

**Testimony of Councilmember Melissa Mark-Viverito
at the Franchise Concession & Review Committee Hearing
on the Proposed Randalls Island Ball Fields Project, February 13, 2007**

Good afternoon Franchise Concession and Review Committee Members. I am here today to express my opposition to the Randall's Island Sports Fields Improvement Project Agreement between the City of New York and the Randall's Island Sports Foundation. You will be hearing much opposition from community organizations and individuals today. It is my hope that these voices will prevail in influencing your thinking and your decision-making.

Like most people I support the development of additional sports fields on Randall's Island because I believe in the need to expand health and fitness opportunities for our youth and because I understand the desperate need to revitalize and enhance our public parks. In addition, I understand the important role private/public partnerships can play in supplementing capital funding for public projects. The contract you are discussing today, though, distorts both these basic principles. In this case the public/private partnership's role in developing and expanding the number of fields comes at a heavy price to the surrounding working-class and working-poor communities I represent. Your decision to grant exclusive use of park land to one group of children over another for such a lengthy period of time is unfair to all the residents of our city and sets a bad precedent on how our public parks are to be used. The current plan alienates parkland unilaterally through the FCRC and is contrary to the historic and legal rights of the public to have access to public lands.

The public schools of New York City should have equal access to permits for the ball fields on Randall's Island. The fact that they do not currently use the fields at the same rate as the private schools should not be used as an argument in support of these 20 schools seizing control of 80% or even 66% of the ball fields. The fact that these schools currently use 95% of the fields is proof of how our New York City public school system under serves our children and is an indictment against New York State and its unwillingness to adequately fund our public schools. If our public schools had sufficient funds they would be able to provide greater access thereby using the fields at a greater rate. What this contract does, in fact, is enable the independent schools to take advantage of public schools' inability to get to the island. We have a responsibility to work collectively to address this challenge instead of allowing a select few to take advantage of it and benefit from it.

On a positive note I would like to thank Deputy Mayor Skyler for his openness and willingness to meet with Comptroller Thompson, Borough President Stringer and myself to discuss the concerns we, and the community, had regarding this contract. As a result of these discussions and the recommendations made I am glad to acknowledge that we have been able to change some of the original terms of the contract. In addition, a memorandum of understanding is being discussed that will call for the creation of a task force to address access to the island and issuance of yearly reports that provide details on

permit requests among other items. Unfortunately, I still feel we have a long way to go in finalizing these points.

To conclude, I believe the greater community has not been approached and engaged in a thoughtful and respectful manner. The discussions and negotiations with the private schools have been taking place for over a year. Why weren't the elected officials, advocates and community organizations engaged in the same way the private schools were to discuss alternative options? In the end we are talking about an unfair bargain where we are trading access to park land in return for \$2.2 million dollars a year according to testimony by our Parks Commissioner. This is a true pittance and not the extreme benevolence that we have been led to believe is being bestowed upon our "less fortunate" communities. I would recommend that this vote be postponed and that the larger community, elected officials and the city as a whole can come up with an alternative plan that does not call for exclusivity of any one group. Our public parks are a precious public commodity. Let us work collectively to preserve them on behalf of all of the residents of New York City.