

Urban Outdoors

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Working for a more Humane New York

EAST COAST GREENWAY MEETS IN JERSEY CITY

This year's East Coast Greenway Alliance's Annual Meeting is local and is more than a status report on the progress of the Maine to Florida multi-use trail. The coastal gathering of trail advocates will include exhibits, walking, bus, and bike tours, and of course, magnificent views of Manhattan from that growing skyline across the Hudson. Most of the events and programs are free and open to the public. The events will take place on the weekend of November 13 –14. PATH provides easy and cheap rail access. Info: www.greenway.org, click "2004 Annual Meeting", then "Weekend Overview"

PARKS PRIVATIZATION AND CHRONIC UNDERFUNDING:

Parks budgets continue to be at record low levels. Many elected officials seem to have accepted chronic under funding of parks as a permanent condition. Some even feel that current park funding levels are adequate. They explain that the department is operating more efficiently now, that park conditions have improved, and that private fundraising has filled the gap in public funding, allowing scarce money to be spent on other priorities.

In this issue, Urban Outdoors will focus on the cost of over-reliance on private fundraising. As with our electoral system, private funding comes with private demands that need to be met. Those demands can influence decision making within the Parks Department in ways that make the broad public interest secondary to those of the funders.

HIGH PRICED GOLF TO CONSUME FERRY POINT PARK

Ferry Point Park has been a poster child for unbalanced decision-making on these pages before. We have reported that the largest part of the "undeveloped" part of the park, east of the Whitestone Bridge has been handed over to a private developer for construction of a high-priced luxury golf course. Major areas of all of the larger Bronx Parks are already in private hands with low-use golf facilities the largest consumer of park acreage.

The developer was supposed to include a greenway along the waterfront edge of the park, along with a first class restaurant. The greenway was to be a public amenity paid for with private funds. However, the neighborhood to the north of the park, fearing visitors from the neighborhood to the south of the park demanded and received a fence that would truncate the greenway within the park.

Now, neighborhood residents to the south of the park are concerned that a new deal has been cut that would place an additional nine golf holes west of the Whitestone Bridge. They have been promised a shiny new playground as a reward for giving up their park. The private sports leagues that are the "organized" current users of the park have agreed to purchase private land in Queens and "contribute" it to the Parks Department, neighborhood residents say. A web site is being set up to tell the whole story (www.ferrypointpark.org)

WATER TREATMENT PLANT CLEARS COUNCIL HURDLE

City Council has voted to allow the construction of a huge water treatment plant in the Bronx's Van Cortlandt Park. The park has a mostly forested rugged landscape that has been badly fractured by NYC's highway system. (Roadways are specifically excluded from the park alienation process and can go forward without legislative approval.) The portion of the park that was alienated for construction of the water factory, as well as other large areas of the park, had been long privatized for golf course use. In return for use of parkland, the City's Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), which boasts a dedicated source of revenue from water taxes, has offered money for the restoration of parkland and park improvement projects in the Bronx. Thus DEP is put into the position of funding park projects that should be funded anyway from an adequate parks budget.

As of now the Parks Department plans to return the land over the factory back to golf use after construction. Reforestation and opening the property to more public uses than golf hasn't even been discussed. Community groups continue to fight against the water plant, now with a court fight.

COST ESTIMATES UP AT BROOKLYN BRIDGE PARK

In order to get a new park in the most under parked city in America, Brooklyn, park advocates had to agree that the parkland would generate the revenue needed to maintain it. At the last meeting of Brooklyn Bridge Park's (BBP) Citizen Advisory Committee, the park management was doing the advising. Their consultants had developed a more detailed budget for the park that significantly increased the need for revenue, thus the need to find private sources of money within the park. Translate that as destination-oriented business opportunities and more higher priced pay-to-play.

At an earlier meeting, the consultants had announced that the greenway, which had been designed to weave through the parkland in prior drawings that reflected a neighborhood consensus that a multi-use trail along the Brooklyn waterfront would draw people into the park, had been moved to the edge of Furman Street, adjacent to what could become a congested two-way truck way and bridge approach route. Perhaps some ballast needs to be thrown overboard at BBP in order to create a better balance of park activities.

THE COST OF BASEBALL, SOCCER AND ROLLER HOCKEY

Pay for play is the rule of the day in New York City parkland. Use of sports fields around the city are leased to league organizers who charge people to play team sports. When the leagues are not using the fields, they are either locked up or allowed to be used by the community, depending on the individual arrangement made by the leasing league. Those fields that are not leased to leagues get less care and deteriorate quickly due to overuse.

In parks around the city, local residents consistently charge that they are closed out of use of parks because outsiders get leasing priority. In Red Hook Park in Brooklyn, we are told; some of the leagues are suburban leagues. Thus people who don't live in New York City get precedence for the use of tight city parkland even as city residents are not allowed to enter suburban county and town parks by local law.

