

**Testimony of Assemblymember Deborah J. Glick
Before the Committee on Parks and Recreation
Regarding the Status of the Possible Exclusive Use of the Athletic Fields on
Randall's Island by New York City Private Schools
January 31, 2007**

As a firm advocate for public accessibility to all of our city's precious recreation spaces, I am deeply disturbed by the proposal to limit public use of athletic fields on Randall's Island, a negotiation that unfortunately mirrors the growing dependency on public-private partnerships in parks throughout our city.

This citywide trend perpetuates the misguided belief that parks must be self-funded and self-supporting, rather than a vital municipal responsibility for the benefit of all New Yorkers. Not surprisingly, the reliance on such partnerships exacerbates the economic disparities between communities that are able to self-fund what should be City supported public spaces, and those that are left to the mercy of an administration that has continually abdicated its responsibility to provide these services. As we marvel over the cleanliness and aesthetic merit of parks heavily endowed by private funding, our attention is diverted from the citywide crisis that affects our most vulnerable communities. The latter neighborhoods are left to depend on the less than 1% of the City's budget dedicated to operating parks, resulting in disrepair and abandonment that leaves children throughout the five boroughs with no safe places to play. Sadly, this seems to be part of the City's practice of ignoring the affordability crisis that threatens our communities in a myriad of ways.

The Randall's Island proposal is particularly disturbing considering that the nearby communities of East Harlem and the South Bronx are already severely park deprived. In East Harlem alone, 58 public schools share only 8 ball fields. The idea of offering 20 private schools near-exclusive use of any portion of the new fields for upwards of 20 years is completely outrageous. Although greater access to Randall's Island for the East Harlem community is planned through a structural rehabilitation and extension of the open hours on the 103rd Street footbridge (while plans to build a footbridge between Mott Haven in the Bronx and Randall's Island seem to have come to a standstill), this plan is futile when much of the island is not available for full-time public use. Presently, the seeming lack of competition by some of these public schools for use of the fields has solely been a symptom of the island's geographic inaccessibility. Ironically, as plans move forward to finally link these communities to Randall's Island, residents of East Harlem will cross a bridge only to find that what awaits them on the other side are closed gates and compromised access to what should be a public park.

As disturbing as the proposal is itself, it was incredible that the City had been in negotiations with private schools for close to a year before any information was available to city and state elected officials or local community boards. This administration has developed an unfortunate approach to decision making in which it limits access to information. When all levels of government work together to shape decisions, better results are produced for the public. Unfortunately, this administration believes no other elected officials need to know what it plans to do with our public assets.

The quality of our parks were once proof of the City's dedication to maintaining truly democratic public spaces; places where we played together, protested together and idled away an afternoon together, enjoying chance encounters with the natural world and most importantly, with each other. Seemingly, this legacy has been buried beneath budget cuts, private interests, and the unfortunate belief that any city can sustain itself on commercial profits while robbing average New Yorkers, particularly children, of open space. The increasing reliance on private funding obfuscates the fact that the City must be held accountable for providing the necessary funds to ensure that all of our neighborhoods have equal access to well maintained and safe places to gather and play.

The provision of park services should never be contingent on the ability of a particular neighborhood to solicit private funding. If this proposal goes forward, the City will once again fail New Yorkers in providing this critical municipal service. It will also continue its "pay to play" mentality that deprives our communities of the public park space they so sorely deserve.