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BOROUGH OF MANHATTAN

SCOTT M. STRINGER
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**

January 31, 2007

Good morning, Chairperson Foster and members of the Committee. Thank you for your continued oversight of the Randall's Island Ball Fields Development Project. As I have said before, the goal to renovating and creating 65 ball fields on Randall's Island is laudable. However, there continue to be significant problems with the proposal.

In September 2006, the New York City Parks Department and the Randall's Island Sports Foundation (RISF) proposed funding the ball fields' expansion through payments of \$2.85 million annually by 20 independent schools over a 30 year period. In exchange, the schools would receive exclusive access to 80% of the fields during the prime after school hours of 3:00-6:00 pm throughout the school year. As a member of the governing body that must approve this proposal, the Franchise and Concession Review Committee (FCRC), I joined with Comptroller William Thompson and Councilmember Melissa Mark-Viverito to inject transparency into this project and bring community concerns to the table.

At the Community Stakeholders meeting we held it was clear that many components of the proposal did not adequately serve the neighboring East Harlem and South Bronx communities. Leaders objected to the contract length and raised serious questions about field allocation and access to the Island. After the community raised its voice the proposal went back to the drawing board.

That shortsighted proposal would have locked out three generations of local children from peak time play hours while under-served neighborhoods are clamoring for open space – a demand that will only continue to grow with our growing city. I will continue to demand five-year renewable terms for any contract, with a maximum term of twenty years. Five-year review will give the public – who own the parkland – and the officials who represent them the ability to reevaluate the needs of the local communities and the independent schools. That is the very least the public should expect from us.

In addition, while the administration has backed down from its original proposal of 80% exclusivity during prime play hours for the independent schools, the current proposal of 66% is still inadequate compared to what the community needs and deserves.

We also have to deal with access. No matter how many ball fields are available to neighborhood kids, if they can't get there, what is the point? With only one dedicated bus route, which mainly serves residents of the Ward's Island Men's Shelter, right now private vehicles are the only feasible way of getting to the playing fields – something few community residents or neighborhood organizations have at their disposal. Access to public parkland, especially in New York City, must be broadly available without regard to one's resources – otherwise, it is not truly public.

While there are long standing plans to increase access to Randall's Island, nothing has in fact been accomplished. That's why the Comptroller and my staff have worked to develop a transportation plan in consultation with community leaders. Our proposal includes Parks Department shuttle bus service to 125th Street during peak play hours. Ensuring safe, free, reliable bus service will allow the community to enjoy not only the ball fields but all of the green space and activity on the island. A community where 1 in every 4 children suffers from asthma must have a green, outdoor refuge. We must work to meet this basic need.

Infusing private monies into public space is not necessarily a bad tactic for improving our parks. It's been done successfully in New York, as we all know. But there has to be a balance where private investment is not allowed to privatize public space. The current Randall's Island ball fields proposal does not strike that balance. I will continue to work for a proposal to increase and improve ball fields on Randall's Island so that *all* New Yorkers are fairly served.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this very important proposal.