

CAMPAIGN TO SAVE UNION SQUARE PARK

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To the Honorable Christine Quinn,
City Council Speaker

We are opposed to the plan for a restaurant or any commercial venture in the pavilion of Union Square Park. There are scores of restaurants and places to eat surrounding the park, so there is no need for another one in the pavilion. The pavilion itself should be refurbished and returned to the public for community and children's activities. The expropriation of scarce public land and facilities is not yet regulated by the City Council. It should be.

Also, we do not understand why, since you were elected Speaker, you have not continued your opposition to the privatization plan for the park's pavilion. Constituents in your district, as well those you as Speaker represent from every district of the city, regularly visit Union Square Park. It is their destination park, a national historic landmark with a grand tradition of free access, open assembly and a forum for free speech. The proposal to privatize the park's pavilion to privilege a restaurant would change the entire character of the park. The community has waited decades for the pavilion to be repaired to serve the increasing need for space and leisure activities of a burgeoning population of children and families. The less affluent, unable to pay the high prices of the café or even the modest cost at a take-out counter would for the first time in Union Square, feel the sting of discrimination and would no longer have free access to the pavilion.

Ironically, the Parks Department cites the deterioration itself as the reason for a private remedy for that neglect. Columbus Park which has the City's other remaining park pavilion is currently being renovated for the exclusive use of the community, while the pavilion in Union Square Park is being designed for the specific needs of a restaurant. The three plans presented to the public thus far, by the Parks Department and the BID have not offered an alternative design for public use only. It is now time for them to listen to the community and do so.

We therefore invite you to reconsider your position in light of the increasing attempts by the City, local BIDs and the Parks Department to alienate public parkland for commercial use. Every piece of our fast-disappearing parkland and facilities is precious and its loss contributes to the deterioration of the quality of life for City residents and their families—who, by the way, pay taxes to support the much-needed amenity of free and open access to all parts of our parkland.

Under this administration, the score of parkland takeovers for commercial purposes is rising at an alarming rate. The City supports such schemes, and the City Council seems unaware of how much of our green space is slipping away from public to private use. A recent example is the Brooklyn Waterfront project's accommodations for building high-end condominiums. Unfortunately, such commercial projects in and around parks provide a value added for the rich and a net loss of public parkland at the expense the public. Stuyvesant Park is now also threatened, as is Union Square Park, by the Department's promotion of restaurants and kiosks in very small parks. Such schemes are not in the public interest at these sites, or in ones we don't know about yet. An alarming example is the almost successful Yankees' expropriation of two Bronx parks without notice to or approval by the local community board and residents.

Only by accident did the community find out that it was virtually a done deal, scheduled

to sail through the City Council without thorough examination of the public versus private issues involved. Were it not for angry community protests, negotiations to relocate the parks and “sweeteners” to the community would not have been provided.

In the same way, in 2004, we led the fight against the original proposal. We alerted the public to the Department’s renovation plan to minimize the children’s playground in order to accommodate