

The Filtration Plant Deal in the Bronx: Flawed Planning, Environmental Injustice

by {ga=tangotti}

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The City of New York is planning to write a fat \$243 million check for parks in the Bronx. But before park lovers uncork the champagne, take another look. This is a payoff for the city's plan to dig up nine acres of Van Cortland Park so they can build an underground water filtration plant. But the million dollar deal is deeply flawed as public policy and the project is the latest in a long line of environmental injustices, having a negative impact on the neighborhood of Norwood.

Gotham Gazette's Anne Schwartz recently raised questions about [the filtration plant proposal](#) and [park swap](#)

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A memorandum of understanding signed by the mayor and city council in September of this year appropriates an unprecedented amount of city funds to fix up Bronx parks. "This is something we want to praise," says Christian DiPalermo, Director of New Yorkers for Parks, "even though the process used for making the decisions wasn't inclusive."

But the most troubling part of this deal is that most of the funds will get sprinkled around the Bronx like fairy dust while the neighborhood of Norwood where the filtration plant is to be located gets all the truck traffic, noise, and pollution. "In most cases where parkland is taken," says DiPalermo, "funds are spent in the affected area. While the project is in Van Cortland Park, most of the money will be spent elsewhere." In addition, "city money is going to the state, for Roberto Clemente State Park" while the state already gets more taxes from the city than it spends.

Another problematic part of the deal is the \$6 million allocated for McCombs Dam Park. This park is located right next to Yankee Stadium and is the proposed site for a new stadium. Details of the stadium plan haven't been made public, but presumably the McCombs Dam Park would be relocated somewhere nearby. Even if that's the case, says DiPalermo, the parks money should go to parks, not "a deal to keep the Yankees." But then sneaking subsidies to stadiums seems to be one of this administration's nasty habits.

In the discussion about where to spend the money, the point of departure for planning ought to be the recreational needs of residents, not the deficits in the Parks Department budget. The

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city's planners don't systematically track recreational needs, so they don't even have the basic information they need to do that. No one even asked what kind of recreational facilities are needed in Norwood. Planning for parks is increasingly driven by the logic of big projects, private conservancies, and one-time infusions of largesse. Many of these big projects - stadiums, arenas, and private concessions - make millions of people passive spectators while a handful of athletes entertain. They reinforce chronic syndromes such as obesity that cripple people young and old. Recreation they're not.

Norwood and Environmental Injustice

The proposed plant is anything but a good deal for the 30,000 people who live in Norwood, the majority of them people with low-incomes and people of color. According to the local youth group The Cove, "The construction of a water filtration plant will cause a negative recreational, educational, ecological, health and life-threatening environment for the most precious resource, our children."

While every New Yorker may benefit from cleaner water (though there are still some questions whether filtration is needed in the first place), and lots of people in the Bronx will have their parks fixed up, the people who lose are all in one Bronx neighborhood. They will lose their parkland, suffer through up to a decade of heavy construction, and get only a fraction of the \$243 million. Of all the neighborhoods surrounding the park, they have the largest youth population and greatest need for recreational facilities. Their closest green neighbors are a golf course and a cemetery.

While the city's giant environmental impact study claims the plant will have no significant negative effect on the surrounding neighborhood, to those familiar with the city's policies for siting major infrastructure it raises the specter of environmental injustice.

Why choose the Van Cortland Park site over a similar site in Eastview, in Westchester County, on land the city owns and has been planning to use for years to build the filtration plant? Why did the city decide they would instead relocate a perfectly fine golf driving range, blast 80 feet into bedrock, fill the hole with a filtration plant, then put the driving range back on top - when they could have just built an above-ground building in Eastview? The city claims that at the Van Cortland site they wouldn't have to build as many tunnels as Eastview. Yet the costs for construction at the two sites, and the projected operating costs, are pretty much the same.

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Norwood activists want to know what the project's planners had in mind when they made the decision so these questions can be answered. But what we may have here is a classic case of "color blindness" - a failure to even consider the disparate impact of facility siting on low-income communities of color.

One of the reasons for the emergence of environmental justice claims by city neighborhoods over the last couple of decades has been the professed color blindness of city officials when they locate such facilities. The preferred sites are usually those where the land in the surrounding neighborhood is cheapest and, thus, where the impact on land values and property owners will be least. The planners are blind to the people who live and work there.

The environmental impact study for the Van Cortland plant appears to have come after the siting decision was made. It includes a section that is supposed to consider the disparate impact on "minority" communities. But these declarations are usually after-thoughts and often not taken seriously. The study notes that the neighborhood near the site is 75 percent "minority" (this term is from another epoch when people of color were a minority of the city's population, and to continue to use it only sows confusion). They even state that the area around the Eastview site is 60 percent "minority," making it appear that the two neighborhoods are comparable.

But what they don't consider important is that there are only about 3,000 people within a half-mile radius of the Eastview site, and these "minorities" appear to be very rich, even richer than the Westchester average. (However, one neighborhood activist points to a prison near the site and believes that's where the "minorities" are). The folks around the Eastview site had a median household income of over \$77,000 at the last census, over a fifth higher than the Westchester County figure and more than twice the figure for Norwood. Race isn't the only factor in environmental justice claims; it's the intersection of race and economics that makes color blindness so damaging.

The other thing that is never mentioned by the project planners is the rapidly rising land values around the Eastview site, spurred by large-scale commercial and retail development in the area. Were the city's planners thinking more like real estate developers than guardians of the public trust when they selected the Van Cortland site? This fits the approach now taken with parkland: save the choicest pieces for income-generating activities and dump on the rest.

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Norwood activists worry that if the filtration plant is built in their neighborhood the city's Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) won't do a good job of maintenance. They worry about the storage of chemicals and daily truck traffic. If the surrounding land and people are seen as having little value, why should those charged with maintenance be careful? Remember the department's lousy performance with their sewage treatment plants in West Harlem and Greenpoint that led them into intense court battles? More recently the department pleaded guilty in federal court to discharging mercury-contaminated water into an upstate reservoir for two years, and is still under the watchful eyes of a court monitor. Who will watch them in the Bronx?

For Norwood residents, the only section of the park that's accessible to them on foot is the one where the plant is proposed. Almost all of Van Cortland Park's facilities are on the west side, near Riverdale, where much wealthier, more mobile households can reach them by car. The Riverdale side of the park stands to get \$18 million from the city's deal. It's bad enough that more land in city parks is getting handed over to paying concessions like golf courses. But the city shouldn't dump on the rest, then reward the parks that are backyards for the rich.

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