

BRONX COMMUNITY BOARD NO. 8

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE PARKS & RECREATION COMMITTEE HELD ON APRIL 23RD, 2014, AT THE RIVERDALE YM/YWHA

Attendees

Committee members CB8: Bob Bender (chair), Laura Spalter (vice chair), Rosemary Ginty, Michael Heller, Robert Press, Mercedes Zegarra-Soja, Maria Khury. Community committee members: Herb Barret, Christina Taylor, Tom Durham, David Gellman

Other CB8: Robert Fanuzzi, Dan Padernacht

DPR: Hector Aponte (Bronx Commissioner), Andrew Penzi, Charles McKinney, Margot Perron, Dennis Burton, Rakeem Taylor

In addition approximately 34 members of the community attended. Attendance sheets are available in the Community Board office.

Agenda

The meeting was called to order at 7:10 pm. Minutes of the March meeting were approved.

Art Students League Project in Van Cortlandt Park.

Ana Sofia Marti and Phyllis Sanfiorenzo presented a project called "Tree of Life" that will appear in the space reserved for public art south of the VC Mansion (the formal entrance to the mansion). The theme of the sculpture is insect life in different stages of development. All of the insects are native to VCP. Seven artists are collaborating on the sculpture. It is the fourth year of a project to introduce art to the community in the park. The sculpture will be 12 feet high, sitting on a concrete pedestal 3 feet high. 28 steel tubes will hold 14 sculptures, two for each of the seven artists. The colors of the insects will be lifelike. The sculpture will be put in place at the beginning of June and will remain through next May. There will be an explanatory plaque affixed to the base.

Committee members expressed concern about possible vandalism of the sculpture. It was observed that the current sculpture has not been vandalized. Nonetheless, the artists agreed that a fence around the sculpture and perhaps a higher base might deter vandals. If there is damage, the sculpture will be repaired.

No further approvals are required. Committee members approved the sculpture with the recommendations noted above.

It's My Park Day.

Bob Bender mentioned that It's My Park Day will take place on Saturday May 17 from 10 am to 3 pm at Marble Hill Playground. He mentioned that outreach is underway to neighborhood institutions such as St. Stephen's Church and the Marble Hill Tenants Association (thanks to CB8 member Georgia Santiago). Tony Edwards from Councilman Rodriguez's office has been contacted as well.

A sub-committee consisting of Bob Bender, Laura Spalter, and Herb Barret will follow up.

Ft. Independence Park.

Bob Bender provided brief background on the history of the Ft. Independence Park renovation, which goes back to 2009. He introduced Andrew Penzi from the DPR Capital Projects Group, who is responsible for Bronx capital projects such as the Ft. Independence Park renovation.

Andrew reported on the current status of the project, including why the park is closed (except for the restroom and playground). Fences and pathways are under reconstruction now. Drainage problems in the park are being remediated. The dog runs are being reconfigured. Work is estimated to be completed by the end of August. It's possible that landscaping could delay re-opening of the park. (*Note: after the meeting Bronx Parks Commissioner Aponte said that if landscaping was not completed, the park could be reopened with temporary fencing around the areas being landscaped.*)

There was a vigorous discussion of the projects. Among the questions and comments were these:

Why was there no notice to the community about the closing of the park?

Commissioner Aponte: the contractor determines operational details such as this notification. There should have been more notice given.

Who will maintain the jogging path? Stone screenings are not a good surface for the dog run. Why can't a temporary dog run be established? Why are there no garbage cans at the reservoir? Why can't some part of the park remain open?

Commissioner Aponte: DEP, not Parks, is responsible for the reservoir property. People cannot be in the park while it is a construction site.

Why can't a temporary dog run be established near the park?

Commissioner Aponte: Most Bronx parks do not have dog runs. Once a dog run is established, it damages the ground where it is located.

Andrew Penzi: moving fences to create a space for the public in the park during construction violates the terms of the construction contract. Any changes to the contract must be vetted and approved. There could be additional costs and there would be delays in completing the project due to the vetting and approval process. Such delays and costs may be in the contractor's interests but not the public's.

