

Urban Outdoors

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Working for a more Humane New York

THE TROUBLED WATERS OF JAMAICA BAY

The troubled waters of Jamaica Bay provide a laboratory for policy changes that can help naturalize our urban waterfront and make it more hospitable for the critters that live in this region or pass through it on their pilgrimages to a suitable climate for hunting or foraging. While no other NYC waterfront maintains so large a natural appearance, more than a century of urban encroachment has taken its toll. The waters are still in need of improvement after decades of remediation. The Bay, while attracting fish and bird life, can poison the animals because human uses have so degraded the water. Most of the issues we cover here, while about the Bay, are common to urban waterfronts worldwide.

BUTCHERING THE BAY

The Fountain and Pennsylvania Avenue landfills are just two of the last generation of garbage dumps to be located at the wet edges of NYC. Most of the wetlands of southeast Brooklyn and Queens have been filled in and waste has long been an agent of choice in the process. The names of Dead Horse and Sheepshead Bays hark back to early use of the Bay for butchering. Starrett City, Gateway Estates, Brooklyn's Marine Park, Kennedy Airport, and Floyd Bennett Field are all former Jamaica Bay wetlands. What makes the Fountain and Penn landfills different is the amount of inorganic waste in the mix, the chemical compounds in that garbage, and the creation of new hills because the city had run out of space to dump. The dumps were closed more than two decades ago.

CAPPING THE LANDFILLS

The garbage hills are now being capped with plastic and soil and prepared by NYC Department of Environmental Protection for use as parkland. While some methane caused by rotting garbage will still be piped into the air, some is being mined for energy. The project will capture most of the chemicals that leach into the water and, with citizen advocacy, efforts will be made to do better as time goes on, perhaps by creating new wetlands to filter the remaining noxious waste.

With the help of NYC school children, Friends of Gateway (FoG) is growing thousands of native plants at the Gateway Greenhouse Education Center at Floyd Bennett Field for use at the landfills. The Field is also serving as a way station for the landfill project. Clean sand is being harvested from a harbor dredging project and stored on a former runway until the landfill project is ready to receive it. For a few years the former airport will have temporary sand dunes. Hopefully, New Yorkers will be able to visit them and do some sand surfing or ski boarding on the loosely packed hills of clean harbor dredge.

NARROWING THE SEWERS

Once all of the Jamaica Bay watershed sewage was just piped into the waters of the Bay. Now the adjacent land is dotted with four sewage treatment plants, which provide primary and additional treatments. While it is possible to clean sewage enough to recycle it as drinking water, the expense would be prohibitive. Thus we settle for a partial solution and try to make it better over time.

One of the remaining sources of pollution in Jamaica Bay is “combined sewer overflow (CSO)”. After a rainfall, too much water flows into our sewers to be captured by the sewage treatment plants. At a City Council hearing former Commissioner Ward said that his agency was holding back 71% of the CSO discharge until the plants can handle it. If too much is held back, unhealthful sewage would flow backward into streets, cellars, sinks and toilets all over the city. Thus after big storms it flows out into city waters, including Jamaica Bay without treatment. Now that construction of sewage treatment plants is completed, the DEP is focusing on abating CSO’s.

A new sewage holding-tank will be installed at the head of Paerdegat Basin. After a rain thousands of gallons of sewage will be held until the sewage plants can process it. A similar tank has just been constructed east of Flushing Meadows Park. At ground level, high quality ball fields serve NYC residents.

DEALING WITH THE DIGS

As real estate was developed on the wetland edges of Jamaica Bay, an easy source of clean fill was the Bay itself. Just dig a hole nearby and pour bay sand onto the adjacent salt-water swamp until it was buildable dry land. In addition to making the former wetland property uninhabitable for wetland dependent wildlife, the holes in the bay, called borrow pits, became dead seas, according to a recent DEC study. Plans are being discussed to fill two of these pits in an effort to restore habitat that people have destroyed. Norton Basin and Little Bay Basin will have clean dredged materials from elsewhere barged in to fill the pits. The results will be studied to see if life returns to a more natural underwater landscape.

Environmentalists have long been suspicious of using dredged materials because of prior governmental efforts to save money by moving contaminated dredge from one part of the harbor to another. At a Jamaica Bay Task Force meeting skeptics were reassured by State DEC representative Steve Zahn, who noted that there would be plenty of dredging in the harbor to provide clean materials for any future restoration. If this project moves forward and successfully brings this place back to life, he noted, others can be taken on with the same meticulous research and in the knowledge that we will not run out of clean materials to use in the borrow pits.

THE INCREDIBLE SHRINKING ISLANDS

The islands of Jamaica Bay are a loose mix of dry land, submerged grasslands, and places where water flows back and forth with each daily tide. When Jamaica Bay Ecowatchers presented physical proof of shrinkage of these islands, important studies were undertaken that indicated that global warming (and rising waters) was not the major factor in the loss of island habitat. The movement of sands around a functioning estuary is normal, the studies concluded. Human encroachment has made estuary expansion impossible, and thus the wetlands cannot maintain themselves.

The islands of Jamaica Bay are all that remain of one of the most productive living landscapes of NYC. The place where the city meets the sea is historically inhabited by the smaller life forms, animal and vegetable, that provides food for larger species. The presence of these life forms attracts fish and birds. Animals at the top of the food chain, including humans, are indirectly dependent on places like Jamaica Bay for their survival. If people can succeed in keeping Jamaica Bay alive, the shrinking estuaries of a planet where increasing human populations are living on the coasts might be saved so that fisheries can replenish and provide food.

