

The Improbable Way That Wildwood Came To Be 1986 – 1995

St. Louis County has a very long history, beginning with its formation in 1812. For many decades, St. Louis County was overshadowed by the City of St. Louis, which, at one (1) time, was the eighth largest City in America. However, as the 20th Century began and the tumultuous era of two (2) world wars and the Great Depression followed, times changed, and St. Louis County began to experience growth. The areas adjoining the City of St. Louis started to have new residences, businesses, and institutions built. The initial growth of the inner ring areas was then followed by growth along the major arterial roadway corridors, which were being extended further to the outward reaches of St. Louis County, while also being expanded to accommodate increased use and traffic volumes.

It was in 1948 that St. Louis County Council adopted a major Zoning Ordinance and established zoning district designations for all properties not located within a municipal boundary. The rezoning of properties included categories for residential, commercial, industrial, and open space activities. The major zoning category for the area that would someday become the City of Wildwood was "B" Residence District, which required a minimum of a one (1) acre lot for any new single family dwelling. This one (1) acre minimum lot size was the largest of all of the residential zoning district designations established at that time.

As the demand for housing grew, particularly after the end of World War II, areas of St. Louis County that had once been farmland or hills and valleys of mature woodlands soon became residential subdivisions and commercial centers to support these new residences. In the span from 1950 to 1970, County's population grew from 406,349 to 951,671 residents, a rate of 134%. Correspondingly, in this same twenty (20) year span, the City of St. Louis began a long descent from 856,796 to 622,236 residents, which was then followed by another decade, between 1970 and 1980, where its population experienced decline of 169,151 residents. During this timeframe of twenty (20) years, the character of St. Louis County and, to a large degree, its development and land use policies were determined and have not substantially changed to this day.

Another major update of St. Louis County's Zoning Ordinance occurred in 1954, but did not lead to any substantive alterations in the area that is now Wildwood. However, by 1960, the St. Louis County Council did recognize that growth was actually accelerating and now reaching new locations, which for many years was thought too difficult or too far from employment centers to become sustainable locations for development. In 1962, St. Louis County completed a study called "Guide for Growth," which covered its entire unincorporated area of it and set new parameters for the remaining rural locations, with the establishment of the NU Non-Urban District – a three (3) acre minimum lot requirement for any new single family dwelling. Much of the area that would become Wildwood was designated NU Non-Urban District and intended under this plan to be open space and rural areas in the future. Obviously, this zoning district designation, which also included many areas beyond the outerbelt of that time – Lindbergh Boulevard, would never see full implementation.

With the adoption of the new comprehensive Zoning Ordinance in 1965, which included a new designation of the NU Non-Urban District, intended to be a holding category for almost all land areas located outside the Lindbergh Boulevard Corridor, the rezoning of all properties under St. Louis

County's jurisdiction, growth in the County continued at record paces through the next years. However, as development moved from the inner-ring to North, South, and West County, not all parties were enthusiastically supporting these changes to their landscapes. Problems with overcrowded schools, over-taxed roadway systems, under-developed utility networks, and scarred landscapes led some areas of St. Louis County to object to the status quo.

As growth continued and discontent increased in areas of St. Louis County, many residents sought to break from its control and started to consider annexations and incorporations. These resident-initiated actions were very concerning to St. Louis County officials, but still became reality, when the City of Town and Country annexed three (3), contiguous unincorporated areas in 1977. This annexation led to a protracted legal effort, with the issue ending up at the Missouri Supreme Court, which supported the municipal action, changing the direction of past lower court actions in this regard (1983). Shortly thereafter, Maryland Heights incorporated, and a string of annexations began that threatened the viability of St. Louis County services, particularly those types that only it is enabled to provide to its residents, such as health and justice services, revenue collection, recording, etc. Through legislative actions by Missouri House of Representatives and State Senate, a Boundary Commission was created to oversee the annexation and incorporation activities in St. Louis County.

About this same time, County Executive Gene McNary began a process of planning efforts called *Small Area Studies* to start addressing County resident concerns about the state of land use planning and services in many areas of the unincorporated locations (1980 through 1986). These studies were St. Louis County's commitment to residents in high growth areas that planning would be pre-determined, with compliance to the adopted requirements by the St. Louis County Council. The *Small Area Study* process was then followed by a more extensive set of studies called *Community Area Studies*. These studies again attempted to set parameters for future growth in developing areas, but now had resident participation, thereby creating an expectation that their recommendations would be followed in the future.

