

Urban Outdoors

No. 101 – May 27, 2004

Working for a more Humane New York

NOSC's BROOKLYN BROWNSTONE PARTY

It doesn't take a lot of street smarts to know that 2004 will be a difficult year for small non-profit organizations. Traditional funding sources are tighter, and the 9-11 disaster continues to focus attention away from the neighborhoods and toward big projects in the city center. The NOSC board of trustees, recognizing the challenges, is again organizing a "fun raising" party (this year at a Brooklyn Heights brownstone) to honor urban environmental heroes and raise rent money so that we can continue our work.

Honorees will include City Planning Commissioner Amanda Burden, for helping to elevate the NYC Greenways system to the level of Mayoral policy, Edward (Ned) Ames, the Mayoral Representative to the Hudson River Greenway, and Ivan Vamos, a retired Deputy Commissioner of State Parks who spark plugged the NYC Greenways System and still stays engaged as a Board Member of the NYS Bicycle Coalition.

The event will include soft music, drinks, great finger food and opportunities to meet, greet and schmooze and a sunset walk on the Brooklyn Heights Promenade. To attend just mail a check to NOSC with the words "fundraiser" in the lower left corner. The party is on June 24th, and tickets are \$100 each for NOSC members, \$135 for non-members. There is limited space in this private home so act quickly.

Neighborhood Open Space Coalition/ Friends of Gateway

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EDITORIAL:

THE BILL PAYER CALLS THE SHOTS

On a recent visit to Washington DC to talk to the American Planning Association and support continuing funding for NYC's greenways system, I arrived in time to watch hundreds of thousands of people demonstrate on the Mall for women's reproductive rights. In Washington DC, the right of people to collectively address their government is considered more important than the condition of the grass on the National Mall. Here in NYC however, a permit to hold a rally in Central Park is being denied because the City has a responsibility to the private donors of the grass to keep it in good shape. Hopefully a solid surface can be found for the public rally.

Outside of the pay-for-use fenced-in public golf courses, which make up a significant percentage of our total parkland, a well-maintained public lawn is a rare item in NYC, thus the curators of Central Park can perhaps be justified in protecting the resource. But the guardians of Olmsted's vision may have violated it by fencing the great lawn off a few years ago so that people cannot amble freely through the park on a personal journey. Has both freedom of movement and participatory democracy been sacrificed because "the people" no longer pay all of Central Park's bills?

We are again in municipal budget season in NYC. Urban Outdoors has annually alerted readers to the ritual between the Mayor and the City Council which keeps park funding lower than most other American cities. We again note that the solution for parks will not be small budget increases in good years and major cuts in bad years. Until NYC government agrees to a dedicated funding source for parks that is at least double the current budget, our city will not begin to move operating expenses like facilities repair and lawn and tree maintenance out of the capital budget where it leads to higher interest expense for the city. We will also not be able to address bigger issues like unmaintained and fenced-in parkland until capital funds can be properly spent on true capital expenses.

JAMAICA BAY ACCESS, FOR WHOM

"We are not the terrorists, We are told to keep on guard, but you can't see anything if no one is there to watch" Samara Swanston of the Watchperson Project told a meeting of the Jamaica Bay Taskforce on May 18th when reporting on the increasingly fenced and barbed wire conditions of waterfront land on the eastern side of Jamaica Bay.

"Communities around Jamaica Bay have between 2.5 and eight acres of parkland per thousand people; our community has less than 1 acre per thousand. Our children don't even have visual access to the Bay; some of them have never seen the water."

Jamaica Bay's east side is dominated by Kennedy Airport, but two inlets divide the airfield from adjacent parkland, potential parkland or neighborhoods. Samara showed slides of existing conditions around her neighborhood including one photo of a City Park with a standard park sign naming it "Public Place". The sign was on a chain link fence topped with barbed wire. Ms Swanston continued: "We are looking for equitable waterfront access. We have to balance the airport's security concerns with the needs of people to be able to use their waterfront for fishing, walking, biking and recreational boating."

OPEN SPACE & EMINENT DOMAINE WITHERS A BIT IN BROOKLYN PLAN

The Downtown Brooklyn Plan, which provides for skyscrapers taller than the Williamsburg Bank building, lost a significant part of its featured public open space in the last minute negotiations as to whose property will be subject to eminent domain purchase. A park plaza was removed from the plan rather than move a private college. Only one privately operated public space is left in the plan and at less than one acre, Downtown Brooklyn will be cursed with a net loss of per capita public land if the plan comes to fruition. As there is no provision in the plans to relocate existing small local retailers and office businesses that do not need sparkling new offices they will most likely

close down to make room for national chains and back office corporate financial space. In a downtown that once supported nine different big department stores, no effort seems yet to have been made to entice Ikea off of its inappropriate choice of locations on the working waterfront of Red Hook to this place which has so much public transit access.

