

Community Gardens Endangered Still. Also: Preserve Bloomingdale Woods

by {ga=aschwartz}

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It has been two years since Mayor Guiliani attempted to auction off more than 100 community gardens to developers. Those gardens narrowly escaped the bulldozers when the Trust for Public Land and the New York Restoration Project worked out a deal with the city to buy the land. But about 500 similar gardens (no one seems to know the exact number) remain in limbo.

Gardeners from all over the city held a rally at City Hall to protest the lack of permanent protection for most of the city's community gardens.

The gardens were originally vacant lots that had been claimed by the city for non-payment of taxes. Beginning more than 20 years ago, the city encouraged residents to clean up and plant the lots, eventually leasing them to the gardeners under the GreenThumb program, but with the understanding that it could eventually reclaim them. Over the years, however, the gardens have come to serve an important public function in their communities, which tend to be low-income, minority areas lacking parks and open space. In many cases, the gardens have been catalysts for reducing crime and turning around a block or neighborhood, as people came together to clear out trash, haul in dirt, plant flowers, and create a place for children to play and neighbors to gather.

The gardens are protected under a temporary restraining order while a lawsuit filed by State Attorney General Eliot Spitzer makes its way through the courts. The lawsuit contends that state law requires the city to conduct an environmental review when it proposes to sell off the gardens. It also claims some of the gardens have been functioning as public open space for so long that they are essentially public parkland, which cannot be sold without the approval of the state legislature. A hearing on the city's motion to dismiss the case is scheduled for May 23rd in State Supreme Court. At the hearing, the state will also argue its motion to compel the city to provide information on the gardens that it previously requested.

Meanwhile, the city has been going through the process of getting gardens ready for sale and development. If the restraining order is lifted, the city is ready to proceed with developing 50 sites, including 20 in Brooklyn and the Bronx under a home ownership program that offers a streamlined process for developers building one- to four-family homes.

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City officials say that the gardeners always knew that the land could be reclaimed by the city at any time, and that the lots are needed to address the city's acute housing shortage. Garden advocates agree that more housing is essential, but claim there are hundreds of truly vacant lots in good locations that should be developed first, and that the housing being built on gardens is rarely affordable to most people who live in those communities. At the rally, speaker after speaker stressed that affordable housing and gardens are not mutually exclusive. "What we say to the Mayor, to Speaker Vallone, and to all of those who would like to be mayor: We want parks and gardens and housing, too," said Leslie Lowe, director the New York City Environmental Justice Alliance.

Last year, City Council members Kenneth Fisher and Adolfo Carrion introduced [legislation](#) that would establish a review process to protect community gardens and give gardens a way to seek permanent protection. But Council Speaker (and mayoral candidate) Peter Vallone has not yet scheduled hearings on the bill. On the state level, there has also been little action on a [number of bills](#) that would give the gardens more permanent protection or require a review process. None of the mayoral candidates have taken a position on the issue.

As for the gardens that were purchased in 1999, the usual work and politics of building a community-run green space continues. The New York Restoration Project, the organization founded by Bette Midler to clean up and maintain public spaces in New York City, will retain official ownership of its 41 gardens. Joseph Pupello, the organization's president, says the group has been getting familiar with its sites and their gardeners, as well as addressing basic liability issues, like sidewalk and fence repairs. While leaving the running of the spaces to the gardeners, it is working with them to increase the number of hours the gardens are open to the public and to build membership.

The Trust for Public Land, which helps preserve land but does not own or manage it, is working with gardeners to set up [three non-profit land trusts](#), in the Bronx, Manhattan and Brooklyn/Queens, to ultimately assume the ownership of the 63 gardens. It is something that has not been done before on as large a scale in other cities, according to the trust's spokesperson, Susan Clark. In addition to handling liability and insurance issues, the trust is also assisting individual gardens in democratic decision-making, conflict resolution, and increasing membership and public access. Those involved are finding it a complex and time-consuming process as gardens with their own rules and decision-making style come together to create the more formal structure of the borough-wide trusts -- "a little bit of democracy in the making," as one gardener describes it.

Anne Sounds Off

In spite of opposition by environmental groups, the city's final environmental impact statement has given the green light for ball fields to be built in Bloomingdale Park on Staten Island. Construction could begin as early as May 17 or 18.

It is understandable why politicians and residents in south Staten Island are clamoring for ball fields on a 38-acre section of the 138-acre natural area. A highway edges one side of the park; typical Staten Island-style new houses, closely built together, crowd another. Ball fields and playing spaces are in short supply because of the area's rapid growth, and the developers of housing are not required to include these amenities for the families they attract.

Many people do not understand the benefits of protecting natural areas, especially wetlands: that they soak up rainwater to prevent flooding of houses and businesses downstream, harbor native plants, and provide habitat for animals and migrating birds. Most people also do not know that clearing sections of native vegetation provides a foothold for weedy species, allowing them to invade the parts of the forest that are left alone. They don't realize that some local and migrating bird species nest only in the interior forest habitat of large 100-plus acre forests -- few of which are left in the metropolitan area.

Bloomingdale Park was originally purchased with state environmental protection funds to protect the watershed of Lemon Creek, and ultimately the water quality in Raritan Bay, as well as to prevent flooding downstream. Moreover, it is completely forested, with hilly terrain, poorly draining soils, and many wet places as well as numerous areas with wetland "indicator" trees, whether or not the state has officially designated the areas as wetlands. Walking around the woods (and looking at the topographical maps), it is hard to imagine where a total of ten soccer and baseball fields and basketball and tennis courts would fit, and how they would stay dry once built. Putting ball fields into this forest will involve significantly altering the terrain and cutting thousands of trees (even if many of the oldest are left, as promised). The dirt road that divides the two sections of the park will be paved, and parking spaces put in. And as anyone who has ever seen this sort of construction project knows, no matter how many promises are made by the politicians, there will undoubtedly be a great deal of unintended damage as bulldozers punch their way into the ball field sites and drag out soil and felled trees.

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A study done by a consultant to the parks department found that ball fields in Bloomingdale Woods would cost two to three times as much to build as similar fields on other nearby sites. The parks department initially opposed the plan, until Mayor Giuliani silenced it and transferred the project to the Department of Design and Construction. And with parks department budgets inadequate to keep up the city's existing parks, will these high-maintenance fields end up useless and decommissioned?

Unquestionably, Staten Island's children need more sports fields (as do the children in all of New York City!). But there are several flat, well-drained sites nearby that could be made into ball fields, just as quickly and for a lot less money -- if the political will was there. Why is the city rushing ahead to build on one of its few remaining natural areas?



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.