

Metropulse - April 1999

Reservation Preservation?

In Oak Ridge, ecologists and city planners face off over the future of 20,000 green acres • BY JESSE FOX MAYSHARK

OAK RIDGE—The road around Freil's Bend is narrow and graveled and off-limits to the general public. Beyond a locked gate, along the meandering shoreline of the Clinch River, it winds past a few teetering barns and cabins, the only testaments to the small farming community that once lived here.

Fifty-seven years ago, government agents showed up on the farmers' doorsteps, paid them \$50 an acre for their land, and told them they had two weeks to clear out. It was the beginning of the Manhattan Project and the birth of Oak Ridge. Sections of the original 59,000 acres the government seized were cleared for the now-familiar alpha-numeric plants—K-25, X-10, Y-12. Other areas became the neighborhoods and commercial centers necessary to support them. But much of the Oak Ridge Reservation remained wild, a natural security buffer for the secret city. While the rest of East Tennessee underwent a half-century of roadwork and urbanization, places like Freil's Bend stayed green. In shielding the cradle of the most destructive weapon in history, it simultaneously protected a wide range of flora and fauna from the bulldozer roar of progress.

It also provided a giant natural laboratory known and envied by scientists

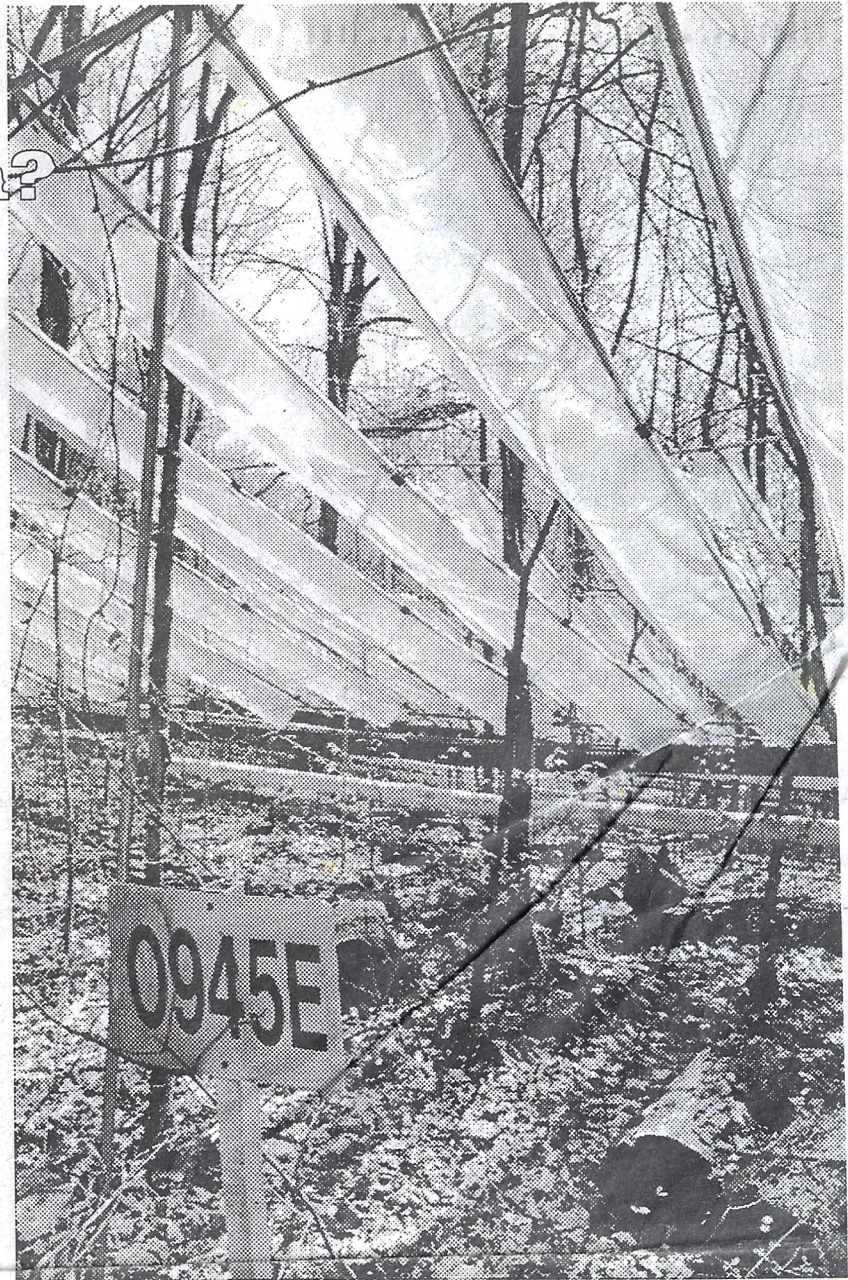


of the remaining 20,000 acres of wilderness for development. (The total reservation, including ORNL plants and clean-up sites, is currently 34,513 acres.) Some Oak Ridge officials see the property as vital to the future of a city beset by federal job cuts and land constraints. But a coalition of scientists and conservationists fear the impact of any sell-off.