Two (2) of these Community Area Studies were completed in the area that is now Wildwood. These studies were the *Pond-Grover Community Area Study* and the *Wild Horse Valley Community Area Study*. Both of these studies were completed between 1990 and 1993. With the completion of these studies, residents now had hope that land use decisions would follow their direction. However, as these studies were being developed, the volunteers that had been selected from the communities of interest to serve in the development of them, who were residents of the area, began to form relationships and discuss the next steps in the event plans were not followed. Many of these residents became the nucleus of the incorporation movement that would follow a few years later.

Despite these planning efforts, St. Louis County never recognized the unique character of this area that became Wildwood until it was too late. Land use policies that had been applied for many years were never modified to reflect the key differences that existed between North County, South County, and West County. These differences were distinctive, but the areas were treated with a one-size fits all approach by St. Louis County that a contingent of committed residents of this area could not accept.

Unfortunately, the second of these two (2) Community Area Studies (*Wild Horse Valley Community Study*) became a more political effort on the part of the homebuilders and other development interests to maintain a status quo, which led to a more divisive outcome from the planning process. Regardless of this process, it became clear from the adoption of the *Pond-Grover Community Area Study* that both the St. Louis County Council and the Planning Commission viewed these studies more as guidelines and believed the recommendations for land use decisions could be changed, if they believed a better outcome could be achieved. This approach on the part of St. Louis County decision-makers was different than expected or explained to participants during both of these processes to develop the plans. Therefore, despite years of cooperative efforts of the residents with St. Louis County officials and plans for the future development of these two (2) areas collectively agreed upon, many of the residents once again had to contend with development policies by this jurisdiction that were not suited to the unique characteristics of this area that became Wildwood.

Along with this situation with St. Louis County Government, another threat that also prompted a group of residents to consider more involvement in their respective futures was a plan by the Missouri Department of Transportation (MoDOT) to consider changing State Route 109 from its current condition to an outerbelt, interstate design that would require land acquisitions from the Rockwoods Reservation and Babler State Park properties and the displacement of several existing residences located in its final alignment. This announcement occurred during the early stages of the *Pond-Grover Community Area Study* process. Such a design standard would be reminiscent of Highway 141 to the east. This proposal led to public outcries and calls for such a project to be stopped, which evolved into the 'Coalition to Save the Greenbelt and Stop the Outerbelt.' This group became, for most intents and purposes, the Committee for the Incorporation of Wildwood, which would lead the effort to bring local government, and its decision-making, to the residents and property owners here, where the impacts occurred each and every day. The history of Wildwood incorporation is rooted in the formation of this citizens' committee in 1992.

The history of Wildwood's incorporation does have several perspectives associated with it. These perspectives are to be expected, when a major action of this nature is proposed, while also being promoted by a grass roots group of participants, i.e., residents of the area. Conversely, another group of individuals formed, holding differing opinions, and questioned the need for a new City, and whether would be successful or not. These factors led to a long and challenging process that included several State Court actions to simply achieve the placement of the question for the requisite vote on a new City before residents of this area of St. Louis County for their consideration. The path to this vote, and the outcome of it, was important to many people, organizations, service districts, utilities, and other governments, which led it to draw region-wide attention and caused concerns in many areas within the proposed City's boundaries.

With the complexity of the incorporation effort and the differing opinions on it, creating a written history of it presents a number of challenges as well. These challenges begin with respecting the opinions of all participants, regardless of their individual positions on the outcome of an incorporation vote. Offering only one perspective in this regard would lessen the importance of the effort and diminish the tireless work of those volunteers on both sides of the issues leading to the desire for or opposition to a new City. Therefore, the authors of this history of Wildwood have transcribed this action of the

incorporation from these perspectives and honors those hours, days, months, and years of discussions, meetings, canvassing, and polling that went into the final conclusion – the formation of a new City called “Wildwood.”

What causes an effort like forming a new City? As many people that are involved in such an undertaking, each of them may have an answer or opinion on this question. Regardless, the roots of this effort to bring local control from County government to the people of this area does have an identifiable lineage and can be traced to several major and key events. This lineage begins with a bang! This sound would be heard from Clayton to Jefferson City and back, when completed.

