

In the News: Garbage Out, Parks In; Also, rating New York City's parks

by Anne Schwartz

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A new State Park will be created along the waterfront in Williamsburg, a neighborhood with the dubious honor of having among the least open space and the most waste transfer stations in the city. Through an unusual agreement, the State will lease the land to New York University, which will turn part of the park into fields for its outdoor athletic program. The fields will be available to the community 51 percent of the time, including the summer. The state will develop the rest of the park, which is expected to include some sort of promenade along the waterfront and the rebuilding of existing piers. The agreement calls for NYU to maintain the entire site.

"This particular site has been on a lot of people's radar screens for a long time," said Eric Kulleseid, New York State Director of the Trust for Public Land. After closing down a nearby waste transfer station that planned to expand to the site, local groups began organizing to turn some of the land into a waterfront park. They succeeded in getting the land listed for acquisition on the state's 1998 Open Space Conservation Plan. Because the state had funding only to purchase the land, the deal was finally clinched by the agreement for NYU to develop and maintain it. The partnership was brokered by the Trust for Public Land, which also negotiated the purchase and will own the site until the state can take title.

The park site, a former rail-to-barge depot called the Eastern District Terminal, has been abandoned for decades. Its dilapidated condition, and the fact that it is fenced-off private property, hasn't stopped residents from using the site for years to fish, sunbathe, walk their dogs, and take in the spectacular river and skyline views. "It seemed so self-evident to everyone here that this is what should happen," said Peter Gillespie of Neighbors Against Garbage about the park. "We wondered why it took so long to get everyone else to realize it." Looking to the future, he said, "There is a lot of potential for other projects like this to happen. We're hoping that this is the first step."

Anne Sounds Off: Insights from a new parks book

The Urban Land Institute and the Trust for Public Land have just published an invaluable new study, *Inside City Parks*, which describes the park systems in 25 major cities, including New York. Published for the first time are statistics about the cities' park acreage, staffing, and funding, among other things. Author Peter Harnik covers the history of each system, provides successful examples and cautionary tales, and discusses parks in the context of each city's political and economic milieu. His look at the New York City park system, its strengths and shortcomings, could help spur new action to improve our parks.

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New York has a higher proportion of parkland than any other city in the book, and among the many wonderful parks are two that set the standards for all others, the Olmsted gems of Central and Prospect Parks. Yet New York ranks toward the bottom of the list in the amount it spends per person on parks and recreation -- just \$42. Only four cities spend less. Some cities, including Seattle, Minneapolis, and Portland, Oregon spend from two to four times as much per resident. New York also spends a much smaller portion of its park department budget on recreation than many cities. Per capita, it has the lowest number of recreation centers, public swimming pools, and public tennis courts. For example, New York, with a population of about 7.4 million, has 35 recreation centers, 54 pools, and 860 sports fields; Chicago, population 2.7 million, has 260 recreation centers, 89 pools, and 1,019 sports fields. Harnik reports that adjusted for inflation, New York's overall spending on parks dropped 31 percent between 1987 and 1996, and the recreation program's budget shrank by 65 percent.

Nevertheless, Harnik is optimistic about the future for New York City parks, citing among other things the public-private partnerships that have revived many parks, the new waterfront parks in the works, and the efforts of scrappy and inventive park activists. In New York and all over the country, Harnik sees a new appreciation for parks taking root, with parks either newly opened, under construction, or being planned in most of the cities profiled.

One of the conclusions Harnik draws is that the successful city park systems have flourished because of a mayor or other powerful civic leader who cared about parks and had a vision for what parks could do for the city. Because there are so many other urgent priorities, parks are often last to get funded. It takes a leader who understands that trees, lawns, flowers, lakes, open vistas and river views, places to stroll or play ball -- things that feed the part of the human soul that responds to the natural world -- all affect the "hard" urban issues, like crime, business development, real estate values, tourism. That's something to think about for the next mayoral election.



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.