

## A Top-Down Program Creates More Parks

by Anne Schwartz

Thursday, October 22, 2009 12:00 AM

---



Image from [NYC Dept. of Parks and Recreation](#) A rendering of the North Park Bird Observation Tower, one of many proposed projects in the Fresh Kills park project.

When I started writing this column in 1999, during the Giuliani administration, the city treated parks as an expendable frill. The parks department always seemed to be at the [end of the line](#) when operating funds were handed out, continuing a decline in maintenance funding and fulltime staff that began several decades earlier. Even as an urban parks renaissance was taking root nationwide, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani sought to [auction off](#) the community gardens reclaimed from the rubble of the 1970s and took the first steps to have the High Line [torn down](#).

Mayor Michael Bloomberg came into office in 2002 with a very different view of the role of parks. He had served on the board of the [Central Park Conservancy](#) and understood how open space and greenery can improve a city's quality of life and therefore boost its economy and the health and well-being of its citizens.

Soon after taking office, Bloomberg stayed the High Line's execution and joined former City Council Speaker Gifford Miller in supporting the [creation of a park](#) on the defunct elevated railway line. He negotiated a [legal settlement](#) with former Attorney General Eliot Spitzer that transferred nearly 200 community gardens on city land to the parks department and created a review process to determine the fate of dozens of others. He [opened City Hall Park](#) to the public, and in his first State of the City address [announced](#) that he intended to complete the longstanding plan for a recreational path circling Manhattan.

Now, as he runs for a third term, Bloomberg has staked part of his legacy on the creation of new parks, greenways and other open space, much of which he spelled out in his 2006 economic and environmental sustainability blueprint, [PlaNYC 2030](#).

## A Top-Down Program Creates More Parks

by Anne Schwartz

Thursday, October 22, 2009 12:00 AM

---

"We are in the middle of our largest parks expansion since the 1930s," he said in an email statement. "In the last eight years, we've added more than 500 acres of new parkland to the city. We have focused on them so intently because they teach our children about the outdoors, clean the air we breathe, encourage exercise, increase property values and boost tourism."

Yet for all its strengths, the Bloomberg record on parks is not unblemished, from the perspective of park advocates. The mayor has set troubling precedents by alienating public parkland. His autocratic style has resulted in a number of projects being imposed over the objection of the affected communities. Maintenance and funding issues remain, especially for outer-borough parks and sports fields. Critics also charge that the Bloomberg administration has gone too far in relying on private and commercial sources of funding for parks, resulting in privatization of and reduced access to our most public of spaces.

### The Mayor Giveth...

With the expenditure of \$1.1 billion in capital dollars over the past eight years, as well as funding from federal, state and private sources, the Bloomberg administration has presided over a dramatic transformation of the waterfront into parks and greenways. It has launched more than a thousand park improvement projects and added new parkland in all five boroughs, from tiny [Greenstreets](#) in traffic intersections to the first sections of parkland being created from the former [Fresh Kills landfill](#). Bloomberg's transportation department, under commissioner Janette Sadik-Kahn, has carved out new public space from the streets and created miles of new bicycle lanes.

PlaNYC sets forth additional greening and open space goals, although the timeline for reaching them has been stretched out because of the recession. It aims to plant a million new trees; the [one-quarter mark](#) was reached this month. Other goals include the creation of [eight new destination parks](#); expanding the [greening of the streets](#); creating or enhancing a [public plaza](#) in every community; and exploring natural solutions for [managing stormwater runoff](#), including protecting wetlands.

## A Top-Down Program Creates More Parks

by Anne Schwartz

Thursday, October 22, 2009 12:00 AM

---

To help meet the PlaNYC goal of having a park within a 10-minute walk of every resident, the administration aims to open 266 schoolyards after school and on weekends. So far, it has [opened 69 yards](#) that do not need capital improvements and 20 renovated sites. It is working with the [Trust for Public Land](#) and the education department to turn more than 150 additional schoolyards into community parks.

### And The Mayor Taketh Away

At the same time that the Bloomberg administration has invested heavily in increasing the amount of parkland and open space, it bears responsibility for taking away major amounts of parkland over vociferous community opposition in two cases: the building of a [filtration plant](#) underneath 28 acres of Van Cortlandt Park and the [construction](#) of the new Yankee Stadium and four parking garages on 25 acres of Macombs Dam and Mullaly parks. Both projects are in low-income, minority communities.

These parkland alienations set a disturbing precedent. The one at Yankee Stadium has been seen as especially troublesome because the community parkland went to a private, for-profit company: the New York Yankees. Instead of the large, centrally located park ringed by mature trees that it once enjoyed, the community will get parks and playing fields scattered around the neighborhood farther from where people live. In both cases, the creation of the replacement parkland has fallen far behind schedule, depriving the community of parkland for years.

To bolster its bragging rights, the Bloomberg administration counts the Yankee parkland that has been completed so far toward its total acreage of new parkland. But it has not subtracted the parkland now buried under the Yankee's new mausoleum.

Of the record \$600 million the administration has spent on parks construction in the Bronx, \$200 million has gone so far to replace the parkland displaced by the stadium -- taxpayer dollars that went to save the Yankees the inconvenience of having to play a season away from their home stadium. Another \$243 million being spent in the Bronx is in mitigation for the alienation of Van Cortlandt Park.

