

A place to call home

Despite hurdles, dream of Jewish community campus became reality

BY TONYIA CONE

SPECIAL TO THE JEWISH OUTLOOK

By the mid-1990s, the groundwork was laid for the Dell Jewish Community Campus.

After a few exciting years when the idea of a place for Austin's Jewish community to gather was planted in the community, land was bought and money was raised, progress toward creating a campus began to stall and people began to sense that nothing was happening with the project.

Sandy Dochen, president of the Jewish Federation for two years in the mid-'90s, explained that a lot of false starts occurred during that time, with at least two groundbreaking, including one attended by then-Mayor Kirk Watson, and a lot of continuously revised plans.

Many different issues were at stake, Dochen said, as well as some opposition to gathering the organized Jewish community on one campus.

"I remember a congregational leader opposed to the project who said, if you put all the Jews on one campus, it will be like the ghetto. Somebody could come in and get rid of the whole community," Dochen said.

"It took a long time to work people's attitudes so we could do this, to raise money, plan this and do something together," he said. "We were going from crawling to running in a marathon. We hadn't done this before in this community. We needed a lot of people on the relay team to make it run as well as it could."

Michael Deitch, treasurer of the Jewish Federation during that time, explained that fundraising began to stall because people were frustrated that money was spent on soft costs like consultants, but bulldozers were not moving.

Also, people were concerned that the Federation did not have the skill set at the time necessary to actually build the campus.

Making things worse, projected costs rapidly escalated from \$4 million to \$9 million.

"It was a \$15-to-20 million project by the time everyone got their two cents in, just for the first phase," Deitch said. "There was real animosity, mistrust and anger in this time frame."

Some major donors stepped in and formed the 40 Acre Group.

Sandy Gottesman, one of the 40 Acre Group members, explained that they knew Congregation Agudas Achim, Congregation Beth Israel and the Federation had capital needs and were moving toward capital campaigns.

"It made more sense to have one coordinated effort," Gottesman said, adding that group members wanted accountability for the project to increase and for the community to get the most value for the dollars invested.

Deitch said the Federation, on the other hand, believed they had the perspective of the entire community and knew what the community wanted in a campus. Federation leaders did not feel that, just because a family gave a lot of financial support, they should tell the Federation how or what to build.

The two groups eventually reached a deadlock and the Federation told the 40 Acre Group to take their money and leave, Deitch said, but around 1996 the two groups realized the project was important enough to reach a compromise.

After negotiating for a year to try to find a way to move forward, a three-member committee called the DJCC Development Corp. was formed to oversee fundraising for and construction of the campus.

Deitch was selected to represent the interests of the Federation, the late Angela Topfer represented large donors and Andy Pastor was included as a mutually agreeable party.



Andy Pastor

Pastor said, "We were three distinct personalities with different skill sets. We all got along very well, had a lot of fun working together and had a common vision of getting it built the right way." He came to the table with development expertise, Pastor said, while Deitch knew the legal side of things and Topfer was an unusual contributor who put her time and money into the project and was passionate about building it the right way.

"It was a lot of fun, and a big part of that was because we had autonomy," Pastor said.

The group's obligation, he said, was to be a good fiduciary and to build the campus within budget.

"We were given a job and left alone to build it," Pastor said, emphasizing that the most challenging work was done by those who began championing the cause in the early 1990s and did the emotional work of gathering community input, building support for the campus and raising funds for the project.

"There were two years of construction," he said, "yet there were nine years of work

leading up to it, which was done by others."

Deitch explained that, once the Federation and the 40 Acre Group reached agreement, Agudas Achim and Beth Israel entered the conversation.

"The overall issue was, how does everybody build what they want to build, and where does the money go," Deitch said, noting that there was a perception that some major donors were aligned with each congregation and a question of who



Michael Deitch

was looking after the interests of the entire Jewish community.

"Nobody thought we'd sing 'Kumbaya' together on the campus," Deitch said, but the community had to figure out how to get along and how to deal with common maintenance issues. One of the issues addressed was building two education buildings, one primarily for Agudas Achim and another for Beth Israel. Originally, it was thought that each synagogue would have its own standalone education building, but those involved realized the economy did not exist to support that and that the buildings would serve multiple purposes.

The Austin Jewish Academy, then housed at Agudas Achim's old location on Bull Creek Road and looking for a new site, became a stakeholder, too.

Ultimately, Agudas Achim moved to the Campus.

Lawrence Maze, then Agudas Achim

president, explained that joining the Campus was a vision of congregation leadership and then-Rabbi Marty

Pasternak and from the beginning Agudas Achim knew they would relocate.