"The term that keeps coming to mind is this insidious loss," says Department of Energy biologist Virginia Dale. "Suppose 100 acres or even 10 acres is gone this year—you may be able to select those lands so there would be no major loss. But the thing is, there would be 100 acres the next year and the next year."

Getting out of a navy blue government-owned van on a hill along Freil's Bend, Dev Joslin cocks an ear to the wind. "A prairie warbler!" he says excitedly, picking out a high series of ascending chirps from the many bird calls that ring out of the surrounding trees.

Joslin knows his ornithology; within five minutes, he's identified four different migratory species, birds he says have just arrived from South America for nesting season. The Oak Ridge Reservation is one of



At a research site on the Oak Ridge Reservation, scientists are

ecological work of the past 40 years has been done here. Research on the reservation has produced major studies of air pollution, acid rain, radioactive waste, and, most recently, global warming.

Now, the new residents of the reservation—the wild mink and blue-gray gnat catchers and federally funded biologists—are facing a possible expulsion of their own. The Department of Energy is considering turning over large parts

because they require large undisturbed ranges. One is on a national list of 20 migratory species whose populations are on the decline—in fact, 18 of those 20 species breed on the reservation.

Joslin, a forestry scientist who spent 16 years studying air pollution for TVA before becoming an independent consultant, is the founder of Advocates for the Oak Ridge Reservation. **continued on next page**

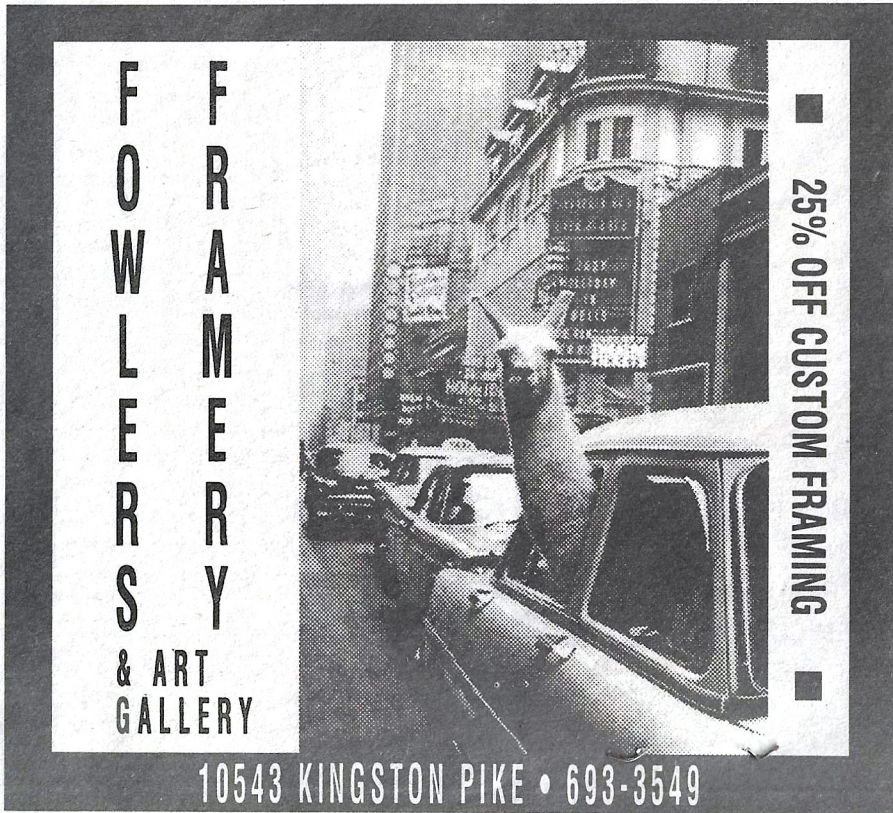
ecosystem.

