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Sealed for seven years

April 29, 2010



A mural painted by Maitland Middle School students is one of the many improvements to Bellamy Park. The bathroom doors were recently unlocked after seven years. Photos by Jenny Andreasson — The Observer

**By Jenny Andreasson
Observer Staff**

Martha Bryant Hall breathed a little easier on Saturday, as she and other Maitland residents celebrated the opening of the Bellamy Park bathrooms, which the city locked more than seven years ago.

They also cheered the park's makeover — a colorful mural on the outside bathroom wall, new water fountains, new countertops and signage.

"Look at all these little kids enjoying the park," Hall said from the pavilion, from which residents were munching on hot dogs, lemonade and Italian ice, courtesy of FOCUS, an interfaith organization that helped the community advocate for the restroom's opening.

Hall, who lives right next to the park, has been fighting to get the bathrooms unlocked since 2002. She said neighbors have been opening their homes for children at the park to use the bathroom and the people using the basketball court have been using a tree.

"I would see these big men eliminate on the ground," said Hall. "Where could they go? They couldn't go anywhere but the ground."

In 2002, the city locked the bathrooms in the predominately black area of Maitland at the residents' request after a string of vandalism and "unfortunate" activities occurred in the park after dark, Maitland Leisure Services Director Chuck Jordan said.

"The neighbors didn't feel it was as safe as they hoped it might be," he said.

The city completed \$100,000 in improvements to the park using a grant in 2006, adding a perimeter fence, security lights, hopscotch pad and refurbishing the play structure. But there still wasn't a consensus among the residents to open the bathrooms, he said.

Jacqueline Dais, Hall's daughter, said the residents wanted them open all along, but didn't speak up.

"Maitland is a diverse community," she said, "and we want to make sure we're included ... We don't want to go through another seven years without bathrooms or things that we need because we don't talk."

Getting results

With the help of FOCUS, the citizens banded together and arranged a meeting with the city at Open Door Missionary Baptist Church in November.

Less than six months later, much more has been done than unlocking bathroom doors. The city put a gate in at the other side of the park for additional access, installed a water fountain separate from the bathroom building, replaced the bathroom's countertops and installed signs at all city parks urging folks who witness vandalism to report it to the police department. Maitland Middle School students painted the mural depicting well-known places in Maitland.

"We were able to hit 90 to 95 percent of the things the community asked for," Jordan said. "But we still have more work to do."

Today, the park is not a high-crime area, Dais said. In 2009, there were nine police calls to the park and one arrest, for truancy.

Maitland Police Sgt. Louis Grindle said the park post-makeover is "100 times better." Jordan said they were able to lock the bathroom doors in an open position, which creates a sense of "openness and security". Police have increased patrol at all parks.

Maitland Mayor Doug Kinson, a candidate for Orange County Commission, attended the celebration as well as the mural painting and said Bellamy Park is "a hidden gem" in Maitland.

"I'm impressed with the community, neighbors and families who are dedicated to making sure that no matter what (park) gate they come through, their family is going to be safe," Kinson said.

Getting heard

FOCUS member Susan Gable said her organization didn't approach the city for the residents, but showed them that they could do it.

"We get the community involved and help them find their voice," she said.

Dais said it's eye opening that so much can get done when a community comes together.

"If there's ever an issue or condition we need to take care of, all we have to do... is touch each other and we can make something happen," Dais said to a group of about 100 gathered beneath the park pavilion.

"We know we can because we did it in this instance. We can continue to do it, but we have to talk to each other. We can't say, 'oh she doesn't look like me, I can't talk to her.'"

But Hall said she's had trouble getting through to the city leaders, and that it took FOCUS and two TV news crews to get the city's attention.

"I was surprised to see [Kinson] here. I've been to Council meetings and they ignore me," Hall said.

Hall said she moved to Maitland in 1959 and "has seen no improvement in the black community for the tax dollar."

"I believe in progress, I believe in equality, I believe in justice," she said. "If you don't have equality and justice, then what do you have?"



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