

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

One St. Louis icon takes on another

By Jake Wagman

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Former Senator John Danforth poses for a portrait near his office in the Metropolitan Square Building.

(John L. White/P-D)

John Claggett Danforth

Age: 71

Day job: Partner at Bryan Cave law firm

Passion: Heading the Danforth Foundation, which has listed over \$217 million in assets

Political experience: Missouri Attorney General, 1969-1976; U.S. Senate, 1976-1995; U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, 2004-2005

Public can join in

The National Park Service will soon issue a newsletter with a schedule of public meetings at which management changes and options for the Arch grounds will be discussed.

ST. LOUIS — John Danforth has presided over the funeral of a president, groomed a Supreme Court justice, investigated the government's response to the Waco siege, tangled with the religious right and tackled civil war in Sudan.

The former U.S. senator, Missouri attorney general and ordained minister — not to mention author, diplomat and philanthropist — has been staring down his latest challenge from his office in the 35th floor of downtown's tallest building. It's hard not to be impressed by the sweeping view of the Gateway Arch and Mississippi River.

But what Danforth sees is a waste of space. A spectacular monument surrounded by a vacant and isolated landscape that offers visitors little to do besides stare up at the span before heading back to their car.

His push for a pedestrian "lid" to make the area more accessible has proved complicated. His idea to take control of Arch ground from the federal government was met with skepticism. And, so far, his attempts to influence the national park bureaucracy have ruffled feathers and yielded only incremental progress.

Now, Danforth is poised to pour tens of millions of his family's fortune into reshaping the Arch grounds by adding something with cultural gravitas to the site — a museum, perhaps — that he hopes will bring lasting luster to St. Louis.

But does one St. Louis icon have enough to change the St. Louis icon? Danforth is prepared to find out.

'A FEW REALLY GREAT THINGS'

By plenty of measures, Danforth has an enviable job. He enjoys partner status at one of the region's most prestigious law firms, Bryan Cave, where his office overlooking the river is filled with pictures of family.

His primary focus is the Danforth Foundation, formed from the wealth accrued by his grandfather, William H. Danforth, who founded the Ralston Purina Co. (The company's checkerboard logo can be found as a diagram in William Danforth's book, "I Dare You!")

These days, the family business is giving away money — and business is booming. Witness the Danforth Campus at Washington University and the Donald Danforth Plant Science Center in Creve Coeur.

According to the most recent available tax records, the Danforth Foundation has more than \$217 million in assets. Much of that money will go to plant research, Danforth and his older brother, Dr. William H. Danforth Jr., chancellor emeritus of Washington University, have said.

The rest, though, is looking for a home.

"The Danforth Foundation has no interest in continuing to exist forever," Jack Danforth says in his trademark baritone. "What we have thought — particularly my brother and I have thought — is that what we want to do is a few really great things."

One of those things is to transform the Arch grounds, which Danforth bemoans as "disgraceful." It's not that he doesn't love the Arch. He just dislikes nearly everything around it, from the desolate levee to the passive landscape to the "stuffed buffalo" in the visitor's center — especially, for some reason, the stuffed buffalo.

"You cannot have this great treasure — that's the Arch — and surround it by junk," Danforth said. "The highway is junk. The riverfront is now junk. The grounds of the Arch are zilch. There is nothing there."

The common thread through Danforth's political ventures is that they have all, eventually, led him back to his home and family in St. Louis. When he stepped down as America's envoy to the United Nations, he wrote in his 2004 resignation letter to the president that he wanted to spend more time with his wife, Sally — "the girl of my dreams."

"I loved the Senate. But there was never ever a minute when I thought Washington was my home," Danforth said. "I never became a Redskins fan."

AN APPEAL TO CONGRESS?

For some, though, Danforth's passion borders on paternalism. And not everyone appreciates his blunt assessments — something even his handlers seem to recognize. After a recent interview, a Danforth Foundation spokesman asked a reporter to come back in the room to clarify that Danforth does not think trees — which make up much of the Arch grounds — are "junk."

Others are quick to point out that, as a national park, the Arch grounds belongs to the United States, not just St. Louis.

When Danforth proposed taking local control of the Arch grounds eight months ago, the announcement spurred a flurry of e-mails from local National Park Service officials, who were apparently not given early notice.

"I am so sorry to see the news in today's paper," wrote a local park service officer, Diana Allen, in an e-mail last summer to two colleagues. "Let's remember that the keepers of the sanctity of the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial extend well beyond the city limits of St. Louis."

