



class size matters

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Leonie Haimson, Executive Director, Class Size Matters
Testimony re Randall's Island Fields Proposal
New York City Council Parks Committee hearings
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My name is Leonie Haimson, and I'm the Executive Director of Class Size Matters, a citywide parent organization devoted to achieving smaller classes in the NYC public schools. Though this contract does not directly relate to class size, we decided to speak out against it because so many of my members were outraged when we first heard about it, and we have become even more outraged the more we have learned.

We have sent a detailed letter to the Mayor, outlining our major objections, and I include this as an attachment to my testimony. This letter was also signed onto by several other parent and community leaders who would have liked to be here today but could not, including David Bloomfield, president of the Citywide Council of High Schools.

The no-bid contract that would give preferential access to most of the fields on Randall's Island to private schools during after school hours is not only inequitable and unethical— there is no rational financial justification for it either.

- The proposed payments by the private schools of \$2.62 million per year amount to only \$33.2 million at present value, while the construction and renovation of these fields are projected to cost between \$70 and \$ 80 million. Thus, the private schools will pay for less than half of the cost, and if one takes into account the additional infrastructure improvements, their payments will cover only about one fourth of the project.¹ And yet the city continues to insist that these schools be granted 66% of the new and existing fields.
- Though the Parks Department and the Randall's Island Foundation point out that these schools now use 95% of these fields by permit, the legal situation proposed in the contract is entirely different. Currently, the granting of permits is up to the discretion of the city, and could change at any time or under a new administration. This contract would lock in inequitable access for the next 20 years. Moreover, there is no reason that the private schools should be given access to most of the new fields as well as the existing fields, even under current permitting policies.

In last year's capital budget, the City Council already appropriated \$76 million to pay for the expansion and renovation of these fields. The RFPs for private contractors have already gone out, with a deadline for response early next month.² With a budget city surplus last year of almost \$5 billion, and

¹ See Juan Gonzalez, "Bad smell at 120M ballfields," NY Daily News, Jan. 26, 2007;

<http://www.nydailynews.com/news/col/jgonzalez/>

² <http://www.nycedc.com/Web/AvailableProjects/RFPsRFQsRFEIs/GeneralContractorRandallsIslandSportsField.htm>

another \$4 billion dollar surplus this year, there is no need for private schools to put up any of the funding, especially if this results in a deal that would exclude our public schoolchildren from having equitable access to these fields for the next 20 years.

Troubling conflicts of interest exist between the Randall's Island Sports Foundation and the Parks Department, as pointed out by an audit of the State Comptroller's office in 2002 and again in 2004, calling into question the propriety of any contract entered into between these agencies. And yet Parks has refused to adopt the recommendations of the State Comptroller to disentangle its finances and governance from the Foundation.

There are also potential conflicts between the Foundation and the private schools that will be granted priority access to these fields.³ Even more questions are raised by new revelations that the Foundation will keep part of the proceeds to subsidize its own operation, rather than spend the funds on maintenance or give the revenue back to the taxpayer.⁴

The City Planning Department has issued formal rules for what constitutes a major concession involving "*an open use which occupies over 30,000 square feet of a separate parcel of parkland.*" The total area of the fields under question exceeds 2 million square feet – almost 100 times as large. Any major concession must go through a community review process called ULURP, and yet the Parks Department has improperly evaded this process by not defining it as such.⁵

The creation of a separate and unequal permitting process, whereby certain private schools are invited to buy access through a long term contract places our public school children -- especially middle and high school athletes -- at an unfair disadvantage. More than one million children currently attend city public schools; many of whom desperately need greater access to after school sports and the fields that would make this possible. Their opportunities to do so should not be curtailed.

As you will hear from parents in the community, they were never asked if they could use these fields – no wonder, when there are few if any available. The private schools were already using 95% of them, and the city intended this arrangement to continue far into the future.

Given the Governor's plan to give more than \$3 billion in additional state aid to education over the next four years, and the likelihood that the city will also be asked to put more dollars into our schools, there are many potential sources of public funding to expand the number of physical activities and sports offered our public school children in the near future – who have in the past been sadly deprived of such opportunities.

To put together sports programs, buses can be rented, coaches hired, equipment purchased. The main limiting factor in the future will only be the physical space to make this possible, because only God can make more land. To lock out over one million school children for 20 years from these fields would be a huge public policy mistake – and an injustice of the highest order.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today.

³ "Oversight of Public-Private Partnerships", Office of NY State Comptroller, June 12, 2002; (<http://nysosc3.osc.state.ny.us/audits/allaudits/093002/00n16.pdf>) and Letter from Frank Houston, Audit Director, Office of NY State Comptroller, April 26, 2004 (<http://www.osc.state.ny.us/audits/allaudits/093004/03f55.pdf>)

⁴ Patrick Arden, "City to pass bucks on Randall's Island," Metro NY, Jan. 31, 2007.

⁵ Rules of the Granting of Major Concessions", NYC Department of City Planning; (<http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/html/luproc/conrule.shtml>)