Maze said the Campus was a good fit for the congregation because some members, many of whom live in Northwest Austin, are shomer shabbas and wanted to be able to walk to their synagogue.

Being part of a community was an important value to the congregation, Maze said, and joining the Campus ensured that Agudas Achim would play a key role in the broader Jewish community.

"It was an interesting time for us," Maze said. "It was not even a closed vote. We didn't even think of staying at our old location. It was never a question for us."

The timing could not have been better to prepare for the move. With a boom-

ing economy and a growing, enthusiastic congregation, Agudas Achim was able to raise almost all the funding they needed to build their space. A small note was necessary to cover the rest.

In March 2001, Agudas Achim moved to the Campus.

"That was when life changed here," Maze recalled. "Before then, the Jewish community was tiny. There was a dinky JCC on Jollyville Road. When we moved to the Campus it changed the whole face of the community."

Maze, Agudas Achim's last president at the Bull Creek Road location and its first on the Campus, said that creation of a Jewish day school and the nearby H-E-B Kosher Store attracted more Jews to Austin.

People started recognizing Austin throughout the United States, as its Jewish community became the second-fastest growing in the country at a time when many others were shrinking.

"People who came (to Austin) in the last 10 years take this for granted because it's all they've known," he said. "But for those of us here 20 years or more, it is a miracle walking on that campus every day."

Beth Israel's president at the time, Paul Keeper, announced at the 1998 Kol Nidre service that the congregation — the oldest, largest Jewish congregation in Central Texas — would remain at its Shoal Creek Boulevard location.

Leon Barish, who represented Beth Israel on a communitywide committee formed to discuss rules for ownership of property and buildings on the Campus, said that

one of the issues of concern for his congregation was that land ownership on the Campus was not an option.

If Beth Israel moved to the campus, it would have had a 99-year ground lease.

"As I reported back to congregation leadership, there were significant concerns about the advantages and disadvantages of giving up autonomy at our own place in exchange for being on campus and having to deal with those issues," Barish recalled.

Beth Israel congregants also were concerned about all of Austin's Jewish institutions existing on a single campus.

"There were very strong feelings about being an integral part of the wider Austin community and what it would say about that to be ensconced in a Jewish-only campus," he said. "There are points to be made on both sides of those issues, good and bad. At the end of day, the majority of the



congregation decided it would be better to stay at Shoal Creek than to go on campus.”

Once Beth Israel announced they were not joining the campus, adjustments were made to plans that included the Federation and two synagogues.

With Beth Israel pulling out of discussion, Deitch said, there was a concern that some donors would no longer support the campus, but almost all of them continued to contribute.

By November 1998, a signed agreement was formed that spelled out technical details, including what to build, how it would be built, how it would be paid for and how the money would be credited.

Around that same time, the DJCC Development Corp. recognized they could not raise any more money on promises alone; they needed to turn some dirt before they could continue fundraising.

Although key donors had made significant donations, it was not enough for construction so the group had to negotiate financing.

Deitch said it was a period full of technical details and negotiating with contractors.

Through all this, the community was also hammering out details with the Northwest Austin Civic Association before campus construction could begin.

“There was a lot of fear of the unknown back then because people who grew up in cities with JCCs knew what an amazing facility a JCC was and what a positive for the community,” Deitch said. “People who didn’t have that experience thought it would be a high traffic count country club.”

Richard Suttle, the land use lawyer who handled the zoning case, said that when the Michael and Susan Dell bought the land, it was zoned for a single-family residence.

“The objective became, how do you get a community center, places of worship and a school permitted on single-family land,” Suttle recalled.

When the zoning case was filed, everyone involved thought it would be rezoned as needed, Suttle said, but it made some neighbors, who viewed it as a commercial incursion into their neighborhood, nervous about traffic the campus would bring to the area, light pollution and details like the height of on-campus buildings.

When this turned into a neighborhood vs. landowner fight, the neighborhood association acquired a valid petition, which meant instead of getting a majority of Austin City Council members to approve the campus rezoning, six out of seven council members had to vote for it.

That’s when the DJCC Development Corp. turned to Suttle, who specializes in the city system.



LBJ Humanitarian Award recipients Sandy and Carol Dochen with children Katie and Andrew, on Sept. 13 at Fall Fusion, a JCC fundraiser at the Dell Jewish Community Campus.

PUBLIC EYE PHOTOGRAPHY: BETTE REDMAN REICHMAN

Dochen said, “It’s always a challenge dealing with neighborhood groups in Austin. We are neighbors, too. We didn’t want a concrete jungle with a lot of noise as well. We wanted it to be a high-quality, neighborhood gathering place.”