Before this sequence of events that led to the incorporation effort unfolded, resulting in a vote and the formation of a new City, St. Louis County had laid the foundation for this movement. This foundation was St. Louis County’s lack of a responsive government to the residents that invested in the area and moved to it due to its unique characteristics. The lack of responsiveness covered a wide range of services and responsibilities, including code enforcement, infrastructure replacement, repair, and maintenance, police services, and others. Despite this list of services, the approach of St. Louis County to development of property was often the single most cited reason for an incorporation effort and seemed to galvanized the residents of this area and prepared them for that lineage of events that would shake St. Louis County.

Development proposals submitted in this area that would become the City of Wildwood were being processed by St. Louis County in a manner that ignored the character of it and treated this portion of it in the same manner as any other location or portion of its jurisdiction. This approach meant this area’s woodlands, topography, water features, and soils were being minimized, when major development decisions were made, as if it was not any of those characteristics, but rather all land was level, denude of trees, and impervious to its unique drainage features and runoff patterns. The standard development template of the time could not be absorbed by the physical features of this area, without causing significant and determinantal impacts to this far western region of St. Louis County.

The residents of this area recognized this situation and the disconnect of St. Louis County had in regard to it and began a systematic and thoughtful process of participating in its prescribed public input processes, as much as allowed by them.

Their story begins here ...

If you were in the area of Orrville Road in late 1986 or Wild Horse Elementary School in early 1987, you would have been wondering what all the cars parked along those roads were all about. Had you gone inside the house on Orrville Road or the school on Wild Horse Creek Road you would have found several hundred angry people trying to figure out what was happening to the beautiful area they all called home.

Both these events had been organized by a group that called itself West Chesterfield Citizens for Responsible Development (WCCRD) headed by Maryanne Simmons. Their concerns focused on a proposed development called Wild Horse that was working its way through St. Louis County’s Planning

Commission process. The threat perceived by these citizens was that the high density being called for with lots of less than an acre, had never before been proposed in this area of far West St. Louis County. Three, five and ten acre development had always been the norm.

Citizens began attending Planning & Zoning meetings as well as County Council meetings, all held in Clayton. They grew knowledgeable regarding the County's zoning regulations – many of which were often ignored in favor of the developers who were behind the Wild Horse subdivision. Higher densities meant increased stormwater runoff, a fact that County dismissed. As the future would reveal, especially in the Caulks Creek Watershed, this dismissal would ultimately create catastrophic bridge and road damage.

Note: Need the picture of the Kehrs Mill bridge collapse inserted here.

The ensuing fight with St. Louis County over the Wild Horse subdivision would ultimately be lost, but it would provide the impetus for a groundswell of opposition to the County's disregard for the wishes of its citizens and its obvious blindness to the beautiful landscapes they were allowing to be bulldozed and stripped bare. Old growth trees, some of which were more than 300 years old, were often knocked down and burned.

Note: Need picture of the stacked piles of trees from the Wildwood Video inserted here.

In the years that followed, determined citizens regularly traveled to Clayton, in futile attempts to raise serious and pressing concerns regarding high density developments. In 1988 the Village of Clarkson Valley attempted to annex a portion of what would become Wildwood. The voters in Clarkson Valley voted the issue down, as they were convinced their taxes would increase. An early incorporation effort collapsed, when the main proponent moved from the area.

1990 - 1991

Excerpt from "Redesigning Cities" by Jonathan Barnett, Planners Press, American Planning Association, 2003. With permission.

"In the early 1990s, residents at the western edge of St. Louis County organized to stop the region's third ring-road from running through their neighborhoods. People were saying "Not in my back yard;" but they understood what was wrong with this highway better than the Missouri Transportation Department.

The engineers wanted a new connection so truck traffic could switch from one interstate to another, farther from St. Louis than is possible now. The residents, using common sense and their observations of what happens when other highways are built, concluded that the connecting road would inevitably become a Main Street for new urban development, completely changing their semi-rural residential community,

If you evaluate an outer ring-road as a means of redesigning the St. Louis metropolitan region, rather than as a convenience for truck drivers, it is a truly bad idea.”

