

February 1, 2007

Ms. Marina Ortiz
East Harlem Preservation
New York, NY 10029
Email: eastharlempreservation@verizon.net

Dear Ms. Ortiz:

I am writing in response to your group letter to Mayor Bloomberg of January 25 about the Randall's Island Sports Field project. As I have a long working relationship which I very much value with you and many of the other signatories, I wanted you to have all the facts and the rationale behind the proposed partnership. As you may know, the project has evolved in many ways as part of an extensive dialogue with elected officials and community leaders, and we are grateful to have your perspectives on the issue as well.

The primary goal of this project is to create new and improved ballfields and increase the number of overall available sports fields in New York City. As you know, 63 fields will be either renovated or newly built on Randall's Island. This is a net gain of the 27 fields with an additional 48,000 hours of available public play time. Currently 95 percent of the 36 existing ball fields are used on weekdays from 3:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. by the Independent Schools. While this may seem like a high percentage, this is only 16 percent of the total prime time hours of use. The other 84 percent of the time on nights, weekends, and throughout the summer, the fields are used by youth leagues, adult leagues, public schools, community-based organizations, and families. Each year, more than 14,000 children come to the island on free buses provided by Randall's Island Sports Foundation to play on the park's fields and learn sports such as tennis, soccer, dance fitness, and track & field. All of these programs are offered free of charge to the children who participate, in close partnership with over 120 local public schools and community-based organizations in Harlem and the South Bronx. (I have attached a list of these groups).

As we continue to develop these facilities and the infrastructure of the Park, our youth programs will expand to take advantage of these vital capital improvements. With the increased number of fields, these Independent Schools will now have only 11 percent of the total prime time hours. Therefore, while the Independent Schools will be paying over \$52.4 million over 20 years, they are actually decreasing their use of the overall available hours of play. In other words, by paying

more than half of the cost of building the fields, they would make possible a net gain of 20 fields during the after-school hours, and vastly expand field time for the general public, including public schools.

This will not only increase our ability to accommodate the demand for field time, but will also give players the state-of-the-art fields they deserve.

Furthermore, while there have been alarmist representations made about this project establishing precedents, it is in fact based on and in keeping with a long history of creative partnerships the City has engaged in with the non-profit sector and New York City residents.

For example, over 1,000 acres of public parkland across the city are maintained and operated by non-profit "cultural organizations" who provide public programs with limited access and fees in most cases. No one would argue that allowing the New York Botanical Garden and Wildlife Conservation Society to operate 500 acres of Bronx Park over the last century is bad public policy.

Similarly, there are more than 500 community gardens located on public parkland. Access to these gardens is "semi-exclusive." Neighborhood residents keep keys to the garden, and only a very small percentage of city residents have the privilege of growing vegetables in these gardens for their own consumption. These gardens were created by volunteers who provided sweat equity and raised private contributions to redevelop land that was taken off the tax rolls, and the potential income to the City was forsworn to create semi-exclusive amenities that are only required to be open to the general public a few hours a week. The City continues to aid in garden operations through Parks Department assistance and by spending capital funds on new sidewalks, fences, and utilities. I have vigorously defended this arrangement from those who charge that community gardens are "privatizing" public land, and I think we would all agree that the gardens serve a significant public purpose.

In a related area, 43 public school athletic fields were renovated or newly created in recent years at a cost of \$133 million (\$97 million public sector/\$36 million private sector) through public-private partnership. The adjoining schools have virtually exclusive use. Perhaps even more germane, there is ample precedent for groups having semi-exclusive access to public athletic fields. In dozens of locations, community-based little leagues and civic organizations have

raised private funds and contributed labor to build or renovate youth sports fields. The groups maintain and have semi-exclusive use through contractual agreements with the Parks Department and other City agencies. In Brooklyn, there are nine such fields or field complexes. In East/Central Harlem, Harlem RBI and the Harlem Little League both have "home" fields, on City parkland, which were built through public-private partnerships and are maintained and operated by these non-profit organizations. These groups are able to accommodate large numbers of children on high quality fields because adult users and other users are kept off. Again, no one would argue that the creation of these fields and the semi-exclusive nature of their use is anything but a public good, and thousands of neighborhood children benefit from these arrangements.

The notion that our proposed partnership to increase dramatically the number of high quality playing fields available to the public is in anyway a violation of the Public Trust doctrine is simply not correct. Our plan follows a century-old tradition of partnerships between the public and private sectors for the public good.

We also must take exception to the idea advanced in the letter that there has been "chronic disinvestment in the City's parks." Our capital and expense budgets are at all-time highs. Our modified FY 07 budget is \$332 million and our capital budget is over \$1.3 billion over the next three years. In fact, we are in the midst of the biggest program of park expansion and reconstruction in the last 70 years. And, you will likely share our delight in the recent increases in the Parks budget in the Mayor's preliminary plan that will add at least \$25 million and 136 new full-time staff (in addition to "baselining other full-time staff added last year). This administration is the first in more than two decades to make a major increase in the staffing level for parks. It is worth noting that when you combine the direct parks budget; other agency funds allocated to parks; pension, fringe benefits, debt service, and legal claims; and the capital budget, the total public investment in New York City parks is over \$1 billion a year (by comparison, Chicago, which has a wonderful park system, spends approximately \$350 million in total on its parks).

Even with this unparalleled public investment in City parks, achieving the ambitious goals we all share to make this the best urban park system in the world will continue to require even more creative public-private partnerships. The \$52 million being allocated by the non-profit partners to this project is crucial to the City's willingness to allocate a significant amount of public funds. There are still many massive public

works projects that require additional funding, particularly during a building boom when construction costs are escalating 1½ percent each month. The \$52 million the City doesn't have to spend on Randall's Island can instead be used to build and restore neighborhood parks and playgrounds across the city.

Given all of the above, this project has the support of many groups and individuals (list of supporters attached). And given this critical moment when so much more needs to be done, it would be a grievous error and poor public policy to walk away from the enormous private contribution that will provide such a huge public benefit. We hope this detailed response has left you better informed, and we would be pleased to answer any questions you have. We look forward to working with you to build a great new recreation space for all our city's children, and please call me if you would like to discuss this matter in further detail.

Sincerely,

Adrian Benepe

[TO COME]

Attachments: Community-based organizations with free sports programming for children

List of supporters of the Randall's Island Sports Field Development Project