

In the News: Playing hardball in Bloomingdale Woods. Also, Parks embattled by accusations

by Anne Schwartz

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In the News: Playing hardball in Bloomingdale Woods. Also, Parks embattled by accusations of prejudice and arbitrary fees; court victory over a water filtration plant underneath Van Cortlandt Park.

(Feb '01) A plan to put ball fields in Bloomingdale Woods Park is rolling ahead, in spite of opposition by Staten Island's leading environmental group, Protectors of Pine Oak Woods. The project raises the question of whether it is acceptable to build recreational fields in a city park set aside for its natural values.

Many people see the dizzying pace of development in south Staten Island as the underlying problem. So much new housing has been built and continues to be built without any planning for recreation or other community needs. Staten Island is actually one of the most biological diverse areas in the state, and environmentalists are trying to preserve some of the last unprotected scraps. Yet there is such an acute shortage of playing fields that kids are on waiting lists for sports, and sports groups are clamoring for the use of existing open space.

The project's supporters say that only the park's eastern section would be affected -- just 38 of a total of 138 acres, with actual construction on 11.8 acres. Baseball and soccer fields, as well as tennis and basketball courts, would be fitted in among the hills, to use the most level spots, save 70 percent of the mature trees, and avoid the officially mapped wetlands scattered about, although significant earth-moving would also be required.

The environmentalists say that they want ball fields, too, but argue that other potential sites would be more appropriate and cost-effective. They say that the wetlands in this section of the park are actually much more extensive than the official maps show, and that the project will fragment a rare native-species forest, allowing invasive species to come in. They note that the City Department of Environmental Protection originally designated this section of the park for its Bluebelt stormwater management plan. They also insist that it doesn't make sense to put ball fields in a hilly, wet site with poorly draining clay soils, predicting problems with muddy and eroded fields. A feasibility study done for the Parks Department in 1999 determined that creating sports fields in Bloomingdale Park would cost four times more than putting those fields at several other sites, with higher maintenance costs as well.

The political pressure to build is huge: Borough President Guy Molinari, Councilman Stephen

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Fiala, and Mayor Guiliani are all lined up behind the \$5.8 million project, along with many other local officials. The Staten Island Advance editorialized against Protectors, saying the group was unreasonable in its opposition to altering even a fraction of the park. The Parks department resisted the idea at first, but has kept its silence since. The city transferred the project to the Department of Design and Construction, which intends to finish the required Environmental Impact Study by March. The department is accepting written comments on the issue until February 21.

Embattled at Parks

Parks Commissioner Henry Stern has been under siege recently, criticized for setting arbitrary fees for events in the parks and for discriminatory promotional practices within the department. Many of the criticisms focus on free-market strategies he has used to compensate for budget cuts by the city. The parks chief, who has a reputation for politically incorrect comments, eccentric behavior, and an abrasive management style, has also been called one of the best parks commissioners the city has ever had. Most recently, City Council members attacked his policy of charging high fees to homeowners who want to cut down established street trees.

In the discrimination case, the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission found that there was "reasonable cause" to believe that the department had discriminated on the basis of race and national origins in the promotion and assignment of employees. The commission also said that the department had retaliated against three workers who complained of discrimination. Twenty black and Hispanic current and former "parkies" filed complaints with the commission, saying they were passed over, some of them numerous times, for promotions that were given to younger, less experienced white colleagues. They also charge that job locations were assigned along racial lines.

A lot of the resentment focuses on a program (called the "Class of" program) instituted by Stern in 1994 to recruit top college graduates the way businesses do. Participants don't follow union rules and typically work long hours for little pay, but are given a lot of responsibility and have access to top department officials. About 80 percent of the young people who have signed on have been white. Although most program participants leave after two years, some have stayed and been promoted to permanent senior jobs - some of which were never formally posted -- ahead of career employees.

The day after the discrimination finding was released, Commissioner Stern appeared before the

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City Council with 46 boxes of financial data subpoenaed in an inquiry into the way the parks department set fees for companies and charities to stage events in the parks. This long-standing parks practice came under fire last fall when the Catholic Museum balked at paying \$20,000 to stage a fundraiser in a Harlem park.

A few days later, Stern was back before the council testifying against a bill that would substantially lower what the department could charge homeowners who cut down trees on their sidewalks. Homeowners must pay the cost of planting a certain number of saplings, depending on the size of the original tree. This issue comes up mostly when a tree needs to be removed for a construction project -- a homeowner can't cut down a healthy street tree just because he or she doesn't like it. The parks department has collected \$1.5 million in replacement tree costs in the last seven years, with the money going into a special tree trust. Council Speaker Peter Vallone said the fees "appear to be another set of arbitrary charges imposed by the Parks department." At the hearing, Deputy Parks Commissioner Alan Moss said that the number of replacement saplings was calculated from an accepted forestry standard based on the diameter of the tree.

Filtration plant blocked at Van Cortlandt Park

A decision by the state's highest court has essentially killed the city's plan to build a water filtration plant in Van Cortlandt Park. The plant was the city's solution to a federal order to filter the part of the city's water supply that comes from the Croton watershed. The court affirmed that state law requires permission from the legislature to use a park for another purpose, which is unlikely given the wide opposition to the plant by Bronx legislators, including Assemblyman Jeffrey Dinowitz and State Senator Guy Velella, who represent the district the park is in.

There has been speculation that the new administration might allow the city to avoid filtration through new measures to protect the already heavily developed Croton watershed. The New York Times reported that Charles Sturcken, chief of staff of the city's Department of Environmental Protection, said that the agency would pursue every avenue with the federal government. But Environmental Protection Agency spokeswoman Mary Mears was quick to squelch that notion. "Our bottom line is that the Croton watershed must be filtered in order to protect public health," she was quoted as saying. "That bottom line isn't one that comes from any particular administration." If the filtration plant is not built soon, the city faces millions of dollars in fines.



Anne Schwartz is a freelance writer specializing in environmental issues. Previously, she was

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