Everything changed in 1990 when MODOT released plans to “improve” Highway 109. These improvements were the creation of a 12 lane divided interstate highway (the Outerbelt). It would run through existing subdivisions, and most alarming, would destroy major portions of Rockwood Reservation (a wildlife habitat – the first natural conservation area in Missouri) and another crown jewel, Babler State Park. The outcry could be heard all the way to Jefferson City.

A diverse number of neighborhood associations, including the WCCRD, joined in a concerted effort to stop these “improvements.” As their efforts begin to pay off, with MODOT revising and then eliminating their plans, it began to dawn on some that there were many diverse groups planning our future. And none of those various interest groups included anyone from the area.

In particular, development in St. Louis County continued its march westward, with the approval of numerous high density subdivisions over the objections of local citizens who were regularly pleading with the County to make use a more thoughtful approach to the rezoning process. Even employees of the County’s Planning Department recognized the environmental destruction that was taking place. His efforts to provide site plans in advance of Planning Commission meetings to concerned citizens allowed sound, fact-based objections to be heard at both the Commission and the Council meetings.

Yet even with these efforts, the County approved thousands of building permits.

Meanwhile, adjoining cities, Ellisville and Chesterfield, begin efforts to annex parts of what is now Wildwood: Chesterfield wanted all of Wildwood Horse Creek Road and Babler State Park; Ellisville wanted the area along State Route 100 to extend commercial development.

Informal meetings begin. The main topic: what would it take to incorporate a new city.

The name “Wildwood” is suggested by Randy Hauser, at the time a TWA pilot. He said that the northern boundary would be Wildhorse Creek Road and the southern boundary would be Rockwood Reservation. Thus Wildwood.

1992

At the time, any effort at annexing or incorporating a city required the approval of the St. Louis County Boundary Commission, a group appointed by the County Executive, who had grown tired of bad publicity from “those West County people.” The Boundary Commission rules required:

1. Population of at least 10,000
2. No “pockets” of unincorporated area, meaning boundaries were placed against Chesterfield, Ellisville, Clarkson Valley, parts of Eureka and the Franklin County line

Thus began the effort to compile a Plan of Intent which would detail how the City would be structured and the desired number of staff, the estimate of revenues that would flow to the City based on population and the dollars that were currently going to the County, a composite planning and zoning action plan, and a budget detailing both revenues and expenditures. Also included was a Vision Statement, listing principles as follows:

⇒ **Preservation and Conservation**

We want to preserve the quality of life in the area, the environment in which we live and the safety of all residents and wildlife. The Greenbelt area is a regional asset which provides unique topography and forested regions for a non-urban style of living - a feature we want to conserve.

⇒ **Accountability to the People**

Today we are represented by one member of the County Council. Most members of the many commissions serving the St. Louis County administration are from other areas where the major interest is in rapid and concentrated development. We want to transfer this responsibility to the people of the area where each will have a voice heard by local, responsible representatives.

⇒ **Improvement and Development**

We support both residential and commercial development in responsible manner consistent with long-range planning and prudent land utilization. We must consider the finite limitation of the environment, the topography, and the existing infrastructure, such as roads and sewage disposal. We will encourage commercial development in a planned manner, but will resist spot zoning which is conceived only to maximize return to developers, without regard for the long-term quality of the community.

⇒ **Save the Greenbelt**

The residential areas are varied and beautiful. But the real assets are the parks - Babler, Rockwood and Greensfelder. We need to protect every available acre of the parks and to do so, we must be in a position to control development along their boundaries.

⇒ **Model for the Future**

Cities are born and bureaucracies spread. We do not want continuing sprawl of government. Conversely, we want to explore a new model for a local city government which deters and, hopefully, avoids an expanding form of government while still serving its constituents.

Don Kozlowski agreed to chair the Incorporation effort, assisted by Jack Dann. Much of the original organizational and financial effort was funded by these two men. The first "Incorporate Wildwood" rally was held at Lafayette High School and drew a crowd of more than 500 people in a rainstorm. Between 50 and 100 sign up to volunteer in some capacity.

The law required petitions be signed by 15% of registered voters from the 1990 gubernatorial election (approximately 1,125). In a few short weeks more than 2,500 signatures are obtained and nearly \$25,000 in donations come from area residents. Eric Tremayne and Dan Vogel begin the arduous and complicated legal efforts required by this undertaking.

