, and appointed his planning director to run it.

Mayor Williams and his planning director "got" sustainability and did their best to ensure that it informed all new development. He once famously told a group of advocates from working under the banner of Sustainable DC, "if it's not sustainable, why the hell would we do it?" The new neighborhood was given special environmental requirements, becoming one of the first "eco-districts."

In 2006, Williams declined to run again, and a new mayor with different priorities took office. The new Anacostia Waterfront Corporation was quickly abolished. The neighborhood around the stadium continued to develop, albeit slowly as the economy crashed. Pressure to clean up the chemicals and other pollutants in the river abated. The red book's plans for the magnificent riverside park were shelved. The grand vision for unifying the city and finally meeting L'Enfant's ideals was mothballed.

Today: Revitalizing the Revitalization

Today, former Mayor Tony Williams is the CEO of the Federal City Council, a 60 year old nonprofit with a mission of improving civic life in the District of Columbia. He remains passionate about repairing the economic and social injustice represented by the Anacostia River and the underutilized federal and city land around it. A major project of the Federal City Council is to recreate the lost momentum for comprehensive revitalization of the river area. The goal is to work with all stakeholders, especially the city, the federal government and the State or Maryland, to transform the area from a great divider of the nation's capital to an equally great uniter.

The Federal City Council's Anacostia Legacy Project has three components: 1) mobilizing the public and political support to clean up or isolate the PCBs and other legacy toxins in the river sediments; 2) working across the watershed (which is 5/6 in Maryland) to control stormwater-borne pollutants and erosion with green infrastructure, with a special emphasis on developing a career path; and 3) working with the National Park Service to reinvigorate plans for a world-class riverside park designed to bring the city together. The vision is to create a great new place, literally at the foot of Capitol Hill, where people can come together to exercise, paddle, learn new skills, enjoy arts, history, music, sports and culture, and fully appreciate each other and the energy and diversity of urban life. The culmination of the project will be to launch a new Anacostia River and Park Trust to help finish the job of restoring water quality in the river and to help achieve the needed capital investment and programming in the park.

We invite you, as an interested participant in the Council on Foundations' 2014 Philanthropy Exchange, to come down to the Nationals Stadium on June 9th to hear former Mayor Tony Williams' continuing vision for the Anacostia River area, see some of the green development that has already been done in the surrounding neighborhood, and get out on the water to see the area's extraordinary potential to demonstrate the ideals on which the nation's capital was founded.

