



Parks & Recreation Committee – Town Hall Meeting

New Yorkers for Parks Testimony

November 3, 2006

Good morning. My name is Christian DiPalermo and I am the Executive Director of New Yorkers for Parks (NY4P) - the only independent watchdog for all the city's parks, beaches and playgrounds.

I would like to begin by thanking Speaker Quinn, Chairwoman Foster and the entire Parks Committee for holding this important hearing. By providing the community and advocates an opportunity to discuss how best to improve the athletic fields at Randall's Island before a final decision is rendered, the Council helps establish a transparent and inclusive process. Our hope is that this testimony will provide some context and identify important issues that must be addressed prior to any final approval.

Over the past 20 years, the Department of Parks and Recreation has seen a 60% cut in staffing and a 20% cut in funding. The Parks operations budget has seen no significant increases over the course of the last three Mayoral administrations. The result is that the quality and conditions of our athletic fields across the city have diminished. NY4P's award winning annual *Report Card on Parks* has documented decreased conditions of athletic fields in neighborhood parks since 2003, including bare, discolored or overgrown fields, excessive litter and glass, and damaged benches and fencing.

In addition to the maintenance challenges, there is a significant demand for more athletic fields to satisfy the increased population and the desire for fields to accommodate new uses like soccer and cricket. Our city is projected to grow by one million residents by 2025, and thus the demand on

park facilities will only increase. In light of these facts, NY4P agrees with the Parks Department and the Randall's Island Sports Foundation that Randall's Island presents a tremendous opportunity for the development of new athletic fields. The question for New Yorkers for Parks is not whether we should develop fields on Randall's Island but how best to fund the building and maintenance of these fields.

In recent decades, the Parks Department has successfully created public private partnerships to help obtain additional funds for parks. A great example is the Central Park Conservancy which at the time of its creation our predecessor organization the Parks Council supported wholeheartedly. Today, the Central Park Conservancy raises the bulk of its funding primarily through the generous philanthropy of private individuals and businesses.

The prospective 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 80% of these fields after school in the fall and spring for the next 20 years. The remaining 13 fields will be open for public schools, leagues, and neighborhood kids.

A Transparent Process

NY4P hopes this hearing is the first step in what should be a fruitful and transparent process as the City moves forward with its negotiations on the future development of Randall's Island. Everyone agrees that the goal of adding new and well maintained parks is worthy. But what means should be employed to achieve those goals?

Specific questions that must be addressed include:

- Could government support the maintenance of this important regional park, or should traditional philanthropy raise the necessary annual funds? Could a combination of government and philanthropy be successful?
- Can the upgrade to the fields be made without a contract for exclusive access?
- If exclusivity is the only option, do similar examples exist in NYC or in other cities? If so, are they effective and equitable? Is there a way to improve the proposed agreement by decreasing the term of the commitment, or increasing the percentage of fields available to schools and groups outside the current consortium?
- Should the contract be competitively bid out?
- Should the contract, which lays out the consortium's payment obligations and exclusive permits, be annually renewable as the City evaluates the use of Randall's Island by the neighboring communities?
- Can the City contract directly with the consortium of schools?

By fully answering these and other questions in a public and transparent way, New Yorkers for Parks believes that criteria can be created to address this situation and future similar cases that are sure to arise.

The prospective agreement at Randall's Island is actually forcing all of us, the Mayor, the New York City Council, the Comptroller, the Manhattan Borough President, public private partnerships, advocates and the community to once and for all address the park dilemma straight on: Do we think parks are worthy of public investment so that they may provide universal access, or is it time to move to a model that requires some sacrifice in the universality of parkland in return for essential funding?

NY4P will base its support or opposition of the final agreement on whether the agreement enhances the City's ability to meet its obligation to provide equitable park services for all New Yorkers.

Again, thank you for holding this hearing and for allowing New Yorkers for Parks to comment.