Nearby, at the Atlantic Terminal area, fierce opposition to the use of eminent domain to benefit the developer of some of Brooklyn's ugliest new buildings has led Forest City Ratner to look for ways to divide and conquer his neighborhood opponents. Local papers have reported that a few residents are being offered generous buy-outs, but Ratner is still counting on a solid wall of 17 bulky skyscrapers, a public land giveaway and a long list of tax incentives to subsidize his sports arena and provide for profitability.

THE FORDHAM TOWER COMES DOWN

A win-win solution has been found to a long running conflict between two NYC cultural organizations. The half completed tower that has been serving to broadcast WFMU radio signals, and spoiling the views from the New York Botanical Gardens will be torn down. Instead, new transmitters will be erected on the roof of Montefiore hospital at a point high enough to double the eclectic college radio station's potential audience. The two private institutions have been fighting over the tower for years, each claiming that their public interest is the more important one.

TREES SPUR LOCAL INVESTMENT

"Within a month of the trees going in, I noticed there were improvements going on all along the block," said Paul Kerzner, president of the Greater Ridgewood corporation in a Daily News report. "People were pointing the brick on their homes. They were putting new sidewalks in, painting their gates, putting in new front doors and windows."

According to Kerzner, when homeowners saw the city was investing in their block by planting trees, they decided to make their own improvements. "I inventoried that block over a six-month period," he said. "For every dollar that the city put in for the trees, they got back \$10 in capital improvements. As a result of this experience Mr Kerzner has included a \$200, 000 request to fund 4,800 more trees in his community in a Congressional grant to be provided by Congresswoman Nydia Velazquez.

PUBLIC SPACE: FOR CUSTOMERS ONLY

Police Plaza is a former street and sidewalk between the Municipal Building, a church, a prison and the Police headquarters in Downtown Manhattan. It features brick walkways, trees, benches, sculpture, a water feature that no longer works, and several affordable café kiosks with plentiful tables and movable chairs. All in all it is a workable and inviting public space, which receives heavy use from municipal employees.

Recently a sign has been added that informs the public that they are no longer welcome at the tables and chairs unless they make a purchase at the café. Urban Outdoors has never included popular-priced cafes in its list of park privatizers. We are aware that cafes bring life to public spaces by keeping people around for a while. The line is crossed here however, as it is when the table space is protected by a matre-d. In this era of privatization, will anyone protect the public interest?

NATIONAL SECURITY AND PUBLIC SPACE:

You can see the new infrastructure for National Security popping up all over town. Street blockades, bollards, fences, new rules about what you can photograph and what you cannot. New York Metropolitan Transportation Council hosts a series of meetings related to improving transportation infrastructure for pedestrians and cyclists. NOSC will be presenting a slide presentation on National Security and Public Space at the next such meeting on June 25th at 1:30 pm at Spector Hall, 22 Reade Street. Jesse Day of the NYS Bicycle Coalition will also be there, showing off the Coalition's resource kit for bike improvements. The public is invited to these meetings.

BROOKLYN WATERFRONT GREENWAY TOUR:

NOSC's executive Director, Dave Lutz will lead a special advocacy tour of the route of the Brooklyn Waterfront Greenway on Wednesday, June 23rd. The tour will describe the current Department of Transportation plans for the Columbia Street Reconstruction and the damage that it would do to this mixed-use community. It will also describe the alternative plan for a landscaped greenway alongside the working waterfront. The evening will end with an information gathering session to solicit ideas for the future greenway, a segment of the Maine to Florida East Coast Greenway. Meet at the Human Compass Community Garden, Columbia and Sackett Streets in Brooklyn at 6:45 pm.

TAKE A WALK, NEW YORK!:

Saturday, June 19, 2004. 10 AM. Montefiore Family Health Walk, Bronx. We will join with Montefiore Medical Center to do a festive health walk through the Bronx, a kickoff to Bronx Week. Bronx Borough President Carrion may join us. We will walk through Van Cortlandt Park, across Mosholu Parkway to the Botanical Garden and on to the Zoo. Walkers will get free entry to the Zoo at the end of the walk. Meet at Van Cortlandt Park; take the 1/9 train to the last stop, 242nd St. Look for sign-up table inside the entrance to the Park. Bring water and snacks.

Sunday, June 27th, 2004 Harlem Walk. Information to come at www.Walkny.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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