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Growing Greener in the City: Open Space Advocacy for Environmental Justice in Jackson Heights

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Recommended Citation

Finn, Donovan, "Growing Greener in the City: Open Space Advocacy for Environmental Justice in Jackson Heights" (2011). *School of Marine & Atmospheric Sciences Faculty Publications*. 8.
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Progressive Planning

The Magazine of Planners Network

Why Unions Matter



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Progressive Planning is published quarterly by Planners Network, Inc., a non-profit corporation in the State of New York.

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Participants in the Our Communities, Our Jobs March in Los Angeles, March 26, 2011.

Photo: © 2011 Marie Kennedy

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Growing Greener in the City

Open Space Advocacy for Environmental Justice in Jackson Heights

By Donovan Finn

DEFINITIONS of environmental justice have traditionally focused on racial and ethnic minority populations and their tendency to be located near toxics and other environmental harms. But more recent conceptions have begun to consider income, social class and lack of access to municipal resources such as parks and transit. The New York City neighborhood of Jackson Heights, in northwestern Queens, is by New York standards a middle-income community. It is also the city's most diverse neighborhood and among its most park-starved. In the last two years, a loose coalition of local activists, planners and politicians have advanced an environmental justice message and worked to create more open space in this dense urban community, even at a time of deep fiscal retrenchment by the city.

Platted in 1910 as a working-class community of large cooperative apartment buildings, Jackson Heights is today considered possibly the most diverse neighborhood in the world. The current population is two-thirds foreign born, over half Latino and also heavily South Asian, with non-Hispanic whites comprising less than a quarter of the population. Combined with the neighborhood's proximity to LaGuardia Airport and the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, and with one-quarter of neighborhood residents' incomes below the federally defined poverty level, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC) officially listed Jackson Heights as a "Potential Environmental Justice Area" in 2007.



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Based on this designation, in 2008 the Jackson Heights Beautification Group in partnership with the non-profit social service provider Queens Community House received a \$25,000 NYSDEC grant to create a community-based sustainability plan. *A Green Agenda for Jackson Heights* was completed in June 2010 in partnership with the Pratt Center for Community Development after three large public workshops and fourteen "mini visioning sessions." Volunteer working groups are now strategizing implementation and the city has promoted *A Green Agenda* as a replicable model for other grassroots sustainability plans.

A Greener Jackson Heights

Concurrent with *A Green Agenda*, other local efforts have also invoked environmental justice rationales. Jackson Heights is woefully lacking in public open space. The non-profit New Yorkers for Parks ranks New York City Council District 25 (which includes Jackson Heights) 49th out of 51 districts in parkland acres per resident. The neighborhood contains only one park—a heavily utilized, fully paved 1.92 acre playground called, erroneously, Travers Park. In a dense neighborhood with 21 percent of its population under the age of 18, open space needs are palpable. The issue is not new. In 1971 a neighborhood leader said in the *New York Times* that Jackson Heights was "a lousy place for children," with "no play streets, no ball fields, no bike streets." Given the area's demographic makeup, advocates have long argued that this lack of open space is a form of environmental racism.

The neighborhood has relatively few empty lots or development "soft sites," but in early 2008 a coalition

of neighborhood advocacy groups (including professional planners, academics and planning students) representing the Western Queens Neighborhood Association, Friends of Travers Park, the Jackson Heights Beautification Group and the Jackson Heights Green Alliance began meeting to strategize low-cost and bureaucratically expedient solutions. NYC Department of Transportation (DOT) officials suggested that the groups apply for semi-permanent closure of a neighborhood street through the DOT's NYC Plaza Program or Summer Streets/Weekend Walks program. Although these programs are mostly designed for commercial corridors, residents proposed a variation whereby the community would operate a volunteer-run play street on 78th Street between 34th Avenue and Northern Boulevard (adjacent to Travers Park)—like the Police Athletic League of New York City has been running since 1914.

The first 78th Street Play Street operated on Sundays from July to November 2008. Volunteers moved traffic barricades into place at 6:00 A.M. on Sundays, monitored and cleaned the street and removed traffic barricades at 8:00 P.M. Instantly, residents accustomed to an overcrowded park filled the carless street with activity. The weekly Greenmarket expanded around the corner, children rode bikes and played games and adults

socialized. Organizers scheduled free events aimed at the neighborhood's diverse population, such as a "learn to bike" clinic, fire department safety demonstrations, exercise and dance classes and concerts and theater performances. Thousands of people used the street over the five months of Sundays while extensive press coverage generated calls to organizers from groups hoping to replicate the program in other neighborhoods.

