

Urban Outdoors

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Working for a more Humane New York

LIFE'S A BEACH

Residents of the Rockaways and Coney Island are again up in arms about beach closings on the city seashore. NYC Parks claims that the closings are due to a shortage of lifeguards, and they claim they have been successfully advertising overseas to fill some of the positions. The agency has closed beaches that have no lifeguards by posting a red flag and have fined New Yorkers for sunning themselves on the off-limits sands.

Residents of beachfront communities counter that a lifeguard shortage gives the city no right to fine citizens for sitting on the beach or fishing in the surf. Some even claim that they cannot be deprived of the right to swim in unguarded waters. They note that there is a common law right to use the water that cannot be taken away by a city agency.

It is no secret that city beaches have fewer visitors than during the subway resorts' heyday in the 1940's and 50's. Health concerns about excess sun, auto travel to suburban beaches, and air conditioning have all taken their toll. While the City claims "lifeguard shortage" and not "need for economies", it could be argued that saving money by not hiring lifeguards is a legitimate response to an era when fewer people are coming to the ocean for a swim. However closing city parkland for all users seems an over-reaction. Boston too has a "red flag" system. Lifeguards there allow swimming only on the beaches that they are supervising, but they do not stop other beach activities including kite flying, volley ball, fishing, picnicking, beach blanket bingo and just plain strolling on adjacent beaches. Perhaps it is time for the enforcers at Parks to lighten up.

NEW PARK ON BQ BORDER

Cyclists on the Brooklyn Queens Greenway have long looked with wonder at the fenced off and decaying remains of three former reservoirs within Highland Park. Through the chain link fences along the greenway a new forest grows in one basin, a second is a reedy wetland, the third a small lake. Last Month, Mayor Michael Bloomberg shifted control of the facility from the Department of Environmental Protection to the Parks Department. "It's on its way to becoming a new park for New Yorkers," Bloomberg declared in an outdoor ceremony near the Brooklyn-Queens border.

However, questions remain about funding park development here. "This has tremendous ramifications for Cypress Hills and Bushwick," Councilman Dilan was reported in Newsday to have said, though he added, "It would be better if DEP could fork over a few dollars for the capital improvement and for the renovation of the park."

TREES AND SIDEWALKS

At a recent NYS Creating Walkable Communities Conference in Rochester, NY, the "buzz" included some concerns about a new NYC law that transfers liability for

sidewalks from the City to the adjacent landowner. No other transportation infrastructure receives such “special” treatment. Building owners have long been responsible for maintaining sidewalks and seeing that they are kept flat and free of litter. It was the City’s responsibility to see that owners did care for the spaces and would repair sidewalks and bill owners if they did not. Fears were expressed that the transfer of liability would also relieve the city of its inspection priorities in this area.

Some local property owners have resisted offers of trees in front of their buildings in spite of the added value that they bring to property and their ability to clean air and cool the city. The principal expressed concern has been fear of being fined for sidewalks that have been damaged by tree roots. At the 2004 ReLeaf Conference in Poughkeepsie, Paul Kerzner of Con Edison noted that that concern is unfounded. If the city tags a homeowner for damaged sidewalks they will automatically make repairs and bill the building owner. If tree roots cause damage to those sidewalks, all the adjacent concrete squares are excluded from the bill, including those that are diagonally away from the trees.

A JOYFUL NOISE, A JARRING DIN

Over 100 walkers joined us for our Take a Walk, New York Harlem walk organized in partnership with the Mayor’s Step Out, New York program. The bobbing of the free blue knapsacks that were distributed to participants provided a rhythm to the event. The melody was the sound of people talking dominating the drone of the road. It is a rare day that the sound of voices is the dominant sound of New York, but it doesn’t have to be.

Mayor Bloomberg announced a major revision to NYC’s noise code last month (nyc.gov), noting that noise complaints are the number one complaint on the City’s 311-phone hotline. Whether the complaint is barking dogs, the rattle of empty trucks, motor vehicles with enhanced noise features, hovering helicopters, or air conditioner buzz, New Yorkers say that the noise of the city is driving them crazy. Research reveals that noise truly is a serious health threat damaging hearing, rattling nerves, raising blood pressure, and slowing the recovery from many disorders. New standards that allow law enforcement officials to tighten up on enforcement can provide welcome relief.

