



**St. Louis** — Mayor Francis Slay and former Sen. John Danforth, hoping to revamp the city's riverfront, want to convince the public and the federal government there is only one way to do it: obtain part of the Arch grounds.

Taking land from the National Park Service would be rare, if not unprecedented. It would require not only an act of Congress, but also broad political and public support.

The National Park Service owns the 91 acres of the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial that includes the Arch, an underground museum, park grounds and the Old Courthouse.

Two years after Slay asked the Danforth Foundation to consider ways to boost the riverfront, they've decided nothing significant can happen without using some of the Arch grounds.

"As long as we assume those 91 acres can't be touched, there is really nothing we can do," said Danforth, a Republican senator from Missouri from 1976 to 1995 and member of the family that owned Ralston-Purina who now works on civic projects. "We might do something cosmetic, but nothing big can happen if we don't free up real estate."

The mayor believes St. Louis needs to build on the success of other downtown projects. Right now, he says, the city is wasting two of its treasures: the Arch and the riverfront.

"The Arch has served this area reasonably well over time, but we have not taken full advantage of this great asset," said Slay, who made riverfront development a major goal of his second term. "People go to the Arch and they leave. We need to make it more engaging."

Danforth called it an "embarrassment" that the Arch grounds and Interstate 70 have become barriers between the city and the Mississippi River.

Turning to view the Arch grounds from the 35th-floor offices of the Bryan Cave law firm, where he and Slay outlined their idea to the Post-Dispatch on Tuesday, Danforth said: "Do you see any sign of human life?"

## **MORE**

**Arch superintendent moving to National Mall**

**Danforth Foundation report on downtown development**

**POLL: How long will it take to complete a downtown development plan?**

**TODAY'S TALK: Riverfront redevelopment -- A real plan, or pie-in-the-sky?**

**The Gateway Arch: Celebrating 40 years**

**GRAPHIC: A plan for the Arch grounds?**

Danforth, a partner in the firm, said he wasn't interested in "entertainment for the sake of fun. We want something that transforms our image of ourselves and transforms the rest of the world's image of St. Louis."

Slay and Danforth were careful to say that nothing about their idea constitutes a specific plan. Among the general possibilities, they said, are an amphitheater, cafes and restaurants, fountains, bicycle rentals, sculptures and an aquarium.

Still, their announcement could spark a heated debate, pitting civic leaders against advocates of keeping the 40-year-old Arch landscape intact.

When City Hall agreed to lease part of Forest Park to Barnes-Jewish Hospital earlier this year, the deal nearly collapsed amid concerns that ceding green space would create a dangerous precedent. That was about land already owned by the city that many people didn't even realize was part of the park.

Danforth acknowledged that the issue of taking over Arch land that features open fields, trees and two lakes could become testy.

"There are going to be people who see this as sacred ground — that not one blade of grass should be conveyed to anyone," Danforth said.

Slay has asked three people to move the idea forward and craft a plan for the public and Congress to consider: Walter Metcalfe, a lawyer with Bryan Cave who was a key player in the drive to build the Edward Jones Dome; Robert Archibald, president of the Missouri Historical Society; and Peter Raven, director of the Missouri Botanical Garden.

"The only way this is going to be done is if there is enormous public support in St. Louis," Danforth said.

The idea has at least one Washington advocate in Sen. Claire McCaskill, who signaled Tuesday that she would vouch for the plan.

"I'm very supportive of what Sen. Danforth and Mayor Slay are trying to do," McCaskill said through a spokesperson.

Neither Sen. Christopher "Kit" Bond nor Rep. William Lacy Clay, whose district includes the Arch, could be reached for comment.

### **UNPRECEDENTED**

David Barna, a spokesman for the National Park Service in Washington, said he cannot think of any instance in which the federal government gave up parkland. The only comparison he could muster is a push to expand an airport runway in Wyoming's Grand Teton park, a fight that has been ongoing for years.

"It is very difficult to take property out of the national park system," Barna said. "It's hard for me to even think of other examples. But we do what Congress wishes us to do."

The park service does not take an official position on pending legislation until a congressional hearing. But Peggy O'Dell, superintendent of the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, said she was surprised by the idea.

"The Arch grounds are part of the national memorial," O'Dell said. "They were designed very specifically to complement the structure of the Arch itself."

Danforth and Slay emphasized they were not criticizing the National Park Service for maintaining the grounds as "passive" space.

"The park service believes it's following the will of Congress," Danforth said. "That's why it will take an act of Congress to transfer any land from the park service."

The Danforth Foundation set out two years ago to find out how to transform the riverfront. One of the early ideas floated was to build islands in the river that could be developed or terraces along the riverfront.

But Danforth said they wouldn't work, largely because of errant barges and threats of flooding. The Mississippi's tendency to flood, in fact, is a major barrier to new development along its bank.

After the foundation spent \$2 million on studies, its conclusion came down to the need to obtain land from the wide Arch grounds well above the river. In 1993, the record flood reached only halfway up the grand riverfront staircase.

### **NEXT STEP?**

If the city could obtain Arch territory, it could justify one of the region's most-discussed downtown improvements: a deck, or "lid," over a three-block stretch of the Interstate 70 depressed lanes. The deck would encourage freer flow to and from the Arch grounds.

That project — early estimates place the price tag at \$90 million — would require two acres from the park anyway for tunnel-ventilation and other equipment, Danforth said.

He and the mayor were careful not to propose seeking a specific portion of the grounds and said a special public district could be created to safeguard use of the transferred land.

Danforth did say that the middle third, which includes the Arch and its immediate open surroundings, shouldn't be touched, but that some part of the remaining two-thirds to the north and south could be developed.

Slay likened the idea to Chicago's newly developed Millennium Park on its lakefront, which opened in 2004 with a music pavilion, skating rink and bicycle rentals.

That would be a departure from the original idea of the wide-open riverfront memorial to Thomas Jefferson that dates to 1933, when civic leader Luther Ely Smith proposed a riverfront park in honor of President Thomas Jefferson.

Two years later, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed an order designating the

area as part of the National Park system and city voters adopted a bond issue for land clearance.

The old warehouses and commercial district that crowded along the old steamboat levee were cleared by 1941, but Eero Saarinen's Arch design wasn't chosen until 1948 and was not completed until 1965.

Part of Saarinen's original idea included museums and other uses on the grounds, all of which disappeared before the final plan was adopted.

**toneil@post-dispatch.com | 314-340-8132**

**jwagman@post-dispatch.com | 314-622-3580**