

# Bridgeport's former 'Mt. Trashmore' site on cusp of green Transformation

Brian Lockhart/CT Post

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From left, City Councilman Ernie Newton, Neighborhood Revitalization Zone president Keith Williams and Minority Business Association director Tom McMillian pose in front of the former “Mt. Trashmore” property, in Bridgeport, Conn. June 1, 2023. The three men and other East End community leaders hope to establish a hydroponic farm on the property and to name it “Mt. Growmore”. Ned Gerard/Hearst Connecticut Media



BRIDGEPORT — The campaign that lasted from the 1980s into the early 1990s to eliminate the massive garbage pile dubbed Mount Trashmore in the heavily-minority East End was loud.

It involved dozens of protest marches and court hearings and brought national civil rights leader the Rev. Jesse Jackson to town.

"We lived through some terrible times with that Mount Trashmore," recalled City Councilman Ernie Newton, a long-time activist and politician in that

neighborhood, in an interview this week.

In contrast, the current effort to [develop the now vacant and cleaned land into something useful for the community](#) has been much quieter, composed of a few years' worth of behind-the-scenes efforts to build partnerships, draft redevelopment plans, raise funds, negotiate leases and apply for permits.

But the end result is expected to be as transformative for the East End as when that mound of filth was finally

hauled off and incinerated 30 years ago.

Deborah Sims, like Newton, also attended the rallies at Mount Trashmore. Now she and the coalition she helped form are on the cusp of turning the municipally-owned site across from Johnsons Creek, bordered by Central Avenue, Trowel Street and Suggetts Lane, into an agricultural and wellness campus.

The new name? Mount Growmore.

But Sims is nowhere near ready to celebrate. Asked this week to ruminate on being part of the movement to clean-up the property and, all these years later, create something new and positive there, she responded, "I don't know what to feel because we haven't closed the deal yet."

"Right now I have a lot of anxiety," she continued. "Because every day — every day — people ask, 'When are you going to start the project?' So it's just, like, waiting. People don't realize the 20,000 steps you have to go through to get it done."

Still, she and her partners — Newton and other East End civic leaders/residents, Mayor Joe Ganim's administration, state and federal officials and staff with Yale University and the University of

Connecticut — are close to finally being able to break ground.

"It's a great feeling. Mount Trashmore to Mount Growmore," said another member of that team, Keith Williams, head of the East End NRZ, one of several Neighborhood Revitalization Zone organizations in town that weigh in on local economic development matters effecting their sections of Bridgeport.

On Monday Bridgeport's City Council is likely to approve a land development agreement and ground lease for the property with the East End NRZ Market & Cafe. [The market/cafe was co-founded a few years ago by Sims and others](#) to provide fresh and healthy food in the East End, [which has been considered a "food desert" because its residents lack easy access to those necessities.](#)

The first phase of Mount Growmore's build-out involves indoor hydroponic gardens in trailers, an idea which, Sims said, came about because market staff typically have to travel about an hour away to purchase reasonably- priced produce to re-sell locally.

"We get up at 4 a.m., go to Hartford to the farmer's market collaborative," she said. "We were trying to figure out a better way to do that and also include job training around that. That's when we came up with the

idea of let's look at Mount Trashmore."

She continued, "But we've renamed it Mount Growmore because we want to grow vegetables as well as people."

It was not a new idea but rather a variation on a well-meaning but failed one.

The city about a decade ago under then-Mayor Bill Finch was awarded \$1 million from the state to clean up some of the ground contamination left over from the dump and raise the site out of the floodplain to keep it dry. At that same time the Finch administration announced an urban greenhouse for Mount Trashmore, Boot Camp Farms, that would be developed with some out-of-town partners from the private sector and employ veterans.

But by 2015 nothing had been built, [and, as Hearst Connecticut Media reported at the time, there were significant questions](#) about the ability of the individuals involved to ever move Boot Camp Farms forward. Ultimately it never did.