CB8 chair Bob Fanuzzi: *the boundaries between the park and the reservoir are unclear and should be clarified.* There was general agreement on this point.

Andrew Penzi: the stone surfacing on the dog run was carefully researched and DPR believes it is the best surface for the dog run.

Neighbors of the park didn't know about the project. The details are unclear.

Commissioner Aponte: the long delay in implementing the design due to DEP tree removals was a complication. The design plan can be forwarded to the CB8 office and posted on the CB8 website.

One of the historic plaques on the Giles Place entrance has been missing. It should be replaced.

Commissioner Aponte: we will look into this.

Are the basketball court and handball court being renovated? Yes.

Can this project be presented again to the neighbors? The design will be made available.

Will you come back to us if there are changes to the project? Yes.

Following this discussion Commissioner Aponte and Andrew Penzi met at the back of the room with some of the neighbors of the park for further discussion while the meeting continued.

Van Cortlandt Park Master Plan.

Charles McKinney of DPR presented an overview of the Master Plan for Van Cortlandt Park that he has been developing for the past two years. Mr. McKinney previously presented the master plan at the October 2013 committee meeting and then briefly at the March 2014 meeting.

One major goal of the master plan is to improve circulation in the park (primarily pedestrian circulation). At the present time it is difficult to walk throughout the park in a continuous fashion. The plan will rationalize the pathways, closing paths that have caused erosion and introducing paths that will show off scenic areas in the park. (These paths will not be surfaced with asphalt.) It will introduce three pedestrian bridges to improve circulation over the highways that have divided the park. The plan envisions covered structures in recreational areas such as the stadium complex and the Shandler recreation area. These covered surfaces can be catalysts for recreation. A new nature-themed tot lot playground is recommended for the area near the VC stables to serve the upper Broadway North Riverdale area. A new community garden is recommended for the Mosholu entrance, which will also improve the appearance of this entrance to the park. The VC stadium needs repair.

Restoration of the forest is a high priority. It is suffering from a proliferation of Norway maples, which shade out other plants, and from invasive vines that have grown in areas opened to sunlight by highways. These vines choke other vegetation. The northwest woods and Croton woods should be priority areas.

Tibbetts Brook should be restored. A long-term goal would allow it to flow freely from Westchester into Van Cortlandt Lake. Someday the lake should flow south toward the Harlem river rather than into the city sewer system as at present. DEP has a Bluebelt plan to restore this waterway, but that plan is unfunded and has no timetable. DPR and DEP would have to work together to restore this area.

The Putnam trail could be resurfaced with a porous asphalt surface, which is reported to be the current recommendation of the DEC. (The review process for the Putnam trail continues independently.)

Natural area management must be intensified. Trails such as the Putnam and Old Croton Aqueduct must be maintained. The perimeter of the park should be improved so that it looks like a park and so that it is pedestrian friendly. Right now highway entrances and exits inhibit pedestrian circulation at the perimeter.

The Parade Grounds need a restroom at West 251st Street and Broadway, where plumbing for a restroom already exists. (Note: this has been a committee capital priority for years.) A food concession ought to be considered too.

The historic core of the park must be maintained. The formal (south) entrance to the VC Mansion should be reconsidered and enhanced. An amphitheater could be introduced in the area between the mansion and the stadium.

Below are some of the many questions from the audience and from committee members.

Why an amphitheater? Why not renovate the stadium? There is a need for a smaller performance space. And this space has to be sufficiently removed from the noise of the subway to work for this purpose.

There are problems with ATVs entering the park. Wouldn't creating new entrances in Yonkers exacerbate the problem? These entrances have to be carefully constructed to keep out ATVs.

Why is there a need to renovate the John Kieran nature trail? Christina Taylor of the Friends of Van Cortlandt Park responded that the Kieran trail is being improved by FVCP under the guidance of a trail plan devised by the New York/New Jersey Trail Conference.

Can the community see this plan? Christina Taylor: We will send a link to the committee and to the community board. Charles McKinney: The Master Plan trails plan coordinates with the NY/NJ trail plan.