1993

Signatures obtained on petitions supporting the effort are certified by the Board of Election Commissioners and the Plan of Intent is filed with the St. Louis County Boundary Commission. Endless meetings, many scheduled at 7:00 a.m., are held with the Boundary Commission in Clayton. They declare that the City cannot survive financially, yet their own numbers show an annual surplus of \$300,000 to \$800,000. They describe the Master Plan as "unwieldy" and that it lacks a "community of interest." The incorporation proponents were even criticized for not budgeting for "mosquito control."

The Committee to Incorporate Wildwood files a lawsuit, declaring the Boundary Commission to be unconstitutional. A lengthy legal battle begins. In the meantime, a group opposing the Incorporation forms, calling themselves "Committee Opposed to Wildwood". Many of the members opposed to the incorporation effort of this area were from the far western edges of the proposed city and developers play on their fears of increased taxes they say will be required to support the City. Most of their funding comes from the Homebuilders Association and large developers.

The County continues to approve, wholesale, several dozen high density subdivisions, many of which abut existing 3 and 5 acre large lot developments. Large areas of heavily wooded forest are clear cut to accommodate this density. Topsoil is sold off by the developers. In order to create the flat, sterile landscapes that can make room for their infrastructure, they frequently bulldoze within creeks and build on 20 to 30 feet of fill. Pleas from citizens continue to be ignored by the County.

In December of 1993 the County Boundary Commission votes 7 to 2 to deny Wildwood's petition to be placed on the ballot.

1994

Stunned by the action of the Boundary Commission, a core group continues on, including the attorneys who have fought their way to the Missouri Supreme Court. On April 4, 1994, coincidentally Municipal Election Day in Missouri, Attorneys Dan Vogel and Eric Tremayne argue in front of the Missouri Supreme Court for the right to vote for the incorporation by the people of the proposed City of Wildwood.

In June, in a stunning defeat for St. Louis County, the Missouri Supreme Court unanimously rules in favor of the Committee to Incorporate, declaring the Boundary Commission to be unconstitutional.

St. Louis County continued to refuse to put the issue on the ballot, forcing the Committee to file suit once again. Another huge rally is held at Lafayette High School and efforts move into high gear. Donations pour in. Many dollars are raised by selling three (3) foot long, wide green ribbons, which are placed on mailboxes all over the proposed City to show support (ironically, even years after the

incorporation, the remnants of these ribbons, boldly displayed on mailboxes could still be seen). The green color matched the green on the "Incorporate Wildwood" signs that sprung up everywhere, far outnumbering the red, "Wildwood Will Not Work" signs of the opposition.

Finally, an ordinance is introduced at the St. Louis County Council to place the incorporation vote on the ballot. One key Council member promises that he will not vote against us. He doesn't. He simply does not show up, making the vote a tie, thus killing the bill. More legal battles ensue.

Finally, the issue lands in the court of Judge Kenneth Romines. He hears the Committee and promptly rules in our favor, placing the issue on the February 7, 1995 ballot.

1995

With only six (6) weeks until the election, dozens of informational meetings are held in homes and churches. Thousands of brochures are mailed out and more than 600 volunteers walk door to door canvassing neighborhoods and manning phone banks.

February 7, 1995 - In a record turnout and on a brutally cold day, the citizens vote 61% YES to have their own City. WE WIN!

St. Louis County refuses to name a date for the official incorporation. Yet they continue to approve developments in what will be Wildwood. More lawsuits are filed. In March 1995, Judge Campbell issues an injunction that halts the on-going approvals by the St. Louis County Council of new land use projects within the area soon to become the City of Wildwood.

While the County continues to fight the incorporation, the new City holds its first Town Hall meeting. More than 500 citizens attend, including both residents who opposed and supported the incorporation effort. Committees are formed that begin the work of putting the Vision of the City together.

September 1, 1995 - The County Council votes to incorporate the City of Wildwood. The ceremony took place at Babler State Park, a park named for a young doctor who had come to the area in the 1920s and fell in love with the beauty of the place. After his untimely death, his family established the park in his memory. The statue of Dr. Jacob Babler looked down on the incorporation ceremony. It was a fitting beginning for a City created primarily by love of the place and recognition of the urgent need to protect it.

The History of City of Wildwood then began ...