The process involved a lot of work with not only the neighborhood association but also city staff and City Council, as well as a lot of compromise.

The height of buildings and plans for schools on campus were limited, special lighting was installed and plans for two lighted baseball fields were revised.

The buffer area next to Greystone Drive by the entrance to the campus was increased from 25 feet to 50; the square footage to be constructed was scaled back; and entrance usage, outside activity hours and use of loudspeakers were limited.

Suttle also recalled funny little hang-ups, like the DJCC Development Corp. had to agree to a wildlife relocation plan because the neighborhood was worried about what would become of all the raccoons, possums and deer once the land was developed.

“They were grasping at straws, trying to throw a roadblock in there,” Suttle said.

Deitch said that the DJCC Development Corp. made many concessions but it was never enough.

“There was a sense that it was too intensive a use. An awareness that there would be two synagogues — that was of additional concern to some neighborhood people. That was interesting because we don’t use the synagogue as intensively as we use the JCC,” he said.

When the neighbors heard about 800 members of one temple and 500 at the other, it sounded like a lot of extra traffic because they were unaware of how the different facilities would be used, he added.

At the end of a two-year battle, most of the neighborhood association’s concerns were addressed and the DJCC Development Corp. eventually came up with a way to get around a zoning case by getting approval from the planning commission for a conditional use site plan with a three-year lifespan.

As the issue moved toward City Council, Deitch recalled, both sides mobilized and many community members actively supported the campus.

“Hundreds of people showed up and overflowed City Council chambers. People signed up to speak, and dozens of people spoke for their allotted time,” he said. “The Jewish community turned out

in full force. It was a very unifying factor.”

Suttle explained that the zoning case was unique in that the Jewish community campus was a community benefit. The DJCC Corp. secured permanent zoning from the City Council in 2008.

Those fighting the campus were worried that their home values would decrease; to the contrary, however, examples of similar campuses from other areas of the nation showed that it would more likely increase their property values.

“I can’t prove it but I think there was an element of anti-Semitism. There was an undercurrent I couldn’t put my finger on. I think a lot of people just didn’t want a Jewish community center there. It wasn’t like we were building retail, an office or apartments, the things that usually get people wound up,” Suttle said. “History’s now shown it is a community benefit.”

By the beginning of 1999, construction was finally underway.

While the community had a lot on their wish list, Deitch said, the DJCC Development Corp. decided to first build what they could afford and what would gener-

ate revenue.

The group knew that such facilities as the fitness center and pool would lead people to join the Jewish Community, Deitch said, so those things were built, while a community services wing that was planned but would not generate revenue, was left out.

Deitch said he took a lot of heat for the pool and they had to redesign the children’s pool midstream.

He also heard a lot of complaints about the kitchen; community members wanted a full-service kitchen but a prep kitchen was built instead.

Construction wrapped up by the end of 1999, and the Dell Jewish Community Campus opened at the start of 2000.

“Construction was the easiest part. Forging alliances, getting interests lined up and getting people to agree on how to go forward was the hard part. It was just a matter of finding the right pieces to fit into the puzzle,” Deitch said.

“Looking back, it was a wonderful outcome,” he said. “What an integral part of the community today that nobody could have imagined at the time. There was worry at the time that we were focusing too much on a physical structure and not enough on the spirit of the community. It helped grow the spirit of the community. It didn’t harm it at all.”

Dochen agreed that the hard work was worthwhile.

“Some of the fun was working with folks from whole community,” he said. “That’s all we wanted: community. We just wanted everyone to collaborate, to be on campus so kids would know one another. It helps people get to know each other across congregations, across the community.”

Dochen said he is proud that the Campus has become a gathering place, not just for the Jewish community, but also for the broader Austin community. Walking out of the gym, he said, he has walked past many events reflecting local diversity, from a Unitarian congregation that used to meet at “The J” on Sundays to Indian association events and quinceañeras (coming-of-age ceremonies for 15-year-old girls in some Hispanic cultures).

“It just makes me feel so good and proud that we’ve all contributed to this community asset that the broader community knows about and takes advantage of. It adds to the diversity of the city. It’s a place where people come together. I love that,” Dochen said. “A cause became a project, and now it’s a lasting community transformation. It really has transformed this community.”

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Tonyia Cone, an Austin-based freelance journalist, is a regular contributor to The Jewish Outlook. Contact her at tonyia76@gmail.com.



Richard Suttle

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— Sandy Dochen,
former president,
Jewish Federation of Austin