Nonetheless, the city in 2017, now run by Ganim, still had that \$1 million [and prepared the land in question for some other future use](#). Housing had years ago also been considered. But the agricultural concept introduced under

Finch had caught traction, and Sims and the East End NRZ came up with their approach.

Mount Growmore is intended to be more than a source of fresh vegetables. Sims used the word "therapeutic." The land agreement/lease up for a vote before the council Monday specifies the property can be used for "a hydroponic container farm, greenhouse, wellness center and learning campus for the benefit of the Bridgeport community."

Suzi Ruhl also had a hand in helping to pull that concept together. [Ruhl is the senior research scientist at Elevate, a program within the Yale School of Public Health](#) with the mission of "elevating mental health and disrupting poverty."

"It's a hands-on advisory role," Ruhl said of Elevate's involvement with designing Mount Growmore as the vision there expanded from tackling the East End's "food insecurity" issues to also encompass "the whole health of the children, their caregivers, their families."

She said Elevate's staff have used their expertise not to tell East End residents what they need, but "listening to them and helping to package what they wanted in the language of government and law." So,

for example, Ruhl said Elevates' work fine-tuning the vision helped U.S. Rep. Jim Himes mount a successful campaign in Washington D.C. [to obtain \\$1 million in federal aid for Mount Growmore that was announced last year.](#)

The project also has secured an additional \$2 million in state financial support.

"We're really part of this national wave that is recognizing health inequities, environmental injustices, climate, and we're doing it from the ground up with the community to come up with these best practices," Ruhl said, noting the process for planning Mount Growmore can be a template for other communities to use.

The University of Connecticut has also been involved. Sims said [Bonnie Burr with UConn's college of agriculture](#) has in particular provided expertise on greenhouses.

The pending land agreement/lease with the city covers 53 years total — an initial three year startup period for the East End NRZ Market/Cafe to meet development benchmarks, a 20 year lease and two possible 15-year extensions. That arrangement was approved May 16 at a joint meeting of the City Council's contracts and economic development/environment

subcommittees. And the pact received the recommendation of the zoning commission this past Tuesday.

William Coleman, Bridgeport's deputy director of economic development, told the two committees' members on May 16 that Ganim's administration will finish preparing the Mount Trashmore acreage for development by capping any remaining contaminated soil so it remains undisturbed with concrete slabs for the hydroponic trailers and a parking lot and installing utilities.

Coleman also noted the rent for the property is just \$1.

"We're not looking to make money," he said. "We're looking to reclaim the site for a community that was so injured by the site."

Ganim, who was first mayor from 1991 until 2003, then re-elected in 2015, was closely involved both prior to his initial election and after taking office in cleaning up Mount Trashmore.

"I think development of this sort on that site is about as complete a transformation as you can get," the mayor said in a recent interview. "I'm very happy about it."

He described an old photo he has of one of the regularly-held protest marches. Sims appears in it with one of her then-young children. The effort to rid the East End of the trash heap involved many prominent figures in Bridgeport community, some like Ganim and Sims who are still involved, some who are no longer living.

"A lot of history there," the mayor said.

"We were faithful to the marching piece," recalled Newton.

Williams this week spoke with a bit of awe about institutions like Yale and UConn being part of an East End project.

"You're talking about jobs, fresh vegetables, a wellness center,"

Williams said. "It's going to be like a big campus. It's going to be a great thing for the East End."

"I'm just grateful that God allowed me to be around to see these kind of changes and that I played a small role in it," Newton said, instead heaping praise on Sims. "Debbie went out and sought information on what other people are doing in white neighborhoods and she studied, she learned and brought it back to the East End. We owe her a debt of gratitude. She raised the money, got other folks involved. It's a beautiful thing."

A modest Sims said this is not her story.

"I want it to be about our neighborhood and us all coming together," she said. "I was just the instrument they used."

[Bridgeport transforming Mt. Trashmore into Mt. Growmore \(ctpost.com\)](http://ctpost.com)