New York Neighborhoods Fight Land Grabs: Public Parks Going to Professional Teams

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New York Neighborhoods Fight Land Grabs

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Public Parks Going to Professional Teams

By Donovan Finn

Three proposed development projects would privatize public parkland in a section of Queens with a large population of low-income people and recent immigrants. The projects are supported by New York City’s billionaire mayor, Michael Bloomberg, and other elected officials. But opposition to these megaprojects has brought together diverse sectors from the neighborhoods of Corona, East Elmhurst, Jackson Heights and Flushing, who have mounted a campaign to stop them in their tracks.

The proposals, which center on Flushing Meadows Corona Park, the largest park in the city’s most diverse borough, would remove a huge chunk of green space in an area that has many unregulated apartment conversions, doubled-up households and little public or private open space. One proposal envisions a 35,000-seat professional soccer stadium. A second includes a mall on parkland currently used as a parking lot for Citi Field, the home of the New York Mets. The third proposal calls for expanding the National Tennis Center, a venue for professional competitions including the U.S. Open. Together these proposals not only threaten to reduce public recreational space, but the cumulative impacts would potentially radically alter the physical, economic and social fabric of surrounding neighborhoods.

Opposition to these land grabs has heated up as Mayor Bloomberg enters the last of his twelve years at the city’s helm, seeking to cement his legacy in new piles of bricks and mortar. Many residents and activists across the city have been burned by the administration’s prior promises and believe that the mayor acts on his pro-development agenda without addressing the needs of local residents, which include high-quality affordable housing, good jobs, better schools, better transit and increased open space. To many Queens residents, these latest plans are more of the same, giving away city parkland to line the pockets of wealthy developers while ignoring local concerns.

Since these three proposals became public in mid-2012, local residents have developed a vigorous campaign to highlight these inequities, bring negotiations out from behind closed doors and make the developers accountable to the community.

Flushing Meadows Corona Park: Famous Target of Development Schemes

Flushing Meadows Corona Park is a remnant of the city’s unbounded drive for economic development and global cultural significance. Originally the Corona Dumps of the Brooklyn Ash Removal Company, it was a World’s Fair site in both 1939 and 1964 on leftover land situated between the Van Wyck Expressway and Grand Central Parkway, all giant projects engineered by Robert Moses. What is now the park’s Queens Museum of Art was the original home of the United Nations (1946–1950), and the park also hosts the New York Mets baseball team and the U.S. Open tennis tournament (both facilities sit on parkland leased from the City).

Thus the park has long served the interests of New York’s economic
and cultural elite, however, it also serves 2.2 million Queens residents, half of whom are foreign-born and have an annual median income $10,000 lower than Manhattan residents. Compared with the city’s other large parks, Flushing Meadows faces daunting challenges. It was planned more as a venue for commercial attractions than as a park and is woefully underfunded and unevenly maintained, including numerous decaying World’s Fair structures. Though the park has long been a partly commercial venture, this has done little to benefit the public. After the departure of the Giants and Dodgers in the late 1950s, the City brought major league baseball back to New York by leasing ninety acres of officially mapped city parkland to the New York Mets until 2060. The 42-acre United States Tennis Association (USTA) National Tennis Center, which opened in 1978, generates $205 million in profits every year as site of the U.S. Open. Yet both tenants pay artificially low rental fees that don’t even fund park operations, going instead into the City’s general fund.

The park’s neighbor to the northeast, the Willets Point “Iron Triangle,” further complicates matters. This 62-acre collection of auto repair shops, scrap yards and other small businesses, accounting for some 2,000 jobs, has long been neglected by the City, which never bothered to pave streets or install sewers in most of the area, even as the Mets’ $600 million Citi Field stadium looms in the background. Willets Point has been a redevelopment target for fifty years, but in 2007 the City began a concerted effort to transform it using the power of eminent domain, and it now owns or has options on 95 percent of the area.

**Bloomberg’s Green Giveaways**

Under the Bloomberg administration, maintenance of New York’s public spaces and remediation of City-engineered blight has increasingly fallen to the private sector. Simultaneously, large developable parcels near the built-out core of
Although Major League Soccer calls the plans to build a $400 million stadium in Corona Park, requiring the use and offsite replacement of 13 acres of parkland “privately financed,” *Crain’s New York Business* reports that the backroom deal being worked out will include “a 35-year, $1-a-year lease, with no sales taxes on construction materials, no property taxes and no revenue sharing with the City.”

Over 600 Queens residents turned out for the September town hall at Our Lady of Sorrows church in Corona, Queens, to learn about and protest development plans by the owners of the New York Mets, the United States Tennis Association and Major League Soccer.

First, the USTA hopes to expand its Billie Jean King National Tennis Center and U.S. Open campus with a $500 million project to annex an additional three-quarters of an acre of public space, construct a third stadium and two parking structures and move a critical access road. Meanwhile, residents have been long frustrated by the detrimental impacts of U.S. Open visitors on the park every summer, and the USTA is not even offering to replace the parkland it needs to acquire, arguing that their facility is publicly accessible—despite court rental rates that begin at $22 per hour.