"We Want the Play Street!"

The 2009 Play Street saw a marked increase in users, and at a community visioning workshop that spring, participants' top request was expanding the program's days and hours. Working with the DOT and newly elected city council member Daniel Dromm, organizers developed a more ambitious plan for 2010 to restrict traffic completely from July 1 to August 31 in addition to Sunday closures in the spring and fall. Dromm also secured funding for Queens Community House to hire two attendants through the city's Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP).

Despite DOT support, the plan still required approval from Queens Community Board 3 (CB3), one of the city's fifty-nine appointed advisory boards



Photo: Will Sweeney

Happy Play Street users.

for local issues including land use, zoning and service delivery. CB3's Transportation Committee voiced strong hesitation over the initial proposal, including concerns about emergency vehicle access and crime and gang activity, and the committee ultimately voted to recommend that the full board deny the application. Galvanized by this setback, organizers worked feverishly before CB3's meeting in May to address the Transportation Committee's concerns and acquire letters of support from all of the neighborhood's city, state and federal elected officials. Additionally, two hundred people attended a public forum about park issues, petitions circulated and a letter-writing campaign was undertaken. On the evening of the May 20th Community Board meeting, over 150 residents rallied at Travers Park and marched more than a mile to the meeting, chanting, "We want the play street." After a marathon meeting including passionate speeches in English and Spanish on both sides of the issue, the board voted to approve the Play Street application despite the reservations of the Transportation Committee.

The ribbon cutting for the 2010 Play Street was held on July 1 with over 500 people in attendance. Over the summer, local businesses and residents donated art supplies, toys and sports equipment, all of which was stored in a portable storage locker onsite. Volunteers and SYEP workers organized games and art projects, kept the street clean and turned on the adjacent fire hydrant on particularly hot days. Even community board members that had spoken in opposition were seen using the street.

Organizers continue working toward their ultimate goal to create a permanent public plaza on 78th Street, and this year hope to replicate 2010's two-month car-free Play Street, with various improvements. Fundraising is underway to provide more shaded seating options for elderly residents and to provide a wider variety of recreation opportunities that respond to the diverse racial and ethnic groups that utilize the Play Street. Organizers have recently met with the New York Civic Participation Project (NYCPP), an advocacy coalition of six local labor unions focused on immigrant issues, to strategize ways to publicize the availability of the Play Street for recreational uses and plan free events that would be of particular interest to the NYCPP's immigrant constituency.

Concurrently, play streets have become a focus for transportation and open space advocates citywide. The NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene and the Strategic Alliance for Health are promoting a summer 2011 play street initiative. Furthermore, the advocacy group Transportation Alternatives has made play streets a prominent tactic, publishing a 2011 *Play Streets Best Practices* manual among other efforts.

Grow a Park

Though the Play Street has been a low cost solution to expanding open space access, other solutions are needed. Located conveniently across 78th Street from Travers Park, the Garden School is a private K-12 school founded in 1923. The Garden School has faced decreasing enrollment for the last few years, blamed mostly on a faltering economy that has made it difficult to recruit students in a borough with few wealthy residents and relatively good public schools. To continue operation, the school has taken on a series of high-interest loans, currently totaling over \$5.3 million.

In the summer of 2010, the school approached council member Dromm with an offer to sell the school's 29,000 square foot asphalt playfield to the city. Seizing the opportunity, Dromm secured \$5 million for the purchase—the school's asking price at the time—in the fiscal year 2011 budget. But in late 2010, the school announced that it was putting the lot and the excess air rights from its existing building on the open market. Needing \$500,000 almost immediately to cover operating costs, the school's board members explained that fiscal needs outweighed their desire to maintain the neighboring parcel as open space and that the city's mandatory Uniform Land Use Review Procedure (ULURP, required for city land purchases) would take longer than the school could afford to wait.

