



Quiet on the Water

The hassle-free construction of the new Cool Spring Reservoir & Park, the largest public-works project in the history of the city, is a lesson in how to move forward

by Michael Pollock

photos by Les Kipp

The gates to the new Cool Spring Reservoir & Park opened without much fanfare on Aug. 8. Resident Sally O'Byrne remembers it well. She'd been waiting more than three and a half years for the day, documenting the construction along the way with her camera.

But the space—at \$23.4 million, it's the largest public-works project ever completed by the city—ties into a history of community that goes far beyond three and a half years.

The original reservoir was built in 1875, after the city purchased six and a half acres of land—Ursuline Academy and Park Place to the north, Jackson Street to the east, 10th Street to the south, and Franklin Street to the west—for just under \$57,000 in 1872. Caesar A. Rodney, nephew of the famous rider, owned a home in the area nicknamed "Cool Spring"; the name was adopted by the reservoir and, eventually, the neighborhood. The reservoir contained two basins, each holding 20 million gallons of water, and is responsible for

serving 15,000 residents in the south and east sections of the city, the downtown business district, and the Riverfront.

Years passed. By the early 2000s, federal drinking-water standards had changed, requiring the reservoir to be sealed off to prevent contamination, algae growth, and graffiti. Homeland-security issues in the wake of 9/11 also urged that the open-water reservoir be covered. The construction of a new basin and tank was now necessary.

Due to improvements in technology and water flow, the new reservoir would be located in the south basin and only take up part of the original site. There was still the matter of what to do with the north basin.

A project of this size and scope can get messy fast, and it's not just the construction phase that causes stress. The design and planning calls for approval and smooth integration, which means working with city departments and the neighborhood itself.

To do this, Cool Spring and the

city decided to hold a landscape-design competition. Working with Philadelphia-based planning group Hurley-Franks & Associates to develop criteria, they sought proposals from seven design firms, eventually choosing the Pennoni/EDAW team, who suggested turning the north basin into a residential plaza.

"The city was committed to developing the replacement tank and surface improvements in a way that complemented the surrounding residential neighborhood," Angie Dixon, an associate planner at Hurley-Franks, says.

"It was important to us that there be an open-water feature included," says Claire Zahradnik, a Cool Spring resident for 23 years who was a member of the working group charged with choosing a design for the north basin. "The water was such an important part of the neighborhood. It was the background for everything. To not have it in the

park would make it too unfamiliar." Concerns about lighting, water, and overall safety were also addressed.

The results, spread over 12.5 acres, were a covered 10-million-gallon tank in the south basin, and a park, featuring a pond, a circular path with lights, benches, and a field, in the north basin.

The construction of the new reservoir tank totaled \$18.6 million. The park was another \$4.8 million. Once the project began moving forward, however, it was hardly noticeable that the most costly public-works project in the history of the city of Wilmington was even taking place.

Chalk that up to the strength of partnership—between city and neighborhood, between neighborhood and business, and between business and city.

"Even though this was the largest and most complex public-works project in the city's history, the work was completed in a remarkably smooth fashion, thanks largely to

the partnership between the city, the contractors, and the residents of the Cool Spring community," Mayor Baker says. "By working together from the planning stages through the years of construction, everyone stayed focused on the long-term benefits. The results of this unique collaboration are not only better management and quality of our drinking water, but also a beautiful new city park that generations can enjoy."

"There were a lot of hands in motion here," says O'Byrne, who, like Zahradnik, also participated in the working group. O'Byrne watched the project unfold from her home on Franklin Street, right across from the plaza. For two months early on, more than 200 trucks were coming and going daily. "But the work was completed seamlessly," she says. "You didn't hear or read anything negative about it, because there wasn't any controversy to speak of. It was quiet the whole time."



PARK LIFE The new Cool Spring reservoir occupies the south basin. On the north basin, pictured here, a park has been built, complete with a circular walking path, adequate lighting, benches, a field, and a pond. It opened to the public on Aug. 8. "There were a lot of hands in motion here," Cool Spring resident Sally O'Byrne says. "But you didn't hear or read anything negative about it, because there wasn't any controversy to speak of."