WHAT: Forum on possible development of land on the Oak Ridge Reservation

WHEN: 9 to 11 a.m., Saturday, April 17

WHERE: Oak Ridge Museum of Science and Energy

WHO: Panel members will include officials from Oak Ridge, economic development groups, and scientists from Oak Ridge National Laboratory. Sponsored by Advocates for the Oak Ridge Reservation.

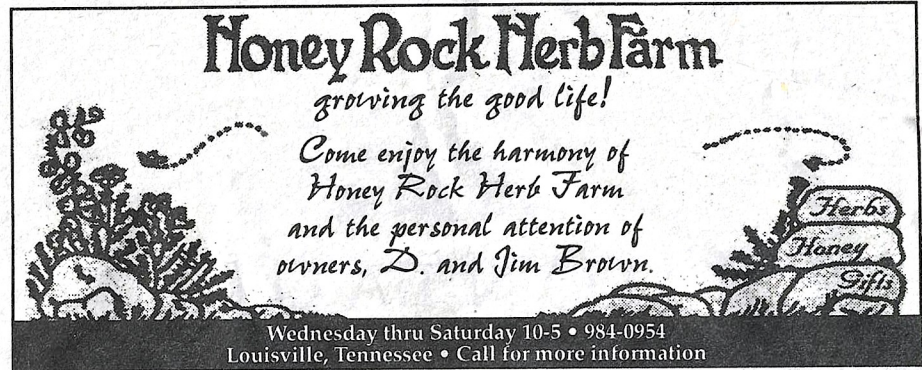


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vation is a wing-shaped island of green in a swamp of urban and agricultural areas.

When Bo McDaniel looks at the Oak Ridge Reservation, though, he doesn't see the forest or the trees—he sees the government jobs leaving town. McDaniel, the city manager for Oak Ridge, says developing some of the reservation's green space is the best bet for attracting new investment.

"Land is presumed to be needed for economic growth, and we are obviously hurting economically here," he says. DOE employment in Oak Ridge has fallen in the 1990s to about 12,000 from a peak of 19,000. The city is feeling the impact. Property tax rates have risen consistently in recent years just to maintain basic services. The only way to end that spiral, McDaniel says, is new industry and new jobs.

"This is not a small issue for East Tennessee," he warns.

McDaniel's position is somewhat supported by the DOE itself, which has been moving in the post-Cold War era to pare down its properties. An article in the leading journal *Science* last fall with the headline "The Great DOE Land Rush?" detailed proposals to sell off parts of several National Environmental Research Parks and set off alarm bells among biologists nationwide.

A 1997 audit by the DOE's inspector general argued that environmental science is outside the agency's core mission and recommended shucking one-quarter of its research park property—about \$126 million worth of land. At ORNL, the report identified 16,000 acres on the reservation as "excess." McDaniel recently proposed that the Oak Ridge City Council ask DOE to turn over 4,100 of those acres to the city. He says the agency has a longstanding obligation to help Oak Ridge become "self-sufficient."

The seven-member council has yet to act, but at least one member—Mayor Walt Brown—is skeptical.

"I don't agree with it," Brown says. "I think we should focus on providing utilities to the existing industrial sites we have in western Oak Ridge. We currently have about 5,000 acres if you add them all up which we don't have utilities and infrastructure for."

Those include the Clinch River breeder reactor (which was in the running for a Mercedes-Benz plant but lost out to Alabama) and a 1,200-acre site that was deforested in the early '90s for a Boeing missile plant that never materialized—an example often cited by opponents to more development. Brown says at the moment, all he would ask DOE for is another 30 to 50 acres adjacent to an existing industrial park on Bethel Valley Road. But he won't speculate on the stances of other City Council members. The Council has scheduled a work session next month on McDaniel's proposal. Meanwhile, AFORR is sponsoring a forum on the issue this weekend.

One forum participant will be Billy Minser, a forestry research associate at the University of Tennessee and a former president of the Foothills Land Conservancy. Minser grew up in Oak Ridge, and he has walked, hunted, and done research on the reservation. He's convinced no amount of development will ever make it more valuable than it is in its natural state.

"It's a wild tract of land now and has been for 50 years," he says. "And seeing that the East Tennessee Valley is almost totally urbanized now and there are not many tracts like that, that area is a kind of jewel for the people of this area to enjoy."

Minser recently co-founded the Tennessee Coalition for Public Land to advocate preserving government-owned wilderness—land he says was "bought by your parents and my parents and our grandparents." He cites the opposition to and defeat of a TVA proposal to sell off land around Tellico Lake as evidence that the general public, given a chance, wants to conserve those properties.

"As far as I'm concerned, they're going to have to fight the public to take this land away from the public trust," he says. ☐