The city missed an opportunity to compel the Yankees to contribute to the upkeep of the replacement parks, said Christian DiPalermo, executive director of the parks advocacy group

## A Top-Down Program Creates More Parks

by Anne Schwartz

Thursday, October 22, 2009 12:00 AM

---

### [New Yorkers for Parks](#)

. "Our biggest concern is that, although it looks great when you open the parkland, in the future, with maintenance needs not being met, it will deteriorate," he said.

### **No Public Option**

Some of the harshest criticism of Bloomberg's approach to parks involves what many residents see as his tendency to develop projects and designs without first creating a consensus in the community and then pushing them through over the opposition of the local community boards. "The biggest complaint we hear is that there is a lack of community-based planning and consultations," said Geoffrey Croft, president of the watchdog group [NYC Park Advocates](#) .

Bloomberg's top-down corporate style and impatience for the slow and messy process of public consultation is no secret. While discussing parent involvement in larger school issues recently, he [told](#) The Villager, "You would never build Central Park, you would never build anything, if you always had nothing but community involvement."

DiPalermo gives the Bloomberg credit for opening the door to advocates in the beginning stages of PlaNYC. "Clearly, under Giuliani, that door was locked tight if not hermetically sealed," he said. "We would like to see, if Bloomberg is elected to a third term, that he takes the next step and brings in more interaction on the local level."

Lack of public involvement was evident in the negotiations with Bronx politicians resulting in the alienation of parkland for Yankee Stadium. The necessary state legislation was pushed through so quickly that people in the community never had a chance to alter the outcome. In addition, the administration has faced opposition and lawsuits from residents who say that the community input was an afterthought in a [redesign of Washington Square Park](#) , a plan to put a [restaurant](#) in Union Square Park, and the [changing](#) of a community-developed plan for Brooklyn Bridge Park to include luxury high-rises.

In Washington Square, opponents of the redesign said it would affect the park's long tradition as a social gathering place and impromptu performance space. Parks commissioner Adrian Benepe said, "Anything you do in New York City is controversial. We didn't kick anyone out. All of the uses continue, but it's just in the context of a much more beautiful park."

## A Top-Down Program Creates More Parks

by Anne Schwartz

Thursday, October 22, 2009 12:00 AM

---

Critics say, however, that many of park plans that have been developed under Bloomberg, like those for Williamsburg or Brooklyn Bridge Park, are essentially esplanades around private housing and discourage public access. "These parks are for passing through and looking at, and maybe if you can afford a fancy dinner there," said Judi Francis, president of the [Brooklyn Bridge Park Defense Fund](#)

. The group is fighting the city's plan to build condominiums inside the park to generate revenue for its upkeep, as required by the city-state agreement creating the park.

### The Funding Conundrum

City appropriations for parks maintenance, consistently one of the [top service priorities](#) for community boards, increased during the Bloomberg years until the economic crash last year, but has never come close to the 1 percent of the overall budget park advocates have been calling for since Bloomberg first ran for mayor in 2001. Most parks without private funding still do not have on-site staff to care for them.

"The big difference from the parks-world perspective is that parks have been treated as an essential service," said DiPalermo. "Bloomberg brought respect back to the delivery of park services, increasing funds when he could and when he had to cut, cut proportionally to the other agencies."

In addition to traditional philanthropy and private partners, Bloomberg has encouraged corporate donations, concessions, the sale of naming rights, and funding mechanisms that link commercial development with the maintenance of public parks.

Conservancies and other partner groups offer many advantages. For one, these organizations can often be more flexible and innovative than government agencies, as has been the case with the Central Park Conservancy, which developed a highly effective zone management system that has become a model for park systems around the country.

Some park advocates, however, find the Bloomberg administration's increasing reliance on private funding problematic, saying that it erodes the public nature of parks. A case in point, they say, is the 2007 [deal](#) with the [Randall's Island Sports Foundation](#) in which a group of private schools agreed to spend nearly \$90 million over 30 years to renovate and maintain fields on the island in exchange for near-exclusive use after school hours. The deal generated

## A Top-Down Program Creates More Parks

by Anne Schwartz

Thursday, October 22, 2009 12:00 AM

---

tremendous outrage, but was eventually approved with small modifications, including funding for a shuttle service from East Harlem.



Photo (cc) [Bricolage](#) A view of Manhattan from Randall's Island.

"We should always have a maximum amount of transparency for public-private partnerships," said DiPalermo. "We believe it is time to create some general principles and a framework for these partnerships to operate efficiently and effectively, but most important, that the parks remain open to the public.

### Looking to the Future

Bloomberg has overseen the largest capital investment in the park system in decades, with more to come if the goals of PlaNYC are realized. "We haven't seen a major official do so much for parks since Robert Moses," said DiPalermo.

The city's parks needed restoring after decades of deferred maintenance. It is much more economical to care for parks infrastructure and plantings on a regular basis than to let them deteriorate to the point where they require major renovation.

Parks, though, compete with other essential services for funding, while fixed costs like pensions and debt service consume an ever-larger chunk of the budget. Although the operating budget for the parks department increased in actual dollars during Bloomberg's tenure (until the recent economic crisis), it is still just under 0.5 percent of the total city budget. The greatest challenge going forward will be how to maintain the green empire Bloomberg has done so much to renew and expand, especially in this difficult economic climate.



Anne Schwartz, in charge of the parks topic page since its inception in 1999, is a journalist who specializes in environmental issues.