Turning Parkways Into Parks? Turning Trees Into Sports Fields?

by Anne Schwartz
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If the state legislature approves, Staten Island could gain 500 acres of parkland and finally put to rest a long abandoned highway plan dating back to the era of Robert Moses and the 1930s. A bill, introduced by Assembly members Robert A. Straniere and Michael Cusick and State Senator John Marchi would officially abandon plans to complete the Willowbrook and Richmond parkways and transfer the land intended for the highways to the state Department of Environmental Conservation and the New York City Parks Department. Much of the land, which is now under the jurisdiction of the state Department of Transportation, is in the heart of the Greenbelt, 2,800 acres of parks and natural areas in the middle of Staten Island.

The two parkways were part of a plan to speed traffic across the island between New Jersey and Brooklyn. Three separate studies over the past 20 years — by the Metropolitan Transportation Council, the City Department of Planning, and the State Department of Transportation — found that the highways would not ease the real traffic problem in Staten Island, which is local congestion from people traveling within the island. Although the state does not ever plan to build the highways, the land has remained under the control of the transportation department, which has issued permits for park-and-rides and other projects on it, avoiding the usual review process.

"People could see that if this is allowed to continue, then gradually this open space is whittled away," said David J. D'Ermilio, an aide to Straniere. He said that in addition to preventing the gradual encroachment of development into the heart of the Greenbelt, the proposal, called a demapping bill because it would remove the highways from the official map, would eliminate uncertainty over the highways and offer a cost-free way to add parkland to the city in bad fiscal times.

The legislation has support from residents who live in the Greenbelt, numerous Staten Island civic associations, and city and regional environmental and planning organizations. But the chairmen of the three Staten Island community boards, whose members are appointed by the borough president, issued a press release saying that they will not support abandoning the highways "until plans for improving all local streets impacted by the loss of the roadways are finalized," according to the Staten Island Register. Borough President James Molinaro's office declined to comment on Straniere's bill, but said that he would present his own proposal soon at an editorial meeting with the Staten Island Advance.

The community board chairs worry that, if sections needed to widen or straighten local roads become park, those projects could be stopped because state legislation would be required. The

bill's supporters say, however, that the park bill would have no practical effect on the process of approving roadway widening plans, because any road changes on the land already require state legislation to resolve questions of title, a city land use review process and various other public reviews.

BALL FIELDS WIN AT BLOOMINGDALE WOODS

A bitter three-year battle over a plan to put recreational fields in Staten Island's Bloomingdale Woods came to an end with a snowy ceremonial groundbreaking in early February. Mayor Michael Bloomberg dug into a pile of dirt instead of the frozen ground to inaugurate a scaled-down version of the project, a compromise he negotiated between the Parks Department, which originally opposed the project, and its chief proponent, Staten Island Borough President James Molinaro. The compromise also involves building additional fields at the nearby Charleston site, most of which is slated for a retail complex.

While South Shore sports leagues and civic groups celebrated, former Parks Commissioner Henry Stern characterized the groundbreaking as a "dark day in park history," although he gave the mayor credit for reducing the size of the project, "so it's far better than the earlier plan."

The Parks Department and environmental groups opposed the project because thousands of trees would be cut down and wildlife habitat destroyed, and because they believed the park's sloping and soggy terrain would be unsuitable for playing fields. A study commissioned by the Parks Department showed that fields could be built more quickly and far more cheaply at other sites on the South Shore. "From the moment this controversy began, parks offered them recreational fields on flat lands," said Stern.

Former borough president Guy Molinari, however, had plans for the other potential sites, none of which were under the jurisdiction of the Parks Department. He made the building of fields in Bloomingdale Woods a top priority and used his political clout to win the support of former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani. The mayor silenced the Parks Department and had the project moved to the Department of Design and Construction.

Environmentalists, led by the local Protectors of Pine Oak Woods , sued to stop the project, raising the ire of sports and civic groups on the South Shore. In recent years, the area has

developed rapidly, without an accompanying investment in schools, recreational facilities, public transit and other infrastructure. "We have all these new homes and new developments, huge new developments, I might add, and there is no place for these children to go," said Dee Vandenburg, president of the Staten Island Taxpayers Association, a civic organization addressing quality of life issues.

Protectors lost its final appeal last summer.

Chuck Perry, a board member of Protectors, said that he agreed that the area needed ball fields and recreation for the children. But, he said, "we should be upgrading the areas that are degraded, not cutting the natural areas we have left." He noted that a privately owned forest near Bloomingdale Park was recently clear cut for a large development. Perry also said it was "fiscally irresponsible" to spend three or four times the money to build fields in an area not suited for them.

To Mike Nagy, the borough engineer who did the redesign, the natural setting is the key to the appeal of the park. "Engineers can build many things," he said, "but we can't build fully grown trees." Nagy envisions the park, with three ball fields, two half-court basketball courts and a playground surrounded by trees, to be like a park somewhere in Connecticut — "where kids can sit under a tree and have lunch, where the temperature in the summer can be ten degrees cooler that it is on the street, where you can take a walk and see a ravine."

The final $9.1 million plan for Bloomingdale Park, which also includes a perimeter greenway, walking trails, bridges, and wetland boardwalks, is scheduled to be completed in the spring of 2004. An additional $6.5 million has been allotted for roadwork to increase access to the park, including two cul-de-sacs leading into the park. At the Charleston retail site, 42 acres will be transferred to the Parks Department, which will build a new 42-acre park with 12 acres of ball fields, tennis and basketball courts, and a fitness trail. The Staten Island Advance reported that the Parks Department has asked the contractor of the retail complex to provide a $7 million maintenance endowment for the new park, which is expected to be ready in the fall of 2004.

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.