

Urban Outdoors

No. 107 – April 7, 2005

Working for a more Humane New York

COUNTING NYC'S TREES

Ten years ago, the Parks Department mobilized an army of volunteers to count every street tree in NYC. The first ever tree census included not only the number of trees but additional information including trunk circumference and species. While the information has proved useful, the real value of the work will begin to pay off now, with the second census, about to begin. For the first time we will get a picture of the health of our urban forest. We will know whether the young trees we are planting are surviving. We will also get some indication as to how quickly we are losing our mature trees. These large trees are an irreplaceable resource and we probably invest too little to keep them in good health. To volunteer to serve call 212-360-1357, write

Treescount@parks.nyc.gov or visit www.nyc.gov/treescount.

STATEN I. GREENWAY KILLED

The parks department has quietly shelved a fully funded and planned \$1.2 million Staten Island greenway that local residents have worked for many years to get built. Borough President James P. Molinaro, who wields tremendous political power on the island and whose support Mayor Michael Bloomberg needs for reelection, is blocking the project because of concerns that it would limit future road-building options. The route, which goes through residential neighborhoods, would provide a recreational corridor between the waterfront and the island's wooded interior Greenbelt, and would also link to a greenway system being pieced together in the borough and throughout the city. For the full story:

<http://www.gothamgazette.com/article/parks/20050315/14/1350>.

JAMAICA BAY PARKLAND TAKEN FOR COMPOST DUMPS

Urban Outdoors first started reporting on large-scale compost operations in NYC parks in 1997. At the time it seemed like a win-win. As described to us, the Department of Sanitation (DOS) would use fragmites (tall grass) fields on the edge of the city to turn leaves and Christmas trees into compost that could be used to enrich parks and community gardens all over the city. After a few years the composting sites would be recycled with a rich layer of new soil and planted as permanent new usable parkland for the communities that endured a relatively short inconvenience. The only complaints that we heard were from Canarsie. Civic leaders there felt that the facility was too close to a residential community. After a fight, that facility was moved to East New York.

Eight years later, a different picture emerges. All of these facilities are now in low-income neighborhoods. Multi-\$million investments have been made by DOS in the facilities, including massive concrete and asphalt pads that point to long-term takeover of parkland and not temporary use. During a recent Take a Walk, New York event, Chris Boyd, a staff member of Controller Thompson's office joined our walk at the site of the abandoned Canarsie compost dump. While much has been done to clean out the remains of the facility, little has happened to rebuild it as a landscaped park. (Similar reports have been received about the former Ferry Point Park facility.) "There are continuing concerns about the effects of these spaces on habitat areas, and environmental justice issues are involved," Mr. Boyd told our walkers, "Parkland is being alienated without public review or legal process." In a note to NOSC, Chris noted that Parks has been parceling out property to a number of city agencies. His hope is that we can leverage a long-

term planning/vision study for the preservation and restoration of "undeveloped" parkland that can then be used to focus on funding opportunities.

PARKS ADVOCACY DAY

It is a discouraging year for the future of parks. More budget cuts are planned in spite of improvements in the city's economy. Our parks are being leased out for mini-shopping malls and sometimes-large land-eating concessions. Government agencies are demanding use of park space and getting it. Private leagues have first dibs on sports fields and organize teams with no residency requirement, pushing NYC kids to unwanted time slots. At the same time suburban parks refuse entry to NYC residents. City Council, pressed by the representatives of far better funded programs, makes hard choices, adds a bit to the Mayor's Parks funding request, but makes no effort to see that negative trends end.

Each year New Yorkers for Parks organizes a Parks Advocacy Day to encourage New Yorkers to come out and speak to their Council members about the needs of parks. Until a dedicated source of funds for parks that is far bigger than the current budget is identified, some parks will be more equal than other parks, many parks will remain undeveloped, and the dedicated people who work for Parks will be reluctant to commit energy to much needed facilities like additional recreation centers. (NOSC has long recommended a fee for plastic shopping bags and fast food containers be dedicated to parks and open space improvement.) People who care about our public space should make every day parks advocacy day and should confront their Council Members with local needs at every public appearance. To help out on Parks Advocacy Day, Wednesday, April 20th, 8am-1pm. contact Toby Brandt (of NOSC) at 212-228-3126 tobyjoan@walkny.org.

SAVING THE FLOWERS: GARDENS BECOME PARKLAND

At a recent meeting of the NYS Open Space Task Force, Jane Cleaver, *Chief of Parklands*, of NYC Parks announced that NYC is finishing work on an agreement that will transfer land title on over 200 community gardens to the Parks Department. These gardens have completed their license agreement with the GreenThumb program and are being given property numbers.

Community gardeners will no doubt celebrate their victory quietly, by planting seeds for a new season of creating welcoming community open space throughout the city. But the hard work of establishing continuity in community gardening is just beginning. Many garden pioneers are approaching retirement. Finding new gardeners will require allowing their way of doing things to change, sometimes hard for people accustomed to taking control. Keeping open public hours is another challenge that must be met.

For a short history of community gardening, written by Jane Weisman, former head of GreenThumb, visit www.treebranch.net.

HONORING IMMIGRANT HISTORY

In late February, in the narrow basement of a Lower East Side Tenement now preserved as the Tenement Museum, the National Park Service (NPS) brought together a cross section of New Yorkers to talk about the future of Ellis Island. The island is only partially restored, and the park is not utilized as well as it could be. Expecting to be able to talk about improving access to the island for pedestrians, cyclists and hand boaters and better links to Gateway National Recreation Area, we attended the session.

