



Urban Outdoors is the Newsletter of Neighborhood Open Space Coalition (NOSC). It is published periodically to keep New Yorkers informed of issues and information relating to their public space system. For more information about NOSC visit www.treebranch.net.

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THE YANKEES WIN, THE KIDS LOSE

The giveaway of a major piece of Mullally Park in the Bronx to George Steinbrenner and the New York Yankees has served as a reminder to some New Yorkers that parkland is not always permanent. There is a process for the sale or giveaway of parkland to developers and it is called “alienation”. It takes an act of the New York State legislature to alienate parkland and in this era when some elected officials believe the private sector should be enlarged and the cost of government should be reduced, that route is perhaps easier than it should be.

It would have been so easy to build a new stadium in place. Because of Steinbrenner’s repeated threats to vacate the city, the legislators caved in Albany and the City Council went along on taking Mullally Park. The children’s interest in a normally crowded park, and the universal interest of promoting physical activity for everyone were pushed aside in the name of economic development.

A NEW GREENWAY FOR MANHATTAN

On one of those raw April days that make a lie of the promise of spring, two Parks Commissioners came together to talk of “partnership” as they opened a new one-mile greenway segment on NYC’s Randall’s Island. State Park’s Commissioner, Bernadette Castro and City Park’s Commissioner, Adrian Benepe planted a symbolic tree on the newest branch of NYC’s 350-mile greenways system. The finished route includes a dual trail, paved for wheeled traffic and stone dust for feet, and extends from the 103rd Street pedestrian bridge to Icahn Stadium. At the ceremony it was announced that new State funding has been made available to extend the trail northward to the Amtrak trestle bridge, a natural potential crossing to the Bronx.

The multi-million dollar project was assembled by the Randall’s Island Sports Foundation and funded from many sources including federal transportation and privately raised funds. It included the dual trail, a pedestrian bridge, landscaping and wetland restoration on an inlet of New York’s East River, a fast moving tidal strait that extends from Long Island Sound to Upper New York Bay. Randall’s Island is part of a potential

East Coast Greenway route that offers breathtaking skyline views framed by trees and greenery.

THE PRICE OF PARK DEVELOPMENT

Randall's Island Sports Foundation, a private non-profit, is charged with the mission of redeveloping Randall's and Ward's Island, together Manhattan's second largest park. The islands are nestled in the East River between Manhattan, the Bronx and Queens and have been best known for being the isolated headquarters of the power broker, Robert Moses. It is also the location of a number of governmental campuses, including a fire department training facility, a sewage treatment plant, and a psychiatric prison.

Now a major chunk of the northern part of the island "park" will be leased to a private company to develop a water amusement park. The leaders of the Harlem community were enticed to go along with the program because the auto-accessed park is not heavily utilized by local residents and there was a promise of job-creation for Harlem in a facility that will cost over \$30 a day to use. The amusement park is going ahead without an alienation process because the new use is not in conflict with the purposes of public parkland, "they" say. To be fair, the amusement park is expected provide additional funds for the maintenance of the more public areas of the island.

THE BOAST AND THE REALITY

Some New York City boosters claim that one quarter of city's land is parkland, but any look at the green on a city map makes it clear that that claim is an exaggeration. Subtract the green cemeteries from your visual image of the map and the scarcity of parkland becomes even clearer. The figure they quote is an odd one, calculated by using the Park Department's official tally of acreage and the city's official land area. However, large areas of rivers and bays are included in the Park acreage figure and certainly cannot be calculated against urban dry land to create a proportion.

The City's public parkland is further reduced by privatization. Large fenced-in private golf courses take up major parts of the City's larger parks. Stadiums, zoos, privately operated gardens, golf driving ranges, pitch and putts, sports leagues, and other fee charging facilities reduce public access to major parts of our parks. Significant parts of our remaining parkland remain undeveloped or are closed off because of dangerous conditions. The result is crowding on what is left. It would be interesting to subtract some or all of the above area from the parkland figure and see what is left on a per capita basis.

