Golf Clubbing Bronx Residents? Also: When Stadiums Win, Do Parks Lose?

by Anne Schwartz
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Environmental groups and residents of a nearby housing project are suing to stop the construction of a golf course at Ferry Point Park, a large and neglected tract near the Whitestone Bridge that was once a municipal garbage dump. The groups charge that the city pushed ahead with the project without fully investigating potential health and environmental threats. They claim that the city and state accepted the results of an inadequate environmental assessment conducted by a consultant hired by Ferry Point Partners, the golf course developer, bypassing the more thorough environmental impact statement that would usually be required for a brownfields redevelopment project like this.

The developer began work last summer, clearing the land and bringing in fill for the project, which besides a golf course also includes a 7-acre community park across from the housing project and a 19.5-acre public waterfront park and esplanade. The course has the vigorous support of the local community board and city officials. They note that the developer is paying for it, not the taxpayers, and that environmental watchdog agencies approved it. Parks Commissioner Henry Stern called the lawsuit "frivolous." City Councilwoman Madeline Provenzano, who represents the Throggs Neck area, said, "This group didn't surface until everything was a 'go.' It's been planned and thought about for a good long time."

But the environmental groups got involved at the request of housing project residents, who were upset when the golf course plan was changed to block access to the waterfront from their side. The residents also told of their concerns about the old dump and health problems in the community.

The Ferry Point landfill was closed in the 1960s, although illegal dumping continued for years afterward. It was one of many dumps throughout the city that were closed before laws were enacted to regulate the disposal of solid and hazardous waste. At that time, industrial chemicals ended up in many municipal landfills (five other city dumps of that era are now listed by the state as hazardous waste sites), although no evidence exists that this occurred at Ferry Point. But even household trash contains small amounts of chemicals and heavy metals that are leached out by rainwater, combining in a toxic brew called leachate that can seep into rivers, lakes or groundwater. Decomposing garbage also produces methane and other combustible and toxic gases. Modern landfills are engineered to prevent the spread of these wastes. Ferry Point was not

The city eventually covered part of Ferry Point with a layer of soil and let nature take its course, but the dump was never properly sealed or monitored. Longtime residents say that during the

1970s and 80s, spontaneous methane fires frequently broke out during the heat of summer. In the early 1980s, according to an affidavit by Lehra Brooks, a resident of the housing project, numerous complaints about the fires, foul odors, blowing debris, and health problems led to community meetings with the Parks department and Community Board 10. Tests at that time showed the presence of chemicals that, while not dangerous individually, could be toxic or combustible when combined. Brooks recalled that the city promised to clean up the site, but nothing ever came of it.

The recent environmental assessment conducted by the developer found toxic chemicals in the park, including volatile organic compounds, DDT, lead, arsenic, and PCBs. The state Department of Environmental Conservation determined, however, that the levels were too low to be a health threat. Methane was also detected, requiring modifications in the golf course plans. Department spokeswoman Jennifer Meicht said, "We've thoroughly evaluated the potential environmental and health impacts related to the site, and we're confident that, as proposed, the project will be fully protective of public health and the environment."

The New York City Environmental Justice Alliance and the other parties to the suit (the New York Public Interest Research Group, the Throggs Neck Houses Resident Council, and the Blue Angels Radio Control Model Airplane Club) disagree, noting that the environmental review didn't delve into the history of the dump, test groundwater, or address the possibility that the construction could force methane to migrate to the basements of houses near the park. "We want to see the site thoroughly investigated," said Michael Livermore, an environmental associate at the New York Public Interest Research Group. The groups are also concerned about potential contaminants in the 750,000 cubic yards of construction debris being used to top the landfill. This phase of the project required a permit from the Department of Environmental Conservation because the developer is essentially operating a construction and demolition landfill. The permit calls for extensive oversight to make sure the fill is "clean" (as defined by the department, which does allow for some level of contamination), but Meicht said she had no information yet about the monitoring.

Anne Sounds Off: Stadiums 3, Parks 0?

Why does it often seem that when stadiums win, parks lose? There is always public money for another new stadium, but private groups are increasingly expected to pick up the tab for maintaining our parks. Sometimes, actual parkland is taken away for sports arenas. And at the same time that commercial sports venues are promoted, a crying need for playing fields and recreation is ignored. To our shame, New York City has the fewest public recreational facilities per capita of any major city in the United States.

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Two new minor-league baseball stadiums, for the Yankees in Staten Island and for the Mets in Brooklyn, are expected cost the taxpayers about $150 million. The mayor has offered to pay one-third of the cost of a proposed new stadium on the West Side, this time being promoted for both the Jets and a long-shot 2012 New York Olympics bid. Estimated costs for that project are $1 billion for the stadium, and another billion for the necessary infrastructure. And these figures don't include the additional services (like police, transit, fire, and sanitation) that will be needed to support the stadiums when built.

The Parks department's entire operating budget is about $150 million a year, about half of what it was in the mid-1980s. The reason Central, Prospect and other showcase parks, especially in Manhattan below 110th Street, look so good -- in spite of 64 percent reduction in Parks maintenance staff in the last decade -- is that they have the financial support of affluent neighbors or the business community. But go to parks in the poorer neighborhoods of Queens or the Bronx, say, and you'll find a different story. The Parks department has also been able to compensate for the loss of maintenance staff by using thousands of Work Experience Program workers to clean the parks. The results of this were documented in a recent study by the City Independent Budget Office, which also shows that the number of those workers is now declining.

In an article in the Daily News reporting that New Yorkers oppose public funding for a stadium on the West Side by a 3-1 margin, Mayor Giuliani was quoted as saying, "Very often, people misunderstand economic development. I don't agree with them." With all due respect, there is one aspect of economic development that the Mayor doesn't understand. Although economists have found a poor return, in terms of jobs and economic growth, on taxpayer subsidies for stadiums, studies have shown that public investment in well-maintained parks does pay real economic dividends. Among other things, it increases real estate values, reduces crime, and draws tourism. It also makes a city more attractive to people and businesses looking to relocate. Money magazine's Best Places to Live 2000 listed good parks among its criteria: "Along with our usual emphasis on solid schools, low crime and job growth ... we also wanted areas ... where city fathers have put a premium on green space ..."

Sure, sports teams have their place in our city and our hearts. But putting public funds into our public parks, instead of building more stadiums -- now that would be a fabulous legacy.

Anne Schwartz is a freelance writer specializing in environmental issues. Previously, she was the editor of the Audubon Activist, a news journal for environmental action published by the

National Audubon Society, and an editor at The New York Botanical Garden.