

Campaign Promises For Parks In Light Of 9/11

by Anne Schwartz

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Voters were planning to go to the polls on September 11 to choose among scores of candidates who had pledged to increase funding for parks. Now the political and financial landscape of the city has been drastically altered. The city is projecting a \$1 billion shortfall for this fiscal year, and a \$4 billion gap for the next. Even as New Yorkers turn to the parks for community, comfort, and to commemorate the dead, will the promises for parks be another casualty of the terrorist attacks?

Parks supporters saw an opportunity in the 2001 election because of the large turnover of elected officials. After years of frustration with the low level of public funding for city parks - even when the budgets of other city departments were restored during the boom years of the 1990s - they organized to educate the new candidates and win political support for parks. Their coalition, [Parks 2001](#), included block associations, athletic and law enforcement groups, community gardeners, and park advocates as well as prominent civic and business leaders. By the end of the primary season, five of the candidates for mayor and most of the other candidates had pledged to work to commit one percent of the city's budget (more than double the current amount of \$160 million) to operating and maintaining the parks. They also promised to distribute resources equitably to all parks, to establish citywide minimum maintenance standards, and to give exclusively to the parks budget the \$60 million in fees the city receives from park concessions, which now go into the city's general fund.

After the attacks, however, when the campaign came back into focus, questions were raised about how the candidates would be able to keep their promises on parks. Before the runoff, a New York Times editorial called Fernando Ferrer "borderline irresponsible" for insisting that he still planned to increase the parks budget. Mark Green seized on that phrase as ammunition, using it in the campaign's first negative ad. Neither Green, the Democratic nominee, nor Republican Mike Bloomberg have commented specifically on whether they will uphold their [promises](#) to increase funding for parks, although Green has said that many of his previous plans would have to be put off.

Mike Klein, co-campaign manager of Parks 2001, says he remains hopeful that the candidates will be able to honor their commitments to parks. "If they mean what they say about rebuilding, rebirth, revitalizing, you cannot do that without the parks system," he says. "I think New Yorkers will be more aware of just how much they depend on these parks and want them to be equal across the board."

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According to Klein, the coalition plans to work with the new mayor, and keep a close watch on the budget process. "This constituency will be much better prepared to have a unified voice on a citywide level, and more clout on a local level. When bad ideas come up in the future, there will be more people organized to speak up."

Bridge Park another victim?

Supporters of the Brooklyn Bridge Park are concerned that plans for the park will be put on hold because of the city's projected budget shortfall, as well as changes in funding priorities from the state. The city had recently promised to spend \$10 million to tear down a city-owned warehouse on a key section of the park. The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, which owns the piers on which much of the park would be built, was to provide more than half of the projected \$150 million cost of building the park. Joanne Witty, president of the Brooklyn Bridge Development Corporation, said, "We really don't have much of a reading as to where things stand, other than the fact that we know both the mayor and governor were strongly committed to the park before Sept. 11." A spokeswoman for Governor Pataki, Suzanne Morris, said, "It's something the governor continues to support. But obviously, in the light of what's happened we're taking a look at everything, re-evaluating the entire budget."

What about Governors Island?

Representatives Carolyn Maloney and Jerrold Nadler and the Governors Island Group are calling on Congress to help the recovery efforts in New York City by stopping the sale of Governors Island. Legislation passed in 1997 required the General Services Administration to sell the island, a former Coast Guard base, at fair market value. Before September 11, a state and city plan for public use of the island had stalled, and the federal agency had been preparing to auction the island in the coming fiscal year.

Joined by 15 members of New York's congressional delegation, Maloney and Nadler sent a letter to the chairmen and ranking members of key House committees. The letter notes that the Federal Emergency Management Association, the Coast Guard, and the National Guard have been in discussion with the General Services Administration about using Governors Island to aid the recovery efforts.

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Governors Island has also been suggested for temporary commercial and residential use for people displaced from the World Trade Center area. The island has 500,000 square feet of office and commercial space both within and outside its historic district. There are also 1200 residential units, 640 of which are outside the historic district and would be most feasible to use for housing. The island has been well maintained by the General Services Administration since the Coast Guard closed the base in 1996.

In their letter, Maloney and Nadler asked that legislation to repeal the sale include two additional provisions: the ratification of President Clinton's designation of the island's historic forts and surrounding land as a national monument; and a requirement that the city and state fully participate in long-term planning for the island.



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.