

Minutes of the Parks & Recreation Committee Meeting, January 24, 2024

Attendees

In Person:

Committee: Present: Deb Travis (Chair), Bob Bender, Margaret Della, Robert Fanuzzi, David Gellman, Rhashida Hilliard, Rob Jacklosky
Absent: Ramdat Singh

Guests: National Society of Colonial Dames of America: Cecily Nisbet, Carol Cadou;
National Society of Colonial Dames of New York (local chapter of NSCDA): Lee Potter

On Zoom:

Marguerite Morrison, Clint Allen (NSCDNY) and more than 35 people attended remotely. Full list is available in the CB8 office.

Agenda

Chair Deb Travis called the meeting to order at 7:03 pm.

Attendance was taken. A quorum being present, committee members approved the minutes of the November meeting unanimously.

Chair Travis mentioned that Fort Independence Park has been chosen to receive funding through the Parks Department's Community Initiative Program. This funding will permit improvements to the park in cooperation with the community.

Discussion of Van Cortlandt House Museum Operations

The Chair began discussion of the role of the National Society of Colonial Dames of America (NSCDA) in the Van Cortlandt House Museum (VCHM) operations. Observing the restrictive nature of membership in the NSCDA, Chair Travis wondered whether limitations on NSCDA membership make it the appropriate entity to operate VCHM.

Marguerite Morrison, president of the National Society of Colonial Dames in the State of New York, introduced the Executive Director of the NSCDA, Carol Cadou, and her colleague Cecily Nisbet, who had traveled from Washington, DC to attend the meeting. Ms. Morrison introduced other NSCDNY representatives who have direct oversight of the VCHM, including former President, Lee Potter and former Museum Director and current Historic Advisor, Nick Dembowski.

Clint Allen, properties manager at the VCHM, began a PowerPoint presentation on behalf of the NSCDA. He presented a brief history of the Colonial Dames, and explained that the relationship between the NSCDA and the VCHM began in 1897, ten years after the Van Cortlandt family sold

the house to the City of New York. VCHM has since operated in a public-private partnership. VCHM is one of 65 properties operated by NSCDA, more sites than are operated by the National Trust. Mr. Allen observed that the Dames award scholarships and sponsor nationalization programs in addition to their work with historic sites. Membership in the society is limited to direct descendants of a list of 1,900 men who were civic leaders prior to the American Revolution in the former British colonies. The society has no male members but is adding 250 women to its list of eligible ancestors, including some people of color, in order to expand its membership and attract a new generation of women. So far they have selected two women of color who they believe have made valuable contributions to the history of the United States.

Carol Cadou reviewed the new interpretive information now displayed at VCHM, which draws on research done by Nick Dembowski, president of the Kingsbridge Historical Society, that re-discovered the role of enslaved people on the Van Cortlandt plantation, and initiated the Enslaved People's Project in partnership with the Van Cortlandt Park Alliance (VCPA). She noted that in the most recent school year, approximately 1,500 students, most from public schools, toured the VCHM.

To clarify the relationship between the NSCDA and the Historic House Trust, Ms. Cadou said that the Dames are responsible for the interior of VCHM and the Historic House Trust for the exterior. Currently there is a capital project funded by the Historic House Trust to do repairs to the roof and exterior of the building and to add ADA accessibility. VCHM will be closed for a period of time once the work begins which is anticipated to be 2025.

NSCDA is seeking a new museum director for the VCHM to replace Mr. Dembowski, who has stepped down from that position. He will continue to be affiliated with the VCHM in an educational capacity.

Following the presentation there was a robust question and answer discussion. Chair Travis began the discussion by expressing her appreciation for the presentation, but noted that few people in the Bronx would qualify for NSCDA membership. Observing that VCHM was a plantation house operated by enslaved people, Chair Travis again questioned the appropriateness of NSCDA operating the VCHM.

Discussion followed about how NSCDA intends to expand its membership. Ms. Cadou said that expansion of membership will be done regardless of race; the only requirements are family history in the U.S. dating to July 4, 1776 or earlier, that they are direct descendants of the official list of ancestors, and that members must be female. Ms. Cadou pointed out that nonprofits often have membership requirements that limit who can become a member. She said that the NSCDA was a pioneering women's organization when it was founded because women could not yet vote and in the case of married women, had few rights independent of their husbands.

Committee member David Gellman recommended that the committee focus on what NSCDA is doing for programming in the community. Responding to a question from Chair Travis, Lee

Potter of the New York Chapter of NSCDA discussed the process for hiring a new museum director of the VCHM.

CB8 board chair Julie Reyes asked whether the NSCDA would consider admitting members who are descended from enslaved people. Ms. Cadou said yes, that is the case, but the problem is identifying these people because record-keeping of enslaved persons was poor, making verification of descent difficult.

In response to a second question from Board Chair Reyes, there was a brief discussion of how people who don't qualify for membership can become "friends" of the various chapters of the NSCDA.

In response to a question about the lack of written records precluding broader membership of the NSCDA, Ms. Cadou said that additional documents are coming to light and are being used to identify enslaved people who were previously unknown. She also said that the Dames are not defined solely by membership but also by their programs, including history that is relevant to people who do not qualify for membership. This, she believes, helps to compensate for the lack of documentation that inhibits membership in the NSCDA.

Meredith Horsford of the Historic House Trust (HHR) said that the programming at VCHM is done by the museum director and that the NSCDNY will be working more closely with the HHT in the future.