Danforth's involvement with the Arch began in 2005 when Mayor Francis Slay asked him to study a way to redevelop the riverfront and connect the area with the rest of downtown by putting a pedestrian lid over the depressed lanes of Interstate 70. After dedicating at least \$2 million to studying the issue, Danforth has concluded that nothing can be done without help from the federal government.

If the park service does not cooperate, Danforth's current plan could require going directly to Congress for control of some of the grounds.

There is precedent for such an arrangement — nonprofit groups control national park land in both Philadelphia and San Francisco.

Still, it's a tall order, one that already has Danforth flexing his political muscles. Members of the area's delegation in Washington have offered mixed reactions to his idea. Regardless, in an election year, it's hardly a priority.

In December, Danforth invited U.S. Secretary of the Interior Dirk Kempthorne, whose department includes the park service, to tour the Arch grounds. Kempthorne, the former governor of Idaho, served in the Senate with Danforth.

"He said this is the worst entry to a national park property that there is," Danforth recalled.

MIGRATION MUSEUM AN IDEA

Whether Kempthorne's visit amounts to more than just a courtesy remains to be seen. No matter who gets elected to the White House in November, Kempthorne figures to be out of office by next year.

More likely to stay on the federal payroll is the new superintendent of the Arch, Tom Bradley, who took over last month after his predecessor was tapped to run the National Mall in Washington.

Bradley, who has not met Danforth, is taking a wait-and-see approach.

"We're stewards of National Park Service land, held for the American people," Bradley said. "For that to change, it's going to require Congress to change it."

The door creaked open earlier this month with an announcement that the park would soon begin taking suggestions on changes to its management plan, which has been in place since 1960, five years before the Arch was complete.

Though Danforth was encouraged by the news, his enthusiasm was tempered by the type of improvements listed in the park service's announcement: new walkways, fresh restrooms and potential modifications to security check points.

"If it is food stands, and walkways, and interpretative booths and the like, then, in my view at least, that is not enough," Danforth said. "If all we're are doing is saying to people, 'Come to St. Louis. Go to our Arch. Take a snapshot. And climb down, if you want, into our subterranean museum and see our stuffed buffalo,' then I don't think we are giving people enough."

Danforth does not have a firm plan yet of what he wants. But last August the mayor tapped a Danforth confidante, veteran lawyer Walter L. Metcalfe Jr., to head a committee that could forge a strategy. Their vision: an international design competition for a cultural institution that could open by October 2015 — the 50th anniversary of the Arch.

Metcalfe, who also works at Bryan Cave, echoes Danforth's sentiment that, although the Arch is sacrosanct, the ground around it is not.

"The Eiffel Tower is a piece of sculpture, but that's doesn't mean they should tear down the Champs-Élysées and everything around it," Metcalfe said.

Robert R. Archibald, president of the Missouri Historical Society, also sat on the Metcalfe panel. He has floated the possibility of building a "Migration Museum" on the grounds, reflecting the site's position on a major river and the city's pioneer legacy.

"If you had to pick a point that is symbolic of our experience as migratory people, this is it," Archibald said.

Like many St. Louis residents, Archibald has seen riverfront ideas come and go — from plans for a set of floating terraces on the Mississippi to an aquarium near the landing.

Does he think this latest effort will change the tide? He is optimistic that Danforth's support could make the difference.

"He has as good a shot as anyone I can think of in our region," Archibald said.

DANFORTH: THINK BIG

At 71, Danforth may have learned a valuable lesson in philanthropy. His last major initiative, St. Louis 2004 — a long push to mark the 100th anniversary of the World's Fair — was criticized as unfocused and meandering, taking on everything from after-school programs to cemetery upkeep.

"The only way to have any impact is to narrow your scope," Danforth says now.

Danforth believes that St. Louis is behind his latest effort. The foundation commissioned a poll that found three out of four St. Louis area residents surveyed favor developing the Arch grounds to provide new activities. Danforth also has letters of support from labor, business, civic and government leaders in the area.

If the people of St. Louis want something new on the Arch grounds, Danforth strongly hints he is willing to foot much of the bill.

But he dares St. Louis to think big — and, please, no stuffed buffaloes.

"All I'm saying is if we're going to take our family's legacy — what's left of it — and put it into something," Danforth says. "I want it to be something worth putting into."

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