



THE CITY OF NEW YORK  
OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT  
BOROUGH OF MANHATTAN

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BOROUGH PRESIDENT

**Statement of Manhattan Borough President Scott M. Stringer  
Before the New York City Council Parks Committee regarding  
The Randall's Island Ball Fields Development Project**

November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2006

Good morning Chairperson Foster and members of the Committee. Thank you for holding this hearing on the Randall's Island Ball Fields Development Project. The proposal we are here to discuss – at its core – is a good thing. It seeks to greatly improve the existing ball fields on Randall's Island while creating much needed new ones. The plan has a laudable goal to create 65 new and renovated ball fields.

We all share the same desired outcome: improving our City's parks to better benefit our children, local communities, visitors and the City as a whole. However, the proposal under consideration by the Franchise and Concession Review Committee (FCRC) falls significantly short of reaching that desired outcome. I have serious concerns about whether or not the current proposal is truly the best plan for Randall's Island and all New Yorkers who wish to access it.

Randall's Island is located between the communities of East Harlem and the South Bronx, where plans to create more open space are desperately needed. As Juan Gonzalez of the New York Daily News pointed out in his October 25<sup>th</sup>, 2006 column, East Harlem is a community in which 58 public schools share eight ball fields. However, this Parks Department proposal comes with many strings attached and does not fundamentally address the needs of the surrounding communities.

The funding for the fields is slated to come from the payments of \$2.85 million annually by 20 independent schools over a 30 year period. In exchange, these schools will receive exclusive access to 80% of the fields during the prime time after school hours of 3:00-6:00pm throughout the school year.

This proposal may sound simple yet many questions remain. My office posed 18 follow-up questions in a letter to the New York City Parks Department and the Randall's Island Sports League (RISL) regarding this proposal. One important question is how did these 20 schools become selected for this program? There are approximately 60 independent schools in Manhattan, was outreach conducted to all of the schools?

Financially this deal is not a windfall for the City either. New York City will make the initial capital investment of approximately \$70 million dollars through the Capital Program to renovate and construct the fields rather than through a special bond sale. The independent schools will pay

back \$2.85 million annually via expense and maintenance funding not debt service. If the City can afford the initial capital investment, the benefit of this deal is greatly reduced. Since the bonds are not backed by this contract, what is the capital investment benefit to the City?

Moreover, this all begs the biggest question: what do children from local communities who do not attend these independent schools stand to benefit from this plan? Supporters of this proposal tout the fact that this project will increase the percentage of available sports fields in Manhattan by 30%. However, without improved access to Randall's Island, there is little chance the neighboring communities will be able to take advantage of the increased space. Yes, we do need more sports fields, but we need to ensure that as we create them, we do so with an eye to the needs of the local communities as a whole.

There are also those who argue that currently there is little local demand for the fields and therefore we should simply accept the deal that is being presented. But to think that demand will not change over a 30 year period is shortsighted. While I cannot look into a crystal ball and tell you what the future holds, I can tell you the following:

- The US Census shows that nearly one-third of all East Harlem residents are under 20 years of age, compared to just 19% in Manhattan as a whole.
- The US Census also shows 62% of families in East Harlem include children under 18 years of age, compared to just 47% in Manhattan as a whole.
- According to NYU's Furman Center, from 2002-2005, 1,960 new units of housing have been built in East Harlem;
- The neighborhood of East Harlem continues to have one of the city's highest rates of building permit activity, and is expected to continue to grow significantly over the coming decades;
- Over 1,000 units of housing are expected to be created from the Uptown NY Project alone; and
- No mechanism exists in the current proposal to adjust the 80% exclusive access rights of the independent schools should community demand increase.

There is little question that demand for the prime time play hours will increase as the total population and the number of families in the local community grows; and thirty years is roughly two entire generations of local children who will miss out on the chance to use these ball fields if this deal is passed in its current state.

In the same way East Harlem and the South Bronx will change, so will Randall's Island. There is a long standing commitment to improve access to the Island by foot, bike and mass transportation. Improvements are underway on bike paths to the Island and plans to rehabilitate the 103<sup>rd</sup> Street Footbridge are in discussion. Eventually, it will become easier for local community residents and other visitors to get to Randall's Island. However, if there is no useable open space for local residents during peak play hours-what are we improving access to on the Island?

As a voting member of the FCRC, I'd like to take this opportunity to explain yet another reason we should all be deeply concerned about this proposal. The rules of the FCRC clearly state that concession contracts are prohibited from being longer than 20 years in term including renewal options. For that reason, the proposed contract was written to skirt the law by offering a 20 year term and a symbolic and non-binding provision stating the option to enter a new 10 year concession by seeking new FCRC approval. However, the financing for this project spans a 30

year term. Therefore, the only way for the City to receive all of the funds is for the full 30 year term to run, thus creating no incentive to terminate the contract in advance.

In addition, I believe a proposal of this magnitude merits a transparent and public process, something this project has seriously lacked to date. Unfortunately, many residents of the surrounding community have been and remain completely unaware of the critical details of this proposal. This hearing is an excellent first step in rectifying that problem, and I applaud the Council for taking the time to shed further light on this important issue.

Overall, the precedent set by this proposal is alarming. This is a time-share of public property for too long a period and without adequate regard for community need. And with only 20% of the fields open to the public during peak hours for the next 30 years, I cannot support this endeavor as it currently stands. At the end of the day, I want to be able to say the FCRC acted in the best interests of Randall's Island's future, our children's future, local residents and the future of our ever-growing City as a whole.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify.