

January 23, 2006

Dear Friend of Union Square Park,

On behalf of NYC Park Advocates, and our campaign to Save Union Square Park, we would like to extend our warmest wishes for a happy and healthy New Year. We would like to thank the more than 57 area block associations, community groups, art and civic organizations, concerned citizens, and many elected officials who have lent their support for this important cause. We would also like to extend our sincerest thanks to the numerous staff members of the many elected officials who have worked tirelessly on this issue. Enclosed, please also find additional information concerning the upcoming community board meetings regarding the renovation of the North End of Union Square Park. Also included is an updated list of supporters.

Because of your efforts over the past year and a half, we have prevented an irresponsible playground design from proceeding, while also stopping a restaurant plan that would have prevented children from enjoying thousands of square feet of desperately needed playground space. Unfortunately, our work is not over. The City continues to ignore the wishes of the community despite vehement opposition. The City/Union Square Partnership (BID) are still insisting that a private seasonal restaurant be built inside the historic pavilion. This exclusive commercial use would occupy the pavilion during the time when the public's need for park facilities and recreation space is at its greatest, Spring through the Fall. This is unacceptable. We are asking for your continued support in helping to defeat this irresponsible plan, and support an alternative plan that addresses the needs of the community.

To accommodate the unwanted seasonal restaurant, the plan would take the historic pavilion, built in 1930, away from the non-paying public for this exclusive, commercial use. For decades the public has been denied the pavilion's use due to municipal neglect. It should be preserved and refurbished, and be given back to the public so it can serve the purpose for which it was originally built, and still very much needed. It is not hard to imagine a variety of other truly needed uses: A children's pavilion for instance, with picnic tables, where shade would provide relief from the oppressive summer heat and rain, and a place where play activities could be organized. It could also provide community space for local organizations, a stage for public rallies, as well as a bandstand and a breezeway. The pavilion has accommodated all of these uses in the past.

We are also asking for support in helping to apply pressure so that the building of the long delayed playground can begin immediately. Public funding for the playground was appropriated more than four years ago. However, the BID -- with the City's consent -- has prevented the desperately needed playspace from being built in order to accommodate their unwanted plan. This is appalling. The pressing needs of children, and the community should come first. These funds should be used immediately for their intended purpose. The idea of putting a seasonal restaurant at this site, denying the public access to this historic building, especially while thousands of children in the immediate area have very limited options for physical activity, is unacceptable.

In Community Board 5, there are only 13,445 square feet devoted to playgrounds compared to 22,297,800 square feet of commercial/office/industrial space. That is why, among other reasons, we have always felt our primary focus should be in supporting the renovation of the park to provide the greatest amount of recreation space for children while also providing greater access to park facilities for all park users in a community that is severely under served. Space that could be devoted to children and the community must not be sacrificed to accommodate a seasonal restaurant, especially in a neighborhood with the highest concentration of restaurants, and lowest park space in the city.

It is more than ironic in this day and age of record obesity that the city is still supporting a plan that takes away potential play and recreation space for children to make way for a restaurant. This is terrible public policy. Every inch that is used to accommodate a restaurant, is an inch taken away from children and the community. They deserve more.

The city is promoting a plan whereby the public would be denied access to the pavilion for most of the year unless they can afford to pay. This was never the purpose of public works, in fact, just the opposite. The majority of these pavilions have been torn down. The one in Union Square is one of only two remaining in Manhattan. The other, located in Columbus Park, is currently being restored without a commercial component.

To the best of our knowledge, the City has still not asked a single elected official to allocate funds to restore the pavilion. This is because this proposal has always been predicated, not on serving the community, but instead on accommodating the BID/LDC business agenda.

We agree with our State Assembly officials that due to the great number of eating establishments in the immediate vicinity -- over 150 within a two block radius -- the installation of a restaurant in the park would not be considered a "public amenity," and therefore this commercial use should require State alienation legislation. We applaud the elected officials who are following up on this important issue and are willing to pursue this.

Furthermore, our serious concern regarding the impact the proposed design will have on the important role the park provides for public assembly and free speech has not been adequately addressed. DPR commissioner Adrian Benepe's January 3, 2006 letter to State Senate and Assembly officials did little to put the public at ease when he stated, "*Any bidder for the concession will have to understand the environment in which it will operate.*" This language is hardly reassuring and certainly not legally binding. (One note: the "misinformation" and numerous omissions contained in Mr. Benepe's letter are too lengthy to address in this correspondence. However, if anyone would like further clarification, please do not hesitate to contact me.)

We are also strongly opposed to any construction of any ancillary buildings. Besides the unnecessary expense, any additional structures would severely diminish the aesthetic value of the historic pavilion and surrounding landscape. It would also severely distort the pavilion's important aesthetic relationship to the park and community. Please help us protect this National Historic Landmark park for future generations.

In closing: It is wrong for the City to continue to abdicate its responsibility to maintain its parks and recreational facilities. The City must not be allowed to continue to lease our precious public facilities to the highest bidder. Solutions must be found that will properly fund these vital services and ensure public facilities remain open and accessible to the public. We ask that you continue to work with the community and all stakeholders on a plan that we can all support to ensure that their needs for the renovation of the north end of the park and square be met. Unfortunately, this current plan does not meet these needs. The plan must not be allowed to accommodate the proposed seasonal restaurant at the expense of the community. We have a wonderful opportunity to measurably improve the lives of thousands through appropriate park design.

If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at (212) 987-0565, or Eadie Shanker at (212) 532-7537. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Geoffrey Croft, President
NYC Park Advocates

NYC Park Advocates is a non-profit, city-wide, non-partisan watchdog group dedicated to restoring public funding, improving public parks, increasing park services and expanding open space in NYC. We are the only parks group that monitors all city, state and federal park lands.