The Department of Citywide Administrative Services (DCAS) had already committed to the purchase and was undertaking the necessary due diligence. The city, however, unlike a private buyer, does not pay a deposit upon signing a real estate deal and only makes a full payment upon completion of ULURP, which can take a year or longer. The city's official offer letter was insufficient to help the highly leveraged school



Photo: Anna Dieguardi

attain the additional bank loan or line of credit it needed to stay solvent in the meantime. Ironically, the lengthy ULURP process is designed, at least in part, to assure opportunities for community comment in the city’s land development process, offering some level of protection against capricious development. Though many high profile urban renewal projects and rezonings have still been approved despite enormous public opposition, in this instance ULURP was the only identified obstacle in a project with little opposition, and in fact enormous community support.

Motivated by the failure of initial negotiations, residents began exploring other solutions. Planners living in the neighborhood offered to conduct the required environmental reviews *pro bono*, avoiding mandated competitive bidding and shortening the ULURP timeline. A “kids’ letters to the mayor” project in support of the purchase collected over 650 letters. Finally, a community meeting was held with just thirty-six hours notice during a January blizzard where over 150 local residents expressed outrage at the Garden School board members for their shortsightedness and fiscal mismanagement.

By the end of that meeting a rough plan had been formulated: the community would attempt to raise

In many New York City apartments, even playing with a train set inside is a frustrating activity. These Play Street users take advantage of the available space.



Photo: Donovan Finn

New York City Council member Danny Dromm, Council Speaker Christine Quinn, New York State Senator Jose Peralta and other dignitaries (and dignitaries-in-training) open the 2010 Play Street at a July 1, 2010 ribbon cutting.

\$500,000 in microloans from neighborhood residents, ultimately aggregated as a bridge loan to fund the Garden School until the conclusion of ULURP. No official deal was struck, but the plan gave residents hope that the community's \$500,000 no-interest loan and the ability to have a park next to their school, instead of an eight-story condominium, would convince the school to finalize a deal with the city. As of this writing, the Grow a Park campaign (www.growapark.org) has raised over \$450,000 in pledges from 286 neighborhood residents, and while the city and the school are still negotiating, residents are optimistic a deal will be reached.

Lessons Learned

Rallying a coalition of local actors behind the issue of open space access by framing it as an environmental justice issue, advocates in Jackson Heights have combined planning and activist approaches, pushing this issue to the forefront of local policy. Based on input from over 400 participants, seven of the *Green Agenda's* forty-two goals are under the heading "green spaces," aimed at increasing the amount and quality of open space in the neighborhood. Publicity around this plan has also helped engage the city's Office of Long-Term Planning and Sustainability, which is now assisting *Green Agenda* organizers with implementation.

The Play Street illustrates that creative approaches to land use and transportation planning can be promoted from the grassroots, even in dense urban neighborhoods. The city still does not have a codified system for working with neighborhood groups to create temporary play streets. The Jackson Heights coalition, however, leveraged planning skills (analysis, design, visioning workshops, etc.) and demonstrated capacity to manage the project despite a lack of paid staff. DOT staff and a receptive city council member were important, but community organizing approaches were also employed to overcome initial Community Board hesitation.

Advocates in Jackson Heights have thus far successfully employed an ad hoc approach to open space expansion, though facilitating city purchase of the Garden School athletic field would be a substantially more important achievement. While the Grow a Park campaign perhaps sets a dangerous precedent by asking



One of the most popular aspects of the Play Street was this small patch of AstroTurf, bought on Craigslist and placed on the street. Travers Park, despite the name, has no grass or turf anywhere in its 2-acre footprint.



The 78th Street Play Street program in Jackson Heights is in its third year. For 2010 organizers closed the street to traffic for all of July and August, the duration of the NYC public school summer break.

neighborhood residents to subsidize park expansion, the microloan scheme may nevertheless eventually facilitate conversion of the last remaining parcel of private undeveloped land in Jackson Heights to public use.

It should be acknowledged that Jackson Heights also has access to a kind of social capital that many other neighborhoods fighting environmental justice battles lack. Owing to its relative affordability and quality housing stock, a critical mass of Jackson Heights residents have creative and non-profit backgrounds—academics, planners, legal aid attorneys, social workers, journalists, independent filmmakers. These skillsets have been important, but only because advocates also harnessed community participation and direct action in creating not just successful projects but a movement around open space issues and their environmental justice implications. **P²**