Karen Argenti praised the presentation made earlier and reminded the meeting that the NSCDA was an organization founded to empower women and that expanding its membership is a wonderful goal, but do not overlook what the NSCDA has already done. Karen also thanked Nick Dembowski for his valuable research into the enslaved people at Van Cortlandt.

Stephanie Ehrlich, Administrator of the Van Cortlandt Park Alliance (VCPA), introduced a VCPA board member, Stacey Wieder, who suggested a community advisory group be created that would include representatives of the NSCDNY, VCPA, and community members, as well as people with expertise on the historical questions relevant to the VCHM. She also said that VCPA looks forward to continuing its relationship with NSCDNY.

Chair Travis opened a discussion of programming at VCHM by asking where funding for programming comes from. Ms. Morrison responded by saying that it costs between \$175,000 and \$250,000 a year to operate VCHM. Most of that money goes to salaries for staff. The planned renovation will limit programming potential at VCHM. Clint Allen said that the museum is underfunded, which is why NSCDNY sometimes steps in and spends money to maintain VCHM. Mr. Allen said that he expects that staffing costs will increase after the renovation is completed because they will spend less money on maintenance and it is the intention to expand staff at VCHM.

CB8 board member Ramdat Singh said that as someone who grew up in the area and teaches nearby, he did not know that it was possible for teachers to arrange for tours of the VCHM for students. How can this information be more widely disseminated in the community, he asked?

Nick Dembowski responded that VCHM does need to reach out more widely to local schools and teachers. Mr. Dembowski also responded to earlier questions, saying that he likes the idea of creating alternate models for determining membership in the NSCDNY. He referred to difficulties in establishing the identities of the enslaved people on the Van Cortlandt plantation.

Committee member Bob Bender urged that there be more community outreach to inform the community about the VCHM and asked what the plan is for increasing outreach. Lee Potter of the New York chapter of the Dames said that community outreach would be one factor in hiring a new museum director of the VCHM. She also wants to explore virtual outreach, which Ms. Horsford has done at the Dyckman Farmhouse. Nick Dembowski said that banners in the park are helpful, but an advisory group, as proposed earlier, could help expand the outreach. Ms. Morrison agreed that community members will have to help determine how best to engage the community.

Committee member Robert Fanuzzi agreed that there isn't enough visibility for the VCHM in the community. Make VCHM a jewel in the crown of NSCDA properties, he urged, recommending that the Dames use a revitalized VCHM to help expand membership and fundraising for the NSCDA. He asked that staffing at VCHM be representative of the community, but also include people knowledgeable about fundraising through grants.

Stephanie Coggins mentioned that her Facebook group was impressed by the VCHM on a recent visit. She urged that the community board focus on programming there rather than NSCDA membership.

Elizabeth Wilson, a community member who teaches at Hostos, said that despite outreach to the VCHM, she has found it hard to schedule school trips there and wishes it were easier to do.

Maya Ciarrocchi asked whether VCHM could do arts programming as is done at the Dyckman Farmhouse. Meredith Horsford of HHT said that they support arts programming there and hopes to encourage more of that at VCHM after renovations are complete.

Ms. Cadou thanked everyone for the discussion and the ideas about what can be done at VCHM. Board Chair Reyes responded by urging the NSCDA to make VCHM a higher priority.

Lee Potter addressed the issue of whether VCHM operates through a license from the City of New York. Chair Travis said that it was her understanding that the license lapsed years ago, but also that it is the expectation of the HHT that the license will eventually be renewed. Ms. Horsford agreed.

Ms. Potter asked whether it was the sense of the committee that the NSCDNY not continue to operate the VCHM. Deb Travis said that the community has not proposed a resolution or other formal action; the purpose of this meeting was to raise issues for discussion.

In response to questions about programming, community engagement, etc. the committee asked that the NSCDNY/HHT come back to the committee by May with some answers to these questions. NSCDNY representatives demurred because of the search for a new museum director, but committee members explained that they are looking for an interim report on this subject going forward, which should be possible to do in a few months. Committee members also urged that the new museum director be more representative of the population of the Bronx.

Report from the 50th Precinct about Robberies in Van Cortlandt Park

Capt. Pierce, Commanding Officer of the 50th Precinct, said that progress has been made in apprehending someone responsible for some of the robberies in Van Cortlandt Park (VCP). The person they are still looking for appears to be Hispanic, rides a moped, and robs single women or older people of their phones and wallets. He did note that there has not been a robbery in the park since January 3. He also said that most robberies occur between noon and 6pm. He reported that a new light tower is temporarily located in the Van Cortlandt Golf House parking lot.

Capt. Pierce noted that robberies do occur throughout the park and many are committed by people riding on mopeds. He said that between 40 and 50 mopeds have been seized in VCP and that the precinct has focused on mopeds, which are usually unlicensed, as are the drivers. This makes it possible for police to confiscate the mopeds.

Capt. Pierce said that the precinct is cooperating with the 47th Precinct and Westchester law enforcement on this problem. He also noted, in response to a question, that installing more cameras in VCP is not an option because of a lack of electrical capacity.

Stephanie Ehrlich previewed a discussion of "Let's Green NYC" that she will discuss at the February committee meeting.

Discussion of Budget Priorities

Chair Travis noted that she had sent the previous year's committee budget priorities to committee members. She urged that committee members think about our most recent budget priorities and also other possible priorities at our February meeting. David Gellman urged everyone to consider new items that deserve consideration for committee budget priorities.

Karen Argenti urged that the committee add funding for an easement on the property from W. 230 St to W. 225 St so it can be added to the Putnam Greenway South project.

The committee adjourned at 9:31 pm.

Minutes prepared by Bob Bender

Minutes reviewed by Debra Travis