However, the discussion only started with place making. When one participant revealed that she is ambivalent about Ellis Island, her family having been brought to these shores in chains, the

discussion moved toward the need to be inclusive and nuanced in historic interpretation. Many immigrants did not come through Ellis and many that arrived on the island were not allowed to finish their journey. Some immigrants kissed the ground upon arriving, some were slaves, and others were brought over to undermine the value of American labor in a growing industrial economy. And the whole experience was not without impact on the original immigrants whom the newcomers called "Indians". A monument to immigration can be a complex and fascinating story, or it can be a flag-waving patriotic expression. Is the NPS up to the job?

MIRAMAR

Perhaps the answer to the above question can be found in California. A few hours from Death Valley sits an abandoned open field that once housed over 10,000 people, mostly Japanese-Americans. It was one of many such concentration camps set up during World War II because the government of our country believed that immigrants from Japan and their descendents were not trustworthy and would have to be imprisoned to prevent them from engaging in subversive acts. The NPS exhibit at the site pulls no punches and tells the story of the multi-family barracks that people were forced to live in, and it quotes government officials trying to justify what it has done. It also notes that this camp was for people who were willing to sign loyalty oaths. Those who resented being stripped of their property, religious liberty and dignity would be sent to other less hospitable places. The exhibit at Miramar also includes photos of a burning World Trade Center and of people demonstrating against the current detainment of prisoners without trial. It lets the visitor decide the efficacy of present practice.

THE GATE

(The following was edited from a note from Steve Faust, sent to members of the Verrazano Lifeway Coalition, being organized with NOSC's assistance.)

I grew up nearly in sight of the orange torii in the Brooklyn Botanic Gardens and still live in walking distance of the Gardens. I lived a year in Japan and saw many more torii, so the sight of 23 miles of torii marching through Central Park was neither unpleasant nor that unusual. Like you, I'm also glad it's not permanent.

Two somewhat related comments on what is art and what it cost. Fairly recently, NYC DOT wrapped both the Williamsburg and Manhattan Bridge towers in white mylar. The wrapping was done to prevent lead releases during repainting, but frankly, how much did these wraps differ from the Christo work at the Reichstag? Good engineering can be a great piece of art as well. Eye of the beholder, indeed.

\$21 million were raised for the Gates. We have an unfinished piece of art here in New York that could have made good use of those funds. The Verrazano Narrows Bridge opened 40 years ago without the two walkway-bike paths that were in its original plans. City Planning's 1997 study "Verrazano Pedestrian/Bicycle Access: Planning/Design Feasibility" produced by Ammann and Whitney (the VNB's original designers) reported a total cost for the paths would be \$26.5 million. For little more than the money spent by Christo to hang his schmatas, we could build a permanent path spanning the Narrows to last a lifetime. Since this pathway would be eligible for up to 80 percent federal transportation funding, even a fraction of the \$21 million would fully cover the local match for the pathways.

These paths would provide world-class views of NY harbor, as well as providing 2-mile additions of the Shore Parkway walkway-bikeway and Fort Wadsworth-South Beach waterfront paths. It would attract tourists and tourist revenues. The paths would also provide full time access – including blackouts and emergencies - for non-motorized travel between Brooklyn and Staten

Island. The Verrazano Lifeway Coalition is actively working to complete the Verrazano Narrows Bridge. Information: toeclip@bigfoot.com.

VOLUNTEERS WANTED

The Gateway Greenhouse Education Center at Floyd Bennett Field in Brooklyn grows tree and shrub seedlings to a point that they are ready for city living and teaches young people about plant biology and the value of a greener urban environment. Friends of Gateway hosts student groups on weekdays and scout and adult groups on occasional weekends at the greenhouse and other locations within the park. We are looking for additional volunteer hands to help us with the program; especially retired people who would like to give part of their time to work with children and plant life. Call 212-228-3126

We are having a volunteer workday at the greenhouse on the Morning and early afternoon of Saturday, April 30th. All are welcome to help plant trees in pots on that day.

EVENTS:

Take a Walk, New York! (www.walkny.org)

Saturday April 23, Resurgent South Bronx. Explore the Mott Haven, Port Morris and Hunts Point neighborhoods with Friends of Brook Park. End the walk at the celebration of the Bronx River Flotilla Festival; see hundreds of paddlers come down the Bronx River, a sign of the revitalization of the River. Meet at the Brook Avenue station of the #6 train, street level.

Sunday, May 1, Town and Country Walk. Howard Beach to Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge. Alan Ginsberg leads. Howard Beach seems a world away; the quiet of this community of canal-backed homes are only broken by the sounds of seabirds looking for a meal or airplanes landing at nearby Kennedy airport. Spring bird migrations and wildflowers bring a special bloom to the National Park Service's Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge, one of NY's special places. Take the A train to the Howard Beach station (A train going to Far Rockaway).

Saturday May 21, Members Only Walk. Staten Island Hill and Valley. We will climb to the top of Grimes Hill for a look at the big houses with harbor views and then descend to the bottom for a peek at Victorian and maritime Staten Island.

Greenwich Village Garden Party

The Friends of Jefferson Market Garden is celebrating its 30th Anniversary on Tuesday, April 26th. Join them as they present their Brooke Astor Award for Outstanding Contributions to Urban Gardens to Lynden B. Miller, Public Gardens Designer at a special fundraising party. For details: http://www.treebranch.com/jefferson_market.htm

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. You have been added to the list because someone has entered your name. 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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