However, there are existing laws against horn blowing by motorists and overloud motor vehicles that are rarely enforced by city police. Until motorists have a reasonable expectation of punishment, car horns will continue to be used for an expression of exasperation instead of a warning of danger. Transportation Alternatives has been working to pass legislation that will require that car alarms be “silent”, relying on cell-phone technology to warn car owners instead of sirens and whistles. Speaking of sirens and whistles, have Urban Outdoors readers noticed that each new generation of emergency sirens are more damaging to the ears than the last? In European cities the sounds made by these vehicles is unique and heard above the din, but the tones are far easier on the ear. Although new standards are welcome, there are many ways to quiet our city that can be implemented without these changes.

POLLUTION ICED OUT

Jamaica Bay environmental activists have long complained about airplane deicing fluids being discharged directly into bay waters by Kennedy Airport employees. By this winter, that will begin to change. HK Shipping Gazette reports that an infrared deicing facility is being constructed that will considerably reduce the use of fluids. When the facility goes on line LaGuardia will be the only Port Authority airport without this technology.

WHAT A WEEK!

We had just returned from the NYS Pedestrian Conference in Rochester where Neighborhood Open Space Coalition made a presentation on the humane application of new security devices into our urban environment. (Our photo files of urban street infrastructure are developing a reputation of its own as a result of frequent speaking engagements.) A Take a Walk, New York! Bronx walk and a Gateway Greenhouse Education Center service day shared a Saturday schedule. On Tuesday, working with the Brooklyn Waterfront Greenway Taskforce, we hosted an advocacy walk of the Columbia Street waterfront. NOSC chair Roberta Weisbrod and a board/staff committee had organized a fund raising party at her home for Wednesday to honor some heroes of the Greenways movement including Ned Ames, Amanda Burden and Ivan Vamos. Guests included Parks Commissioner Benepe, Gateway Acting Superintendent Billy Garrett and a host of other urban environmental luminaries. On Thursday we were scheduled at the NY Metropolitan Transportation Council for a reprise of our upstate slide presentation. On Saturday, we hosted Mayor Bloomberg and Commissioners Benepe and Bill Castro for the launch of his Step Out, New York program at another of our Take a Walk, New York urban hikes, this time in Harlem.

Neighborhood Open Space Coalition has always had a reputation for energy in promoting its vision for a greener and more humane city. On this busy summer week we outdid ourselves. Everyone that helped us pull it off, board, staff, contributors, Mayor, Commissioners, governmental staffers, and even our loyal walkers, take a Bow!

BTW... It is not too late to help fuel our energy. Go to treebranch.net and hit the money button. Our work can't continue without you.

URBAN OUTDOORS MESSSES ONE UP

In our last issue we reported on a compromise between Fordham University and New York Botanical gardens over the protracted transmitter dispute. We got it wrong on more than one point. No compromise has been agreed upon as of yet. The new location for the transmitter was not to be a hospital but an apartment building. Residents of the proposed site are not on board.

TAKE A WALK, NEW YORK!:

Saturday, July 24, 2004, 9:30 AM. Step Out Bronx. Sponsored by the Mayor and the NYC Commission on Women's Issues, we will walk through the Tremont/Crotona area of the Bronx including Crotona Park, Claremont Park, Little Italy in the Bronx and more. The walk will start at the Bronx District Public Health Office (DPHO), 1826 Arthur Avenue (nr. Tremont). Registration starts at 9:30 AM. Take the #2 or 5 trains to 174th St., walk up Crotona Park East (1 block uphill) to Crotona Park North (alongside the Park) to

Arthur Avenue and right to the DPHO (about a 15 minute walk). Lenore will leave the 174th St. station (street level) at **exactly 9:30 AM**; if you want to walk with her, be there! For other routes, call the MTA at 718 330-1234.

Saturday, August 14, 2004, 9:30 AM. Step Out Brooklyn. Sponsored by the Mayor and the NYC Commission on Women's Issues and the Brooklyn District Public Health Office, we will walk through parts of Bushwick and Bedford Stuyvesant. We will meet at Woodhull Hospital; take the J train to Flushing Ave. More details to follow.

For those of you who missed our Harlem Walk or cannot make it to either of our upcoming Step Out, New York walks, we are posting trip descriptions and maps on our walkny.org web site. Now you can Take a Walk, New York! on your own.

Friends of the Old Croton Aqueduct have published two illustrated maps and guides to one of New York's historic regional greenways. One covers NYC segments, the other adjacent upstate sections. They are available for purchase at www.aqueduct.org

Please help support the work of NOSC-FoG and the publication of this newsletter by contributing \$50 or whatever you can afford. Go to our website or <http://www.guidestar.org/partners/networkforgood/donate.jsp?ein=13-3081501> and join NOSC/FOG today.

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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