

Full definition of Union Square Park proposal is urged

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On the last day of January, the Parks Committee of Community Board 5 preliminarily approved the redesign of the federally landmarked Union Square Park's North End. The process, if not the result, has been a complex example of community and government interaction, still moving forward.

Change has been a permanent feature of New York's real estate, ever since we found out that an island cannot expand indefinitely, sideways and upward. Currently,

Mayor Bloomberg's proposed changes for the West Midtown Rail Yards (also a CB5 topic) are getting some major press.

Meanwhile, in our

neighborhood, the Department of Parks and Recreation is doing its bit, to replenish the scant funding of maintenance of our essential green spaces through rent-paying restaurant concessions, park by park. In Union Square Park we have had the first such tenant for a few years, on a modest scale, the Luna Park restaurant, at the foot of the North End pavilion.

In Stuyvesant Square Park, several attempts to convert the little convenience building into a food kiosk have failed, due to community resistance and the proposed concessionaires' lack of interest. Further West, the food kiosk in Madison Square Park has been implemented.

But what of the North end of Union Square Park, nearly 20 years after the rehabilitation of 1985, one that converted a neglected haven for derelicts and drug dealers

into a thriving community resource, with most of the credit due to the Greenmarket. The latest design, sponsored by the Union Square/14th Street LDC/BID, now renamed the Union Square Partnership, to be paid for by \$8M of city and \$6M of unnamed private funds, has run into major opposition.

The Union Square Community Coalition, a major neighborhood group has voted to reject the project in its entirety. Over a dozen quasi-regulatory, community and consumer organizations and elected public officials have also expressed their disapproval of substantial parts of the effort, if not of the whole: the Fine Arts Federation of New York, The Municipal Art Society of New York and its preservationist arm, Place Matters, Historic Districts Council, Flatiron Alliance, Greenwich Village Block Associations (an aggrega-

tion of 45 block associations) and Fifteenth Street Block Association. The sentiments are shared by Assembly Member Steven Sanders and State Senator Thomas Duane as well as the Tilden Democratic Club, Gramercy Stuyvesant Independent Democrats and the Village Independent Democrats.

To understand the problems, the proposed redesign should be subdivided and evaluated in detail, element by element. The most objectionable appears to be the perceived enclosing of the North end, with a row of 15 trees facing 17th Street, from Broadway to PAS, and bleacher-like rows of "shaded public seating." The designers have compromised and reduced the trees to seven, and eliminated the obnoxious seats, as well as a central water fountain that would disappear underground on the four Greenmarket days. How

the seats would have been hidden on market days was never clear.

The North end of the park has traditionally been the site of public protest, from the first Labor Day parade in 1882 through the years of May Day observances, demonstrations and sharing of grief after 9/11. Keeping this space open appears to be the most common objective.

An equally controversial item is the consolidation of the two playgrounds into one, with more space, for which City Council Member Margarita Lopez had provided \$1.9M of the funds. This issue is tied in with the rebuilding of the upper part of the 1930 Pavilion as an upscale restaurant, with a bridged extension ("terrace") above, while the "pit" below, currently used by Luna, would serve as a connection of the unified playgrounds. The design of this area is

murky, particularly the addition of a "takeout window" for people with slimmer pocketbooks.

While there is not much doubt that CB5 in its monthly meeting of February 10 will approve the report of its Parks Committee, the project faces a further rocky ride, through the Art Commission, and, subsequently the NYS Department of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, administrators of the National Historic Landmarks.

From the point of view of this old-time project manager, the plans are too patchy, and someone soon should call a halt until the definitions are completed. Approval of multi-part projects with undefined details is full of pitfalls. As for the battle against part-privatization of parks, it was forfeited long ago, but we can still strive to define the limits, case by case.