BUDGET TIME IN NYC

Once again, people that care about parks are being asked to talk with their City Council members about the needs of their parks. It is an important exercise even though it sometimes seems frustrating. Parks advocates are not an organized constituency with a financial interest to pitch to City Hall. They just care about the quality of city life and thus are sometimes dismissed as well-meaning "tree huggers."

We remind the readers of Urban Outdoors that quality of life is one of the selling points that other cities use when they pitch economic development to potential corporate

relocators. Quality of life most often refers to the level of care given to public spaces including parks, streetscapes, and community gardens. Our public officials should be paying more attention to what our competitors are doing.

HOW TO FUND IT

Elected officials are quick to note that the tax income of the city is not enough to meet all the needs. Parks gets the short end of the budget because, unlike other agencies, it is mostly funded with local money and without major contributions from the State and Federal government. A few park advocates have come to the conclusion that private concessions in parkland, large and small, may be the only way to fund the parks and protect them from alienation. In fact, privatization and alienation are partners in reducing access to parkland.

We have called for solving this problem with a dedicated funding source for Parks and public space that is potentially larger than the current Parks budget. We note that small dedicated funding sources to governmental priorities are often calculated and cut from their budget, leaving the recipient agencies in no better position than they were before.

We have proposed an environmental fee of 15 cents on every plastic shopping bag and every plastic fast food container packed in New York City. The experience with similar fees in Ireland is major reductions in litter and sanitation costs, as people avoided the fee by bringing their own bags when they shop. Some have called our proposal a regressive tax, but it is not because it is completely voluntary. We have been told that retailers will oppose it, but one of our first letters of support came from “Whole Foods”. Other stores give discounts to people who bring their own bags.

The problems of under-funded parks and public space will not end until a funding source is approved to meet all of the needs. Our proposal is potentially one such source. Any others? Join Cyberpark (cyberpark-request@treebranch.com) and let's continue the discussion.

REMEMBERING JANE JACOBS

Perhaps the best way to remember Jane Jacobs is to think about what this City would look like by now without her influence. A highway would have dissected Greenwich Village and the Lower East Side and Washington Square Park would have been eliminated. Robert Moses's highway building machine would have continued unabated neighborhood destruction in the name of “slum clearance”. Landmarking would most likely still be limited to a few “important” facades. The neighborhood preservation movement would most likely not have been empowered. All neighborhoods would be up for grabs by high-rise developers. Low-rise row houses would not be considered an option for urban redevelopment. Mixed-use neighborhoods would not be a thought that a professional planner would consider rational.

If you have not recently read the “Death and Life of Great American Cities”, this is as good a time as any. A note on Cyberpark noted that Jane Jacobs was to the urban environment what Rachel Carson was to rural values. Right On!

More from the Coalition:

URBAN OUTDOORS is the periodical 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 join the URBAN OUTDOORS list: visit the subscription area: http://www.treebranch.net/urban_outdoors.htm.

Take a Walk, New York is NOSC’s Walk for Health Program, organized in cooperation with the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. It takes New Yorkers for visits to interesting places in all five boroughs and rewards participants with a colorful passport stamp for Walk for Health passports, which we provide. For more information and to be added to the email list visit: www.walkny.org.

In addition to Urban Outdoors, NOSC hosts a number of **special interest listservs**, including Cyberpark, Cybergardens, and Jamaica Bay. These forums provide “meeting rooms” for the free exchange of relevant information between people who are doing the work of building a more humane city. For additional information and a complete list of listservs visit: <http://www.treebranch.net/listservs.htm>.

www.treebranch.net is the NOSC’s extensive web site. In addition to information about the work of the Coalition it includes an extensive list of links to many of the organizations that share the work of building a better urban environment.

The continuation of NOSC’s work depends on a strong membership and contributions from people who share our interests and appreciate our presence. Annual membership cost is \$35. Any contribution is appreciated. To join or contribute: http://partners.guidestar.org/controller/searchResults.gs?action_donateReport=1&partner=networkforgood&ein=13-3081501

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