



NY4P Position – Randall’s Island Athletic Fields Proposal January 2007

New Yorkers for Parks is the only independent watchdog for all the city’s parks, beaches and playgrounds. For nearly 100 years, New Yorkers for Parks has worked to ensure greener, safer, cleaner parks for all New Yorkers. Throughout our long history, New Yorkers for Parks has consistently advocated for public access to all of New York City’s open spaces.

We have serious concerns about the proposal for a consortium of private schools to be granted exclusive access to fields on Randall’s Island in return for annual payment. This proposal sets a dangerous precedent by putting a price tag on public parkland and enables private groups to “*pay to play*.” A better solution to improving park facilities on Randall’s Island must be found.

We commend the private schools’ willingness to improve public parkland and sympathize with their desire to provide high-quality recreational facilities for their students and others. However it is the exclusivity of the agreement that we oppose. We ask that instead, the City commit public capital funds to the project to guarantee universal access and challenge itself to find a way to take advantage of the private schools’ inclination to provide support without exclusive use and an extensive length of term.

It is our understanding that the current proposed agreement among the Randall’s Island Sports Foundation, the City and 20 private schools would result in the expeditious construction or improvement of 65 athletic fields, which all agree are badly needed. The City would receive from the consortium of private schools, \$2.45 million a year to pay the interest on the capital improvement and approximately \$400,000 to maintain the fields. In return for their investment, the consortium of schools would be guaranteed exclusive use of 66% of the fields during peak hours (3-6pm on weekdays in the spring and fall). Any other

school or community group may apply for permits for the remaining 33% of playtime, with public schools receiving preference.

New Yorkers for Parks cannot support the new proposal on principle and on substance. Parkland is protected by the Public Trust Doctrine which reserves it for the enjoyment of all New Yorkers. Enjoyment requires that the land be accessible to all. This restriction, seemingly based on how much a group can “*pay to play*”, is unacceptable and establishes dangerous precedent. Moreover, this contradicts the admirable goal set out in the Mayor’s sustainability plan to provide equal access to parks for all New Yorkers.

Furthermore, equitable transportation access to Randall’s Island should be an integral part of any development plans for the island, so as to be proactive in ensuring that all of New York’s children have a place to play. Enabling children from both public and private schools to access these athletic fields must be the priority.

Chronic disinvestment in parkland leaves it vulnerable to private development and exclusive use deals. Instead of entering into the proposed contract, the City should prioritize the renovation and creation of athletic fields on Randall’s Island by committing \$36 million in public funds. Philanthropic giving and revenue-generating concessions should be encouraged, but access should remain public. For example, Central Park and Prospect Park are supported by private donors yet remain free of access restrictions. The current proposal for Randall’s Island is unlike any prior concession arrangement, as it allows only select groups access to athletic fields at the most desirable times while excluding other members of the public – regardless of their ability to pay a fee.

On substance, the term of the contract is far too long, lasting through three mayoral administrations. To lock the City into such a contract ties the hands of future mayors and commissioners as they grapple with providing quality park services for an anticipated additional one million people by 2030. While there are five-year reviews of the contract by the Parks Department and an obligation to notify the relevant Community Boards and City Council members, there is little incentive for any future commissioner to end the contract since it would result in the loss of \$3 million in annual revenue to the city. We must ensure that good public policy leads the way rather than money.

We ask that this contract be withdrawn. Elected officials should work with the affected communities to devise a plan that provides safe, efficient transportation to quality athletic fields on Randall's Island for private, parochial, and public school children, as well as community-based organizations and adult leagues without violating a basic park principle of open access. We believe that if all parties work together a solution that maintains the principle of public access is achievable.