

Urban Outdoors

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Working for a more Humane New York

WEST SIDE STORY: THE JETS AND THE SHARKS

Plans move forward for a West Side Stadium for the New York Jets and for the 2012 Olympics, a one time event followed by a half dozen football games a year. In order to justify the multi-billion dollar budget, government officials call the facility a dual-use building and say that it would provide expansion space for the Javits Convention Center, which is generally conceded to be too small for larger gatherings. State Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver has proposed Convention Center expansion without the stadium at a far more modest cost that would result in a structure designed for its purpose instead of some unrelated use.

The Mayor and other stadium proponents feel that the stadium would be a catalyst for West Side development by decking over the existing rail yards, but questions have been raised over whether a sports facility is needed to attract investment dollars westward, or whether the Javits Center expansion could do it alone.

In 1964, another dual-use facility was built on parkland in Queens as an adjunct to another international event. It was to serve the needs of professional baseball and football. The construction of Shea Stadium eventually led to the Jets abandoning the city because the ballpark did not work for them and the baseball configuration put the fans so far away from the action that this stadium and its twin (in another city) may have led to a new generation of city ballparks with an older more intimate feel. The Mets continue to work for its demolition after the construction of a new stadium on adjacent parkland.

SPENDING MILLIONS FOR THIRTY LUXURY BOXES

Meanwhile, in the Bronx, the city seems to be moving ahead to assist George Steinbrenner in his desire to ensure his legacy as the man who destroyed the House that Ruth Built. Here the plan is to build a stadium with fewer seats than the existing field and 30 additional luxury boxes. It would be built across the street from the existing ballpark, in public parkland now heavily used for track and field workouts by Bronx and Manhattan residents. The issue of park alienation (It is illegal to take away public parkland) would be dealt with by calling the stadium a “parks concession”... like a coffee kiosk. The old stadium with its landmark façade would be torn down and turned into a parking lot to serve the new ballpark.

It is not as if more creative alternatives don't exist in the Bronx. One plan would use the existing site for a new stadium or stadium upgrade that could accommodate a sports mall

and even a possible hotel/ convention center within available adjacent land. A plan for the nearby almost abandoned Bronx Terminal Market calls for a waterfront promenade and activities that could connect and would further complement the stadium. Those plans would be made hard to achieve by the moving of the stadium northward into the park.

Moving the stadium would also bring its noise closer to housing and away from existing transportation infrastructure. It would take light and air away from apartment building residents every day of the year. Old growth maple trees that now grace the park would be cut down. While the more creative plans would cost more to build, the potential here could turn the stadium area into a year round attraction and job generator for the Bronx. Unfortunately, Mr. Steinbrenner is better known for his temper than his creativity.

BROOKLYN NETS PRO B'BALL

Perhaps the Dodgers would still be in Brooklyn if Robert Moses had agreed to subsidize the construction of a stadium over the Atlantic Terminal in Brooklyn. Now the new owner of the former Long Island and soon-gone New Jersey Nets wants a gift of public land for a wall of densely packed skyscrapers so that he could afford to grace the city with yet another "Olympic" jewel. (The mayor has recently announced that this too will be a venue for the 2012 games). It is hard to argue that this transit accessible site is inappropriate for a crowd generator. And it is possible that the Nets, playing so popular an urban sport, would do better here than in the ghost arenas of Nassau and the Meadowlands, both built with public subsidy. However, at the same time that a developer is looking for the gift of land, the MTA is lobbying for substantial fare increases. Transit advocates have recently joined the opposition to this great give-away.

STATEN ISLAND STADIUM FALLS SHORT OF PROJECTIONS

Former Mayor Giuliani was an advocate for stadium construction. In his term he managed to build a gold plated diamond in Staten Island for a minor league Yankee farm team and a far more modest facility on Coney Island parkland for a Mets franchise. He justified the Staten Island expenditure on its ability to attract rent-paying events other than the few games a year that are relegated to low level pro-ball. But it seems that a baseball stadium is a baseball stadium and has little draw for other activities. The Richmond County Bank Ballpark, in spite of its catchy name, has failed to meet its revenue projections.

ARE THE COSMOS IN THE WINGS?

There is no question that professional sports has a constituency in New York and is also a good addition to a service economy, providing local jobs. The thrill of the game is for many people more interesting than the predictable plots of television situation comedies. In fact, even as the professional promoters work to get the public to finance their various fields of dreams, a grass roots campaign is in progress to bring a new pro-soccer franchise to New York City. The New Jersey MetroStars will soon move to a new stadium in Newark. Some fans want a local team to take the name of the legendary New York Cosmos. Soccer fields are wider and shorter than American football fields and it is possible that soccer could not be shoehorned into a stadium squeezed into tight

Manhattan spaces. Randall's Island might host a team but it is away from public transportation.

DECKING THE WRONG RAILROAD YARD

In Long Island City, about a mile from the East River is an unbuilt transportation interchange of enormous potential. The largely empty Long Island City railroad yards have tracks that lead to all points on Long Island, Connecticut, and New Jersey. There are three subway stations and about seven different subway lines that pass nearby. It would be easy to link this place with Kennedy and LaGuardia Airports and with Penn and Grand Central Stations. Amtrak runs its New England trains right through this location. The Long Island Expressway and the Brooklyn Queens Expressway meet nearby. The site is adjacent to industrially zoned land and thus quality of life impacts of development here would be negligible.

If New York City were Paris, this would be the place that grand plans would be made. Ball fields could be built on platforms here in a way that includes sports bars and other pay-for-play recreational venues both within their structures and in separate buildings creating street-life on new traffic-free pedestrian spaces between the facilities. A new Queens Central Station below could provide customers with a vibrant new transit accessible place within the city. There is a modest Long Island City plan, prepared by the Department of City Planning, which encourages changes to the streetscape in the adjacent areas to make them greener and more walkable. Building here could complement that plan and allow Long Island City to retain its industrial character.

The temporary Museum of Modern Art, PS 1, and the Movie Museum have proven that given quality attractions, people will come to Long Island City; yet this site, physically on the Olympic X planning documents, is not included in those plans. It is not too late to make changes. If we do not, it is possible that popular opposition to the current stadium obsession could force all the development into Flushing Meadows Park or another rare NYC greensward.

A NEW YORK GHOST STORY

The Greenwich Village Superblock contains 1950's Moderne apartment buildings, the more sculptural towers that hug a concrete cubist sculpture designed by Pablo Picasso and a couple of fifty-foot wide sidewalk spaces on Laguardia Place and Mercer Street that are the ghost of Robert Moses's Lower Manhattan Expressway. Today those sidewalks contain a variety of disjointed public open spaces that seem to separate themselves from the city instead of being part of it. Nine years ago, the local Community Board voted to have the properties transferred from Department of Transportation to Parks but that proposal has gone nowhere. Neighbors suspect the ghostly hand of another powerful institution, New York University, which may want the spaces for some unspecified future building project.

Local open space support groups, fearing the worst of its institutional neighbor, are launching another fight to move the municipal property into the Parks Department so that the present uses would be preserved. That move could create the opportunity for a

permanent redesign to finally heal a scar left by the fight to stop the highway builders from destroying the Village so many years ago.

GREEN CITY SHORTS

A bill has been filed in Albany to allow the sale and alienation of Queens parkland alongside Grand Central Parkway to provide parking for a local religious institution. Parkland has special status in law and cannot be sold without approval of the state legislature. Sale of parkland along the parkway system could make greenway development in the spaces in the future impossible. . . .

Jamaica Bay stewards report deterioration of water quality at beaches this summer. Writing on the Jamaica Bay listserv they note that brown water (possibly indicating algae growth) may be caused by frequent rainstorms and sewer overflows washing into the bay and out onto the ocean. . . .

A 9-11 memorial tree grove, planted adjacent to Gateway National Recreation Area may be chain-sawed to accommodate the needs of an adjacent developer. A Staten Island community board, ignoring the wishes of park stewards from the Turnaround Friends organization which has worked to have the memorial grove planted, has asked the city to work to serve the developer's wishes and build a road through the park site. . . .

Friends of Gateway will be remembering 9-11 with a day of renewal at the Gateway Greenhouse Education Center. We will report trees for eventual planting in the urban environment and provide free trees & shrubs to civic groups and community gardens. Info:212-228-3126. . . .

Free Trees & Shrubs are available to civic groups and community gardens at the Friends of Gateway Greenhouse at Floyd Bennett Field in Brooklyn. They are distributed on Gateway Service Days or by appointment. 212-352-9330. . . .

Citing security concerns and lack of resources, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey announced last week that, starting on Sunday, August 29, it will close the George Washington Bridge bicycling and walking path overnight. Transportation Alternatives reminds us that no lanes of automotive traffic will be similarly treated.

The Bronx's Wave Hill has transformed a landmarked turn-of-the-century garage to meet current visitor and horticultural needs. The new facility sends visitors out into the gardens and woodland with a better sense of what's there. . . .

TAKE A WALK, NEW YORK!:

Saturday, September 18, 2004. Walk & International Coastal Cleanup at Plumb Beach, Brooklyn.

10:00 AM. We will again join JPMorgan/Chase and the American Littoral Society in the annual international cleanup of coastlines. We will combine the cleanup with a TAWNY walk and **maybe** end the day at Fort Tilden for a picnic hosted by the National Park Service. Meet at the Sheepshead Bay Road station of the Q train, street level; take the back of the train. We will walk to Plumb Beach, participate in the cleanup till approximately 1 PM and then walk on to Fort Tilden for the picnic. A very active day! Bring water, snacks, sunscreen, a hat and work gloves if you have.

Saturday, October 2, 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 train to 174th St., walk up Crotona Park East (1 block uphill) to Crotona Park North (along side 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!

Saturday, October 9, 2004, 6th Annual Bronx River Golden Ball. 10 AM. We will join the Bronx River Alliance and many other organizations to celebrate the revitalization of the Bronx River. Our new route will include a walk through Woodlawn Cemetery, exploration of the northern most part of the Bronx River in NYC, Muskrat Cove, a "secret" tunnel entrance to the Botanical Gardens and the new Riverwalk area of the Bronx Zoo. Take the #4 train to the last stop, Woodlawn. Bring water and snacks.

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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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