



Closed

Location, money woes result in shuttering gardens on Saturday

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NEARLY 20 years ago, a group of Northsiders worked tirelessly to improve a once popular Jackson landmark.

Now, their efforts are fading with Mynelle Gardens falling victim to location and city financial woes.

The gardens are now closed on Saturdays. The Jackson City Council recently voted to close the gardens on Saturdays.

City officials maintain that the move is not because the park is on the decline, but rather was a decision to help with staffing and finances.

The facility will still open, with advanced booking, to host special events,

like weddings and neighborhood meetings.

Some residents, like Sheila Palmer, who led efforts to revitalize Mynelle years ago, believes the park is succumbing to its poor surroundings.

"It's a shame. A lot of brides don't want to go out there," she said.

The gardens are located at 4763 Clinton Blvd., in West Jackson.

At one time, Mynelle was a sought-after place to photograph brides, hold weddings and receptions, school field trips and enjoy afternoons outside.

However, attendance, at least in the last three years, has been dismal.

For fiscal year 2018, Mynelle logged just 205 visitors and two weddings, said

Parks and Recreation Director Ions Harris.

The fiscal year ended on September 30.

THE ADMINISTRATION recommended closing on Saturdays, because it is the least busy that day. The gardens average about two visitors on that day, he said.

"A staff person is there all day. For people to come in eight hours on Saturday for two (visitors), it doesn't make sense," he said.

Mynelle has four employees — two administrative staffers and two maintenance workers who maintain the

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grounds.

JACKSON CHIEF Administrative Officer Robert Blaine said the decision will save staffing and utility costs, as well as cut down on overtime expenses.

He said parks department employees who work Saturdays either must take time off during the week or get paid overtime for working the weekend.

"This was done for more of a staffing reason," Blaine said. "We're trying to be more efficient with our resources."

The council approved the measure on a 7-0 vote, with Ward One Councilman Ashby Foote and Ward Seven Councilwoman Virgi Lindsay voting in favor.

"They said that (Saturday) was the slowest traffic (day). I was surprised but that's what they said," Foote said.

Mynelle began as a private garden created by Mynelle Westbrook Hayward. It, along with the Westbrook House, was obtained by the capital city in 1973. Over the years, both facilities suffered from a lack of maintenance, brought about by a lack of municipal funding.

In the early 2000s, a group of Northsiders came together to help revive the garden and the Westbrook house.

Jonelle Primos, a relative of the garden's namesake, formed the Mynelle Gardens Botanical Society. And Palmer, who retired about six years ago, served as the group's fundraiser. The society raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for improvements.

"We wanted to make that a statuary garden. There are about six or seven beautiful pieces of statuary there," she said. "We put in some benches and waste (receptacles), provided for replacement of plants, developed new portions of the gardens."

The society brought in master gardeners, as well as prominent landscapers, like Neil Odenwald, professor

emeritus of landscape architecture at Louisiana State University, to help.

"We would alter the garden to what he said," Palmer recalled. "We brought in quite a bit of money, private money, to buy plants and statuary."

Between 2004 and 2014, the year the group was abolished, the society raised \$346,000, according to the Mississippi Secretary of State's Web site.

Palmer said it grew harder to raise money later on as the park's surroundings deteriorated.

MYNELLE IS LOCATED about two miles from the Jackson Zoological Park, a place that has also suffered from dwindling fund-raising and attendance because of its surroundings. Between I-220 and the zoo's main entrance, Capitol is lined with dilapidated structures.

Mynelle's surroundings are significantly better, with only one dilapidated business and several thriving businesses located around it.

That dilapidated structure, a burnt out house, is located across from Mynelle's main entrance at the corner of Clinton Boulevard and Colebrook Avenue.

Harris didn't know what would happen to that structure, but believes recent improvements, combined with reduced entry fees and increased marketing, could help boost Mynelle's attendance.

Recently, the city repainted the facility's main structure as well as installed new flooring.

And last year, the city lowered admission rates to the park. Entrance fees are \$5 for adults and \$3 for senior citizens and children ages four to 12.

This year, the city is expected to begin a new marketing campaign to promote the facility, he explained.

"We're trying to do what we can to increase its image," Harris said. "We've had about the same number of visitors a year for the last three years. Maybe we'll have more this year."