by Anne Schwartz
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As the deadline for selling Governors Island draws closer, the federal government has made it clear that New York State must fill in the details of its draft plan for the island by October 1st, and that the state legislature must approve the plan as law.

The state's plan calls for a new civic space on Governors Island, including a 50-acre park, sports fields, museums, and educational facilities, as well as a large hotel and conference center, offices, and restaurants. The plan would preserve the historic forts and buildings on the former Coast Guard base, while creating a new visitor destination in the harbor.

Representatives Jerrold Nadler and Carolyn Maloney, co-sponsors with Rep. Ben Gilman of a bill to turn the island over to the state at a nominal cost, have called on the Pataki administration to step up its efforts to secure the island as a public space. Nadler and Maloney said they were only recently made aware that state legislation would be necessary, but that the state had been informed as long as six months ago.

Rep. Maloney said, "In five months, the federal government plans to sell Governors Island to the highest bidder and we are running out of time. It is time for Governor Pataki to get personally involved in this effort before it is too late."

COMMUNITY GARDENERS GET POLITICAL

Community gardeners marched to City Hall August 1 to present petitions for a referendum on turning community gardens over to the parks department. The gardeners also sought to call attention to the community garden legislation proposed by Ken Fisher and Adolfo Carrion that is stalled in City Council. The More Gardens! Coalition fell short of gathering the 30,000 signatures needed to get the proposal on the ballot. But Aresh Javadi, who helped start the coalition, says the last-minute referendum effort gathered 23,000 signatures in two months, showing widespread support for gardens. It also educated New Yorkers about the issue. "A lot of people thought that Bette Midler had saved all the gardens," Javadi said.

Two years ago, as the city was about to sell off more than 100 community gardens to developers, Bette Midler's New York Restoration Project and the Trust for Public Land stepped in to purchase them. But more than 400 gardens on city-owned lots are living on borrowed time. The city allowed residents to clean up and plant the vacant lots, but reserved the right to reclaim

the land. The only thing holding off the bulldozers at a number of sites is a temporary restraining order won by State Attorney General Eliot Spitzer, who has filed a lawsuit to stop the city from razing the gardens.

State Supreme Court Justice Richard D. Huttner recently denied a request by the Giuliani administration to lift the restraining order. After the decision, Mayor Giuliani said it was "absurd" to block development on the lots. "There are people who don't have homes." The following week, responding to reports of a rise in homelessness in the city, the mayor blamed the gardeners for holding up the development of housing.

The Coalition for the Homeless issued a statement objecting "in the strongest possible terms" to the mayor's comments: "Given that the city has other parcels of land at its disposal, it is simply not necessary to encroach on the precious few remaining green spaces for new development of affordable housing. The technology, community commitment and manpower exist to deliver significant numbers of newly constructed homes. What has been lacking over the past few years is the fiscal commitment by the local government."

Gardeners plan more political theatre later this summer to identify support for gardens among the candidates running for office this fall. They have also gotten involved in the Parks 2001 campaign, which seeks to get candidates to pay attention to parks and open space and commit to increasing parks department funding to one percent of the city budget.

A MAYOR WHO CARES ABOUT PARKS

Imagine a mayor of New York City who talks about parks as a way to make his citizens happier. Who sees a park in every parcel of vacant or underutilized land -- even the rooftop of City Hall. Who believes parks are as essential as the water supply to the physical and emotional health of the city.

Speaking at a conference recently held by the Institute for Urban Parks in New York, two mayors - former mayor Enrique Penalosa of Bogota, Colombia, and Mayor Richard Daley of Chicago - actually said these things.

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To a New Yorker, it was amazing.

As Joyce Purnick pointed out in her New York Times column about a mayoral forum held on the same day that Mayor Daley spoke, "In New York, parks are seen as a frill. The last four mayors have concentrated resources on core services, especially education and the police, and as a result, parks spending has been in decline." Of the six men running for mayor, only Peter Vallone has pledged to increase parks department funding to one percent of the budget, as a coalition of parks supporters has been advocating. The others say they believe funding for parks should be increased -- if the city can afford it.

The two mayors who spoke at the conference see it differently. To them, parks are a core service. Parks and public space are woven into the fabric of the city, furthering other important goals like education, public safety, and economic vitality.

As mayor, Penalosa added or restored 1200 parks for the rapidly growing yet poor population of his city, reclaimed the sidewalks from cars, and persuaded the voters to approve a future ban on cars in the city. Mayor Daley showed slide after slide illustrating the changes in Chicago: 300,000 trees planted, new riverfront and lakefront parkland, landscape ordinances requiring developers to install and maintain plantings around their property and in the public ways, and on and on.

Both mayors believe that if you want to improve the quality of life in a city (or as Penalosa plainly put it, to make its citizens happier) parks and public spaces should be high on the list of priorities.

They also believe that a better quality of life leads to a stronger economy. Mayor Daley said, "By and large, the places that are doing well today are places that are pleasant to live," noting that jobs follow people -- and companies -- where they want to live. Penalosa said, "A city is better not when it is richer but when it is happier. But something interesting happens. If it is happier, then it will get richer.... The most important competitive advantage a society can have in this new age of information is quality of life."

With the change in political leadership, it is time to change the old attitudes toward parks. The would-be mayors should start thinking more creatively about how green and public space can

revive neighborhoods, boost the economy, and make New York City of the 21st century a happier, healthier, and more prosperous place to live.

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.