

Final Design for Brooklyn Waterfront Park. Also: Funding for Urban Parks

by Anne Schwartz

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Less than a year ago, neighborhood opposition killed a proposal for a massive hotel and development along the DUMBO shoreline in Brooklyn. Since then, with amazing swiftness, a realistic plan for the entire downtown Brooklyn shoreline has been created, and has won the backing of most of the area's civic organizations and elected officials. In a borough that has the least amount of parkland per capita in New York City, the Brooklyn Bridge Park would be one of first of a new generation of parks, along with the Hudson River Park, to reclaim the scenic and recreational assets of the waterfront.

The Brooklyn Bridge Park Development Corporation presented the final design to the public in July. For years, Brooklyn community groups have been advocating for a waterfront park. Last September, the Port Authority (which owns the piers along the waterfront) agreed to give the Brooklyn Bridge Park Development Corporation a year to come up with a plan for the park. New York State provided funding for the planning process. Part of the agreement was that the park must generate enough income to pay for maintaining itself.

The design for the park evolved through a series of public workshops attended by some 4,000 people over the past year.

The proposed park would occupy a long, very narrow site running from the Manhattan Bridge to Atlantic Avenue, transforming an industrial matrix of piers, warehouses, and parking lots into a landscaped space with spectacular views of the harbor and the Manhattan skyline. The plan includes numerous recreational amenities, such as playgrounds, a swimming pool, an ice-skating rink, and an outdoor amphitheater, as well as commercial projects like a hotel and a banquet facility. It also calls for restoring the nine-acre Empire-Fulton Ferry State Park and its historic warehouses.

The plan has wide support in the community. Although some people are unhappy with the commercial features, most seem to have made peace with the assumption that the park must produce income for its continued upkeep. A group of Brooklyn Heights residents oppose the plan, however, largely because of a predicted increase in foot traffic down Joralemon Street, which would be the main route to the park from the subway. The group, Waterfront Development Watch, recently sent petitions and letters, its analysis of the proposed park and an alternative plan to the Governor and Mayor.

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By the end of the summer, the Brooklyn Bridge Park Development Corporation will submit its master plan to the State and the Port Authority, which must approve it and agree to provide funding for construction, estimated at \$150 million. (The City has already pledged \$64 million over four years for the project.) A lead agency will be designated to oversee the park's completion. Then begins the extensive public environmental and land use review, ultimately leading to a more detailed design.

Even before the review process, the City and State could make some of the changes set forth in the master plan. The City has committed \$7 million in this year's capital budget to improvements to its property in the area. The State has begun repair work in Empire-Fulton Ferry State Park.

Anne Sounds Off: Landmark Law for Land Conservation

You probably won't read about it in the papers, which have largely overlooked the progress this summer of a bill that is of major importance for urban parks, as well as land and wildlife conservation nationwide. The legislation, called the Conservation and Reinvestment Act (CARA), would provide nearly \$3 billion a year from offshore oil and gas royalties to preserve open space, protect wildlife, restore coastlines, and help develop urban parks and recreation areas.

Among other things, the legislation would dedicate \$900 million annually to the Land and Water Conservation Fund. This fund was supposed to receive that amount from offshore oil receipts, but has been shortchanged since it was established in 1965. Half of the money is currently divided among the states for state and local parks, recreation, and natural resource protection. The new legislation would allocate funding to other urban park, recreation, and forestry programs as well.

The House passed its version of the legislation, 315-102, in May. In late July, The Senate Energy and Natural Resources committee approved a carefully crafted bill that resulted from intensive negotiations between Senators Frank Murkowski (R-AK) and Jeff Bingaman (D-N.M.), who each had their own version of the bill. The full Senate is expected to consider the bill after the August recess. Opposition in the Senate comes from a small group of western senators concerned about property rights issues, who may try to block the bill's passage.

Some environmental groups, while supporting the bill, want to make sure that the final legislation doesn't allow funds meant for coastal restoration to be used for environmentally

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damaging projects like roads and port facilities. They also want to eliminate a provision that offers incentives for new offshore oil and gas drilling in Alaska.

Conservationists have been trying for decades to secure a permanent funding source for federal land and wildlife conservation programs. With the strong support of the Administration and key legislators, supporters feel this year offers the best shot ever for this legislation. "This is clearly the moment," said Alan Front, senior vice president of the Trust for Public Land. New York's senators should press for a Senate floor vote and support the passage of the Conservation and Reinvestment Act.



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.