

Posted on Fri, Nov. 14, 2008

Retired judge watches over FDR Park



PETER TOBIA / Staff Photographer
Alex Bonavitacola, retired president judge of the Court of Common Pleas, surveying a swath of FDR Park at Pattison Avenue over the summer.

By Art Carey

Inquirer Staff Writer

True to his name, Alex Bonavitacola is still living the good life. At 77, the former president judge of the Court of Common Pleas is trim and muscular - the happy consequence of 15 minutes of daily weightlifting and a 2 1/2-mile walk in FDR Park.

Known to generations of Philadelphians as "The Lakes," FDR Park, at the far end of Broad Street and just north of the Navy Yard in South Philadelphia, is the retired judge's 348-acre backyard. He lives in a Packer Park rowhouse 2 1/2 blocks away.

"I've had a lifelong love affair with this park," Bonavitacola says. "As a boy, I used to come here every day and play baseball. When you're an urban kid, trees, greenery and open space mean a lot."

To Bonavitacola, they still do.

He's an officer of the Friends of FDR Park, where he has participated in two spring cleanups with his wife, Flora.

As a member of the Fairmount Park Commission, to which he was elected in May 2007, Bonavitacola has directed the same energy and determination that he applied to improving the efficiency of the city's courts to preserving and protecting the 9,200-acre citywide park system.

"I see myself as a bulwark against any erosion of the parks," Bonavitacola says.

The judge is dismayed by the charter change that voters overwhelmingly approved last week, which will abolish the 16-member commission and merge the park system with the city Department of Recreation.

"To say I'm disappointed is an understatement," Bonavitacola says. "It puts the park under people who are not park people. They're a different breed with a different mind-set. If the choice is between buying more trees for the park and putting up a playground, guess which one will get the money? Because trees don't vote."

The city budget crisis makes the situation worse.

On the bench, from which he retired in 2005, Bonavitacola could sometimes be crusty and cantankerous. As a commission member, he can sometimes be, to use his word, irascible.

"I'm a naysayer," Bonavitacola acknowledges. "I don't pull punches, and I won't go along with the crowd because it's the thing to do."

"He's an independent thinker," says Philip Price Jr., the commission's treasurer. "Many people his age don't want to undertake matters like this, but he knows Fairmount Park is unique. He's a great believer in its importance, not only to Philadelphia but also to the region, and even the nation."

"If we don't cherish, protect and support the park system," Bonavitacola warns, "then we're all doomed to a life of asphalt and concrete."

Bonavitacola's chief aims are to give citizens more say in how their parks are managed and to make the park's staff more responsive. His chief gripe is that many parts of Fairmount Park have become shabby and unkempt.

FDR Park is Exhibit A.

"It's a diamond in the rough," says Bonavitacola. "It's rough because people don't treat it too well and it's been neglected."

What is now FDR Park was once League Island Park. It was designed in 1914 by the landscape architectural firm of the Olmstead brothers, who gave New York Central Park. To build League Island Park, 300 acres of marsh were filled and graded. In 1926, the park hosted the Sesquicentennial Exposition, the nation's 150th birthday party.

"Look at this vista. Isn't it pretty?" Bonavitacola says as he surveys Edgewood Lake from the pavilion atop the park boathouse, the site of a popular exposition attraction known as the Russian Tea Room.

"They used to have paddleboats. It was set up like a Venetian lagoon. You could take rides on gondolas."

But the beauty of the vista on this day was marred. At least a third of the lake's surface - it's more the size of a pond - was covered with algae scum, and its banks were overgrown with brush and wild shrubbery and studded with dead trees.

"This park has been on a reduced diet for at least a decade," Bonavitacola laments. "The whole park system is suffering because of a lack of funds. Every time there's a city budget crunch, the parks get cut."

To make matters worse, the Fairmount Park workforce is responsible for pruning, removing and replanting all the street trees in the city.

"A terrible burden," Bonavitacola says.

He's proud that the Packer Park Civic Association, of which he is a director, planted more than 80 trees last year and plans to plant 20 more this year. It thrills him that 15 disease-resistant elms were recently planted along Broad Street, a bit north and south of the park.

"I'm not an arborist or horticulturist," Bonavitacola says. "It's just a love I have for trees and greenery."

His favorite tree is the oak - "sturdy, good wood, and a lot of foliage." His next favorite is the locust - "lacy, airy-looking, and doesn't overwhelm a property."

On a sunny day last fall, while walking through FDR Park with a friend, Bonavitacola stopped under a grove where the ground was littered with chestnuts.

"I picked one up to look," Bonavitacola recalls. "These weren't horse chestnuts. These were American chestnuts. I know what the fruit looks like. I used to roast and eat them as a kid. 'Wow!' I said. I thought they were all dead."

"When Penn came to Pennsylvania, the state was covered with chestnut trees, from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh," Bonavitacola says.

Last summer, Bonavitacola sent twig and leaf samples to the American Chestnut Foundation's research lab at Pennsylvania State University to verify his find.

"It looks like I struck out," Bonavitacola said the other day. None of the samples was an American chestnut. Sara Fitzsimmons, a forester and the foundation's Northern Appalachian regional science coordinator, identified the specimens as common hackberry, red maple and American basswood.

"These three species are more common to wetter areas than one would find chestnuts, especially American chestnuts," Fitzsimmons wrote in a letter to the judge. "American

chestnuts require well-drained and acidic soils, much like you would find throughout the Appalachian Mountains."

In fact, thousands of American chestnuts still grow on the ridges of the Appalachians - Fitzsimmons herself recently counted about 1,200 along a 27-mile stretch of the Appalachian Trail in Central Pennsylvania - but most are killed by the blight fungus before they reach maturity.

Of the judge's devotion to the chestnut, Fitzsimmons says: "I think it's great. I encourage him to keep looking and to send more samples."

Bonavitacola intends to comply.

"I still insist there are American chestnut trees there," he says of his beloved FDR Park. "I've got to wait till they drop their fruit. The hunt goes on."

Contact staff writer Art Carey at 610-696-3249 or acarey@phillynews.com.