It's important to maintain the historic core of the park. The Putnam Trail should not be altered.

There is a plan to restore the wetlands because DEP is under a mandate to lessen storm-water overflow. Why not integrate the DEP plan into the Master Plan, especially with regard to Putnam Trail renovations? We want to coordinate but the Bluebelt wetland plan is a DEP plan and there is no guarantee that the timetable for both projects will coincide. The Putnam Trail plan can't be put on indefinite hold.

There are too many questions remaining about the Master Plan. Does nature have a place in this plan? The plan defers to nature but it's important to improve circulation around the park, too.

There should be facilities for bikers as well as pedestrians.

There are elements of the plan that seem out of date already. The ice rink may not return. There is a plan for a new 213th Street entrance at Jerome Avenue. Why are there entrances to Yonkers? We want to invite residents of Yonkers to participate in the park and respect the park, especially children.

Yonkers parks are open only to residents. What will this plan cost? Some of this work can be done by volunteers. The park definitely needs more maintenance personnel. All these projects must be funded on an individual basis.

Capital projects are great but maintenance is essential. Agreed. But community commitment is also essential. In Riverside Park [where Mr. McKinney was the planner], there were more than 80 plots that were tended by volunteers.

Commissioner Aponte, do we have adequate maintenance in Van Cortlandt Park? The current staffing is what it is. The Master Plan is a vision and the hope is that it will attract money to the park, which can help increase staffing.

What exactly is a covered recreational area? Multiuse recreation, covered in some way, and using existing surfaces.

What will be the surface of these new trails? In forest zones there will be a soft surface. In the northern part of the park trails are not paved. In Croton Woods the trails are dirt. Width will vary depending on context. The details are site specific.

Will the proposed perimeter paths include existing paths? Yes.

I commend you on unifying the park. The new trails that you propose are pedestrian trails? Yes. *Can we have trails that are porous and soft and not toxic?* Yes. *Are any pedestrian trails changing to mixed use?* Only one disused trail in the Woodlawn area. *Will the surfaces and uses of the John Kieran, Cass Gallagher, and John Muir trails change?* No. *Bridle paths?* No change. *Putnam Trail?* The surface will be a porous aggregate that is permeable. The DEC has to approve the surface and this is what they want. *Will the Old Croton Aqueduct Trail remain pedestrian only?* Yes.

How can we maintain the Memorial Grove? Will money be set aside for it? No money has been set aside for the Grove. It needs a Friends of Memorial Grove to care for it.

A resolution to support the VCP Master Plan was proposed and discussed. There was discussion about whether to include references to the proposed DEP Bluebelt. Commissioner Aponte said that it is the goal of DPR to work with DEP but DPR cannot leave decisions about Tibbetts Brook and the Putnam Trail in the hands of DEP. He stressed that the Master Plan is a "vision," that specific projects will come back to the committee on an individual basis.

Mr. McKinney said that DPR is hoping for approval of the plan from the committee. When asked whether further changes to the plan are anticipated, he said no.

The following resolution was proposed:

The Parks & Recreation Committee of Bronx Community Board 8 endorses the Van Cortlandt Park Master Plan with the understanding that the surfaces of the trails in the Master Plan will be natural, permeable, non-toxic, and pliable to the maximum extent possible and will meet the standards for adjacent wetlands, and that the Department of Parks & Recreation will return to the community board at the earliest possible time before proceeding with the projects described in the Master Plan.

In favor, 8: CB8 members – B. Bender, M. Heller, R. Press, M. Zegarra-Soja, M. Khury.
Community committee members – H. Barret, T. Durham, D. Gellman

Opposed, none.

Abstain, 3 – R. Ginty, L. Spalter;
Community Committee member: C. Taylor (with cause)

Maria Khury mentioned a tree giveaway sponsored by TD bank and invited those interested to contact her for details.

The meeting adjourned at approximately 10:30. The next meeting will take place on May 28.

Bob Bender
Chair
Parks & Recreation Committee