Second, as part of a larger proposal to redevelop the industrial brownfields of Willets Point, Sterling Equities (the Mets development arm) and the Related Companies are proposing a 1.4-million-square-foot mall on the parking lot of Citi Field stadium, which is mapped city parkland used by the Mets under its 1961 lease. The Sterling/Related partnership was the successful respondent to the City’s 2011 Request for Proposals (RFP) to redevelop the first 23 acres of Willets Point. All twenty-nine respondents to a prior RFP in 2009 requested City subsidies for remediation, but leveraging its lease rights to public land, the Sterling/Related joint venture proposed the mall as a revenue stream fund remediation. Local residents fear potential impacts on traffic, transit and nearby small
Opponents of the City’s plans for real estate developments in Flushing Meadows Corona Park march past the park’s Unisphere in December of 2012. Major League Soccer claims that the front entrance to its proposed stadium, which is in alignment with a tree-lined boulevard that terminates in the iconic monument, is just a lucky coincidence.

businesses. The plan also postpones affordable housing promised by the City when the first version of the project was approved in 2008, angering many who fought hard for these guarantees and fostering a widespread sentiment in the community: if the Mets can build a mall under the terms of their lease, why not affordable housing instead?

Finally, Major League Soccer (MLS) is aggressively pursuing plans to build a $400 million stadium in the park, requiring the use and offsite replacement of 13 acres of parkland. Though MLS calls the project “privately financed,” Crain’s New York Business reports that the backroom deal being worked out will include “a 35-year, $1-a-year lease, with no sales taxes on construction materials, no property taxes and no revenue sharing with the City.” While soccer is extremely popular in the borough, the proposal strikes many Queens residents as simply the wrong project in the wrong place, with inadequate benefits. MLS is not offering to assist with ongoing park maintenance or game-related cleanup or policing, and only proposes replacement parkland that has been roundly criticized as wholly inadequate.

The combined effects of these proposals, many community members fear, would begin with untold headaches from three large construction projects in a relatively small, dense urban area and conclude with the loss of dozens of acres of public open space, increased traffic and pollution, more congestion
on the already over-burdened #7 subway line and cement the notion that parkland in poor communities is for sale to the highest bidder.

**Community Coalition Against the Land Grabs**

As these plans came to light, residents quickly recognized that the plans ignored pressing local issues while giving away public land for private gain, and that they were being fast-tracked by the very governmental agencies ostensibly tasked with assuring due diligence and transparency. Coalescing as the Fairness Coalition of Queens (FC Queens), concerned community members worked to alert and organize the public, beginning with a 600-person town hall meeting on September 17, 2012 at Our Lady of Sorrows Church in the Corona neighborhood. Community reaction was decisive, and press coverage, from local Queens papers to the *New York Times*, was overwhelmingly critical of how the proposals were being managed. A second town hall in Jackson Heights days later attracted 250 residents whose reaction was similarly outraged. FC Queens has since met with all three developers to express community concerns and delivered a 4,000 signature petition to Mayor Bloomberg in early December, three days after 200
residents turned out in dismally cold rain for a two-mile march past all three proposed development sites.

Key grievances of the coalition include recognition that the three proposals are within a one-third-mile radius of one another and all on public land, and that they have enormous potential for detrimental cumulative impacts. Yet no City official, City agency or representative of the three developers will acknowledge this reality. MLS recently told Queens’ Times-Ledger that they hoped to break ground soon so that “the other developers would have to account for the stadium in their plans, but the league would not have to consider those other projects in its environmental impact study.”

The proposals also highlight the city’s schizophrenic policy agenda. Painting himself as the country’s greenest mayor through efforts like the PlaNYC sustainability plan, which promotes expanding park space and reducing flood risks as part of its agenda, Bloomberg continues to simultaneously prioritize real estate development and privatization of city services. As the New York Post reported in November, the Mayor’s Office recently created “a special list of high-profile priority projects to fast-track before Bloomberg’s third term ends,” which the Post confirmed includes the MLS and USTA projects and almost certainly includes Willets Point as well. All three Flushing Meadows projects, though, are proposed not merely on public land, but also on marshland offering natural flood protection.

Particularly after superstorm Sandy, it strikes many as hypocritical that Bloomberg would openly ignore the climate-related risks of development merely to burnish his reputation as a mayor who gets things done.

The proposals also illuminate how the City has increasingly abdicated responsibility to provide basic services, instead creating blight until it can offer up corporate developers as saviors. What the City and developers appear not to have foreseen was a community that, after decades of neglect and scapegoating, would finally push back against such giveaways, demanding that community needs be prioritized. Bloomberg’s own relentless drive to leave his mark on the city has almost certainly contributed to this backlash. Too commonly developers’ trickle-down benefits have failed to emerge, creating a culture of skepticism citywide. Although MLS claims it carefully analyzed twenty New York City sites before choosing Flushing Meadows, many suspect that it assumed the largely immigrant community would embrace the plan without recognizing its risks.

Vulnerable neighborhoods face daunting challenges in such a pro-development climate. Related, the Willets Point co-developer, is one of the largest real estate firms in the world, and the U.S. Open is the most lucrative sporting event in the city. MLS will ultimately spend more than $1.5 million in 2012 lobbying city officials. The city’s Economic Development Corporation, the right arm of the mayor, has relentlessly promoted a growth agenda, and recently admitted it used city funds to finance illegal lobbying of City Council members and other officials to promote projects, including Willets Point.

In 2013, the mayor’s famous city hall countdown clock will start to inch towards zero. MLS will burn through cash holding more contrived pep rallies disguised as “town halls” like the one in early December, handing out free food and soccer paraphernalia. The environmental review processes for Willets Point and USTA projects will begin. But FC Queens hopes to keep local residents and park user needs at the forefront. One of the developers told the coalition recently, “We want to create a reason for people to come to this part of Queens.” Local residents don’t need a reason. They are already here. But clearly they will need to work hard to make sure no one forgets that they have a right to be there.