

Park Support Groups of Baltimore City: **The Seton Hill Association**

The beautiful historic district of Seton Hill is located in central Baltimore City, just west of Mt. Vernon. Known to some as Baltimore's French Quarter, the neighborhood is characterized by 19th century townhouses and holds at its center the 4.75 acres of St. Mary's Park. This stretch of land once belonged to the Sulpician Order, and was gifted to the city in the 1970s. Today, the park is one of the more serene open areas in Baltimore. Broad, brick-lined paths intersect across green fields, and are edged by healthy-looking trees, bushes, and historic streetlamps.

St. Mary's is a gorgeous park, but it was never designed to be a public space. With its high brick walls and shaded corners, the park has all too often provided a haven for illicit activities. Trash has been an issue for St. Mary's as well, and certain features, like a broken fountain, have deteriorated over time. In recent years, these problems have begun to be remedied by the efforts of the Seton Hill Association (SHA).

SHA has been dealing with its community's concerns since the 1960s. The group's mission is to "serve as a tool to assist the community," which takes a variety of forms. SHA provides residents with information on useful programs, helps them navigate the codes for home improvement projects in an historic district, and keeps them abreast of important legislation.

One of the strongest tools that SHA has found for creating community involvement and excitement has been working on St. Mary's Park, improving

and beautifying the space as well as hosting events there, like a community fish fry and a festival/flea market. A Park Committee was formed in 2002 to coordinate these efforts. The head of the committee is Karen French, an art restorer for the Walters Art Museum who says she just wanted to see things get done.

Certainly, a great deal has gotten done in St. Mary's over the past few years. In 2004, the Baltimore City Department of Recreation & Parks responded to SHA's requests and lowered a wall on the park's northern end where criminal activity had been especially bad. The community produced a master plan for the park with the Neighborhood Design Center. Over the next year, the association received two Partnerships for Parks grants (funded by Recreation & Parks and administered by the Parks & People Foundation), which provided thousands of dollars for plantings, as well as money to insure the grounds building on the property, install an exterior spigot on the building and commission a park sign.

The issue of insurance for the grounds building was a difficult one. Members of the association had cared for and used the building for years, storing tools and holding meetings there. Then, in 2004, they found themselves barred from the property. By law, the group needed insurance to secure a Memorandum of Understanding with the city for the building's use, but this expense proved prohibitive for the same organization. Resolution finally came with the award of a Partnerships for Parks grant which,

among other things, covered this essential cost. The group signed an agreement with Recreation & Parks in July of 2005 and a stronger connection is steadily being established between the two entities.

Despite the ever-present need for more funds and committed volunteers, SHA has managed to make some remarkable changes. By starting with a series of small projects and partnering with many elements of the Seton Hill community, such as churches and a local transitional

shelter, the group has pulled off a number of successful projects and events in St. Mary's. In the spring of 2006, the association was awarded \$40,000 from the TKF Foundation for the design phase of a two-part scheme to totally remake the southern half of the park. Having accomplished several isolated projects in the park, the SHA is now working to bring its park projects together into a comprehensive makeover of the biggest green space in downtown Baltimore.



The bulbs come up after a planting in St. Mary's Park

WHAT: The Seton Hill Association

WHERE: St. Mary's Park in the Seton Hill community of central Baltimore City

WHEN: Since the early 1960s

WHY: To "promote social welfare and general neighborhood improvement," preserve the area's historic character, and create a sense of community

Based on an interview with Karen French and on information compiled during the summer of 2006.