SHOULD PARKS KEEP THE MONEY THEY MAKE?

Parks Department managers have been under orders from the city to increase revenues from concessions in parkland. Using a carrot and stick approach, managers are told that park

budgets will be enriched by money so raised. In fact, some park advocates have long complained that not only does Parks get shortchanged at budget time but even loses the right to keep money made from concessions on parkland. Concession money is assigned City's general fund and informal arrangement aside, there is no guarantee that it will stay in parks. They believe that just as water taxes are a dedicated source of revenue for the DEP, concession revenue should be a dedicated fund for Parks.

Unfortunately, even if a far more entrepreneurial Parks Department were in the public interest, concession revenue would not be enough to fund a fraction of Parks budget. If it were so dedicated, gains could result in cuts in the regular budget, leaving the Department in the same position they are now. That is why Neighborhood Open Space Coalition has not been able to support a concession revenue initiative. However, concession revenue would be acceptable as part of a package of several dedicated sources of funding that could provide enough money for Parks to meet its needs.

A TAX ON GUM

Urban Outdoors has kept readers informed about a plastic shopping bag tax in Ireland that funds improvements in the Irish environment on the principal that the "free" bags were messing that environment up. The tax was imposed with the support of many retailers who understood the potential savings to them. We also reported that the Irish people were smart enough to first support the tax and then by bringing their own bags to stores. The environment was made cleaner by the presence of fewer bags but not by the anticipated tax revenue. As a result of the Irish experience, Urban Outdoors suggested adding fast food containers to a similar tax in New York and dedicating the revenues to improving public space.

Olympia, Washington residents have just voted to create a dedicated tax for parks and sidewalks and tag it to utility bills: gas; electric and phone. Where dedicated taxes provide enough money for quality of life, two tiered park systems do not exist. Now, from the emerald isle, comes an initiative to tax chewing gum. The rationale is the same; it costs a fortune to clean up after the stuff. (more about [gum](#) link) In New York City gum generally stays in place, making sidewalks well...ucky.

The condition of our streets and parks is critical to increased tourism and encouraging physical activity for health. Changing behavior that leads to a degraded environment while providing funds for its improvement has proven popular in Ireland and wherever it is put to a vote in the U.S. Is there an elected official out there that is willing to work with us to get it done here?

COMMUNITY GARDEN INSURANCE

For over twenty years Neighborhood Open Space Coalition has provided affordable liability insurance to community gardens. We have done so by maintaining one large policy and allowing individual gardens to buy in. That insurance was a requirement of the original GreenThumb program for garden leases and the City requires it today. For most of those years the claims against that insurance were minimal, and the price remained stable. For around \$250 (with some exceptions based on size of gardens) insurance protected gardeners and the city from liability and property damage lawsuits.

The year before last a major claim was made against a community garden for an accident down the block from the garden, that had nothing to do with the garden, which left someone seriously injured for life. While it is unlikely that the garden could be held liable for something that happened elsewhere, the lawsuit along with steep price escalation in the general insurance market have led to major increases, for two years running, in cost to NOSC for the policy. Last year we absorbed the increase. This year we passed it on only to be hit with another increase that we cannot afford to absorb. A surcharge notice will be sent out soon.

GREEN CITY SHORTS

A block or so from Hudson River Park the Highline elevated railroad lies abandoned, forming a narrow meadow in the sky. On Oct. 6th, Mayor Bloomberg and Speaker Miller announced a rail banking agreement and the choice of a design team in the effort to re-create it as a linear park. \$43 million is allocated towards redevelopment...

Restoration of Fort Totten's Historic Fortifications have begun. Most of the spacious former military base, on the North Queens waterfront, is to become a city park. Since 9-11 security has been tightened and the public has been excluded from the grounds if they don't have specific business there. Local residents are lobbying for the construction of bathrooms at the Park's entrance near the busy Joe Michaels Mile greenway...

TAKE A WALK, NEW YORK!:

Saturday, October 30th A Palisades Descent. A rugged walk down our urban Jersey Grand Canyon and a slow climb back to the GW Bridge, scheduled to capture some of the colors of autumn. Not for people who have trouble climbing. ([details](#))

November 13th and 14th. Jersey City Tours. While not formal Take a Walk, New York walks, these talking tours sponsored by the East Coast Greenway Alliance are easy introductions to the joys of urban walking. ([details](#))

Saturday, November 20th Eastern Queens Walk. Paul Graziano will lead us through queens neighborhoods, parks and cemeteries on a street hike that ends at magnificent Forest Hills Gardens. ([details](#) closer to walk date)

URBAN OUTDOORS is the monthly newsletter of Neighborhood Open Space Coalition and Friends of Gateway. It reports on citywide public space issues and the work of hundreds of local civic groups that take an interest in the spaces. To be removed from the list reply with "remove" in the subject header. To add someone to URBAN OUTDOORS list: visit the subscription area of <http://www.treebranch.net/>.

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