

Randall's Island deal gives new meaning to pay-to-play by Tina Traster Published: **January 13, 2008 - 6:59 am**

Frederick Douglass Academy in Harlem is a typical inner-city school, built in the 1960s, with no gymnasium. Had it not been for access to sports fields on Randall's Island over the past decade, the school would not have been able to field soccer, baseball, lacrosse and track teams.

"We won the city championship in baseball in 2005," says Gregory Hodge, the school's principal. "These fields have been a transforming opportunity for our students."

In the last decade or so, Randall's Island has enhanced New York City's sports and cultural scene with a world-class track-and-field stadium, sports fields and summer concert venues. But a \$300 million public-private capital improvement plan that includes building 27 new sports fields and renovating 36 existing ones is fueling debate over whether private entities that help fund park projects deserve special treatment when it comes to public land.

Twenty private schools, including Dalton and Spence, have agreed to pay the city \$52.4 million for the fields on the island. The city will finance the balance of the \$70 million project. In exchange for their contribution, the schools will get first dibs on playing on 42 of the fields between 3 p.m. and 6 p.m. on school days for the next 20 years.

Last June, a group of East Harlem residents filed a lawsuit against the city, claiming that parkland should not be monopolized for private purposes. The plaintiffs, represented by civil rights lawyer Norman Siegel, claim the city failed to properly follow its own guidelines as part of the Uniform Land Use Review Procedure, which requires major projects to be reviewed by the local community board, the City Council and the borough president. The Randall's Island agreement was approved by the city's six-member Franchise Concession and Review Committee.

Parents' objections

Opponents, including parents of public school children from East Harlem and the South Bronx, parks advocates and members of the City Council, complain the deal establishes a pay-to-play policy in public parks.

"Randall's Island should be for everyone," says Scott Stringer, the Manhattan borough president. "It should not be auctioned off to the highest bidder."

Those favoring the plan point out that it's not easy to raise \$52 million for the fields. "It's not like we had other individual donors lining up to pay for fields," says Parks & Recreation Commissioner Adrian Benepe.

Located along the East River between Manhattan and Queens, Randall's Island was farmland until the city bought it in 1835. Over the years, it has housed a variety of municipal facilities, including a mental hospital, a burial ground for the poor, a sewage treatment plant, and a Police Department harbor unit. The Parks Department took control of the island in the 1930s, and recreational facilities were built over the next few decades.

The Randall's Island Sports Foundation, the conservancy that operates much of the 480-acre island on behalf of the city Parks Department, depends on private investment to leverage city funding. In 2005, the city contributed about half of the \$45 million cost to build Icahn Stadium on the footprint of the old Municipal Stadium. It has an Olympic-class 400-meter running track, a soccer field, locker rooms and a dance studio. Corporate raider, investor and philanthropist Carl Icahn contributed \$10 million and got his name in lights.

Big plans

In the next three years, \$300 million in capital improvements are planned, including the sports fields, a golf driving range and a 20-court indoor tennis center. The sports foundation has named Sportime to run the concession for the tennis center, and bids are out on the driving range. Improvements to wetlands sites and waterfront pathways are under way.

But with outside partners critical to those plans, nothing is assured. Last year, the Parks Department yanked a contract with Aquatic Development to build a \$168 million, 26-acre water park after the company missed a financing deadline.

Richard J. Davis, chairman of the board of the Randall's Island Sports Foundation, says the reliance on outside investment and concessionaire fees is necessary to support capital improvements and the foundation's \$3 million annual operating budget.

"Public-private partnership is critical," he says, "if we want to give New Yorkers a place to play."

COMMENTS? cnyb@crain.com ◆