*Pembroke Marsh – brief history.*

Pembroke Marsh has posed problems to Bermudians for the past 200 years. When Hamilton became the capital in 1815, development accelerated in Pembroke and the marsh was mainly an obstacle to work around. The area was seen to be more valuable if it was drained and turned into reclaimed land. These efforts were to lower the risk of flooding in the area and to minimize mosquito breeding. Reducing mosquitoes’ breeding environments was a priority at the time due to the threat that mosquitoes would continue to spread yellow fever on the Island.

Attempts at draining the land failed, leading in 1941 to the area being called Marsh Folly. Technical difficulties were also encountered in the reclamation projects as a result of the peat layer compressed beneath the marsh. There was greater success in the West basin of the marsh resulting in more sites being developed including Bernard Park. However this area is still very susceptible to floods. Once dumping was prohibited in other marshland around the Island the East basin was turned into a popular dumping site. Garbage collection services provided by the Health Department were established making Pembroke Marsh an official landfill.

As the dump grew in size further complications arose, especially to the surrounding neighborhoods. Burning of the waste on site generated smoke that invaded the surrounding residences. The smells looming on a humid Bermuda day were unbearable and unavoidable in the area. In addition there were the problems of rodents that were a disruptive and unpleasant aspect of living nearby.

The introduction of a pulverization plant set up in 1975 reduced the amount of waste dumped at Pembroke Marsh but also prolonged the potential use of the site. Heavy metal objects and large appliances were now being sent to a new reclamation site at the civil air terminal, reducing the amount of waste being deposited at the Marsh and lowering the risk of contaminating the ground. However these attempts did not help significantly and Bermuda’s growing population and consumerism were increasing the need for an alternative means of waste disposal.

In 1995, the Marsh Folly Waste Treatment Facility was launched by the Bermuda Government’s Ministry of Works and Engineering. This was made possible by the completion of the Tynes Bay Incinerator in 1994. Now that there was another place to dispose of waste, dumping could officially stop at Marsh Folly. The Treatment Facility is a composting site on top of the existing dump. The 25-acre site receives 8 metric tones of organic waste and 35 tons of horticultural waste a day. The Marsh Folly site produces fertile soil as a marketable recycled product from composted organic material.

*The Pembroke Marsh Plan 1987.*

In 1983 the Pembroke Marsh Redevelopment Committee was established. Their aim was to make recommendations for the redevelopment of the Pembroke Marsh Basin. By 1985 the committee was working with the Ministry of Environment, other Government departments, and a group from Harvard University Graduate School of Design. When consulting with the public it was clear that the most requested use for this land was as a public park. The Harvard graduate students produced several different plans for the park providing the committee and public with a variety of choices. These plans were focused on public needs and sustainable development for the Island.

Pembroke Marsh is located in Bermuda’s most densely populated parish, Pembroke, with 5,349 people per square mile. The 1980 Census declared that nearly 10% of the dwellings were overcrowded.

The marsh originally covered 119 acres and accounted for 38% of Bermuda’s total marshland. The park will allow for preservation of this natural habitat and ecosystem. The efforts to clean up the marsh and clear it of invasive species will restore the land as a natural water purifier.

Also if the marsh is restored and left undeveloped it could become an ideal flood plain, capable of holding surplus storm water run off from the city. This could lead to a reduction in flooding of Mills Creek onto roads and private properties.

The final phase of the 1987 plan was programmed to be finished in 1993. However, in 2013 the East basin is continuing to be used as a composting site and the West basin remains as a marsh. In terms of progress, work has been done clearing the invasive plants around the perimeter of the project area.

The original plans remain untouched and apparently forgotten.

*What prevented progress?*

Before any progress on the redevelopment plan could begin it was necessary to shut down the dump, although this meant that an alternative method of waste disposal was needed. The Tynes Bay incinerator became the new facility to accommodate the Island’s increasing need for waste disposal, however it was not in operation until 1994. Therefore there was no choice but to continue dumping at Pembroke Marsh and this created a time lag of many years during which the project lost momentum and became an afterthought.

At present there is the problem of the relocation of the composting site. It is not necessarily difficult to establish a new composting site because it only requires space and very little specialized capital. Nevertheless, a site needs to be determined and composting needs to officially be relocated before work on the redevelopment could commence. Continuous composting has significantly changed the physical state of the land since the 1987 plans were produced. If the project were to be revived it would need to start from scratch with new plans that better reflect the current state of the land.

Most importantly nothing can get started without sufficient funds. In 1987 the project was estimated to cost $10 million. In the late 80’s this was a significantly large sum of money making this a huge cost to the government. Today’s questions are how much the cost will have increased since 1987 and where the funding will come from.

Another obstacle has been discontinuous management. With changing governments and priorities the motivation for the Redevelopment project has appeared to fade.

*Where does the project stand now?*

Currently the project remains ‘on the shelf’. In 2012 the Ministry of Public Works began work on clearing invasive plants around the perimeter of the site. This was not a part of the 1987 plan but rather in response to public concern related to preserving the existing marsh in the West basin. However the clearing is only phase one of a three-year project to revitalize the Marsh.

*Should the project be revived? (-from the writer’s point of view).*

The Pembroke Marsh basin is still reserved from encroachment by other developments although alternative uses continue to arise. However the open space is what would truly be valuable to the area and development would not have the same social benefits as a park.

There are many good reasons to revive the plans for a park. An open green space would be visually appealing for the area and increase residents’ quality of life. Not only would the vista value for the area and quality of life increase but also likely pride of place would rise, as would the desirability of the area as a place to live. As a compliment to Bernard Park and the Parson’s Road playground the Pembroke Marsh parkland would become a more pleasant and popular place for people to gather and potentially have a positive multiplier effect for area businesses, making them more accessible as parking area was increased. In addition the Marsh could become a new tourist attraction with bird watching and nature walks.

Despite the many benefits from redeveloping Pembroke Marsh, successive governments have not moved this project up to their lists of actions. The redevelopment of the area could actually do a lot of good, and all the work and study done so far should not be allowed to go to waste.

It would help if there were one group composed of diverse members of Government solely focused on the Redevelopment project for the time it takes to be completed. The members of this ‘group’ would need to remain constant or have some system to ensure continuity. This would foster shared knowledge and improved control of the project, and with individuals from different Government departments working closely together, we could expect an increase in productivity and better internal Government communication.

Redeveloping Pembroke Marsh would benefit the environment, the people in the area, business prospects and possibly internal Government processes. Let’s hope the Plan gets revived.

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Many Thanks to the following interviewees:

Interviewee 1 – Dr. Walwyn Hughes, former Vice President, Bermuda Senate

Interviewee 3 – Malcolm Kirkland, Bermuda Sloop Foundation

Interviewee 4 – Valerie Sherwood, F.R.I.C.S.

Interviewee 2 – Larry Williams, Planner, Department of Planning