SUSTAINABLE TRANSPORT AND PUBLIC ACCESS

New Yorkers are demanding public access to its coasts and Jamaica Bay is no exception. While construction of the Shore Parkway by Robert Moses created a somewhat accessible Brooklyn east coast with a beautiful greenway from Sheepshead Bay to Howard Beach (and beyond on an inland route), getting to that coast is still problematic. Our subways just don't go that far. Private development blocks access to parts of some inlets. The historic Buffer the Bay plan called for a connected system of trails around Jamaica Bay and the New York City Greenways Plan and Rockaway Gateway Greenway Plan elaborated with a proposal to build greenway fingers into the adjacent communities by connecting new inlet trails under the Parkway bridges to the main trail around the Bay. These new trails would allow inland residents to get to the bay by foot or bike on less trafficked streets than the few main routes that now cross or touch the highway.

A project to reconstruct Parkway bridges over Jamaica Bay inlets (and pave parts of the green space along the highway) could provide funds for the development of the long sought "fingers into the communities". As each bridge is rebuilt narrow roadways can be built under the bridge for greenway access. Without these entrance trails the Belt Parkway will continue to hinder waterfront access and keep people away from the magnificent resources of Jamaica Bay.

CORRECTION

In our last issue we informed our readers that roadway widening was exempt from park alienation proceedings. That is incorrect. The reason so many highway widenings go ahead without such proceedings is that highway land titles often extend into the green space adjacent to the roads. If roadways were to be extended into land that Parks holds title to, alienation rules would have to be followed before the parkland is forfeited.

WALKING THE V-BRIDGE

The Gateway Greenway will connect the Jamaica Bay National Park unit with units in Staten Island and New Jersey. A study of the important Bay Parkway to Sheepshead Bay link is underway at the Department of City Planning (DCP). The bi-state trail would cross to Staten Island over the Verrazano Bridge. The V-bridge would also be a link in the Maine to Florida East Coast Greenway. This year marks the 40th anniversary of the Bridge and much of the media coverage has noted the lack of pedestrian access to the facility.

State Senator Golden, Congresswoman Velazquez, and Mayor Bloomberg support the construction of a V-bridge footpath. Unfortunately, MTA Bridges, a State agency, has been resistant to the idea. A DCP study estimates that it would cost about \$25 million to build such a trail. Even with inflation, on a cost per user basis, it would be one of the less expensive links in the NYC greenway system.

Neighborhood Open Space Coalition is holding a meeting in our offices to attempt to see that the 50th anniversary is celebrated with a walk enjoying harbor views on a retrofitted walkway/bikeway. Join us December 15th 2004 @ 5pm. Arrive early for coffee and snacks. We will start on time with a 15-minute slide presentation about the NYC greenway system. Link: rsvp@treebranch.com, so that we know who is coming.

KAPLAN FUNDS A STREETEND PARK FOR JAMAICA BAY

Near the entrance to Gateway National Recreation Area's Floyd Bennett Field, at the end of Aviation Road, is a beachfront with superb views of the Marine Parkway Bridge. This sandy beach

attracts fishers on a daily basis. The National Park Service, recognizing its special location, has built a stairway to the beach to support use of the space.

When Floyd Bennett Field served as a military airbase the area upland from this beach was a trailer park for military personnel. The remains of that infrastructure include the road, paved parking, paved pads for the trailer housing, and an assortment of garden plants that have continued to grow after the caregivers have left.

Friends of Gateway has received a grant from the JM Kaplan Fund to improve this upland space to accommodate additional people and uses. Our plans include landscaping of the area with shade trees and shrubbery, and adding berry plantings for kids to pick. Infrastructure improvements will include shade shelters, bike racks, and using some of the former trailer pads for picnic tables and barbeque pits. We will install water fountains and attempt to make the space more family friendly with painted game courts for hopscotch, skelly, and small court ball games.

Starting in spring FoG will program the space with volunteer tree planting events and continue with beach cleanups, floatables programs, fishing instruction, kite flying days, and a series of events that will allow New Yorkers to build parts of this Fishers Park with their own hands. A NYS Department of Environmental Conservation Grant will provide some of our plant materials. NYC Soil and Water Conservation District will be helping to create environmental education events. Schools, scout groups and adult volunteers will be mobilized. The National Park Service will help with some of the major infrastructure changes and oversight. At the end of eighteen months, improvements will be in place that will make Fishers Park into a family and fishing destination.

A NEW VISITORS STATION

Gateway National Recreation Area is beginning a full-scale renovation and enlargement of the Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge visitor station. Constructed in 1972 to serve a few thousand visitors annually, the station now hosts approximately 130,000 visitors per year. Renovations will bring it up to accessibility and safety standards and provide improved educational opportunities. Renovations include new rest room facilities, a large multi-use presentation room, and a sustainable, “green” design using environmentally friendly materials. A temporary visitor station has been built on the north end of the refuge and trails will remain open to the public through the construction period.

TAKE A WALK, NEW YORK!:

Sunday, December 19th The Christmas Lights of Dyker Heights. After visiting a corner of Bay Ridge we head to the mansions of “Dyker Heights” where residents decorate their urban estates more lavishly than contemporary department stores. The walk begins at the 95th Street station of the R line at 3pm, just in time to allow evening skies to allow the light show to shine.

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/>.

Neighborhood Open Space Coalition/ Friends of Gateway
232 East 11th Street. New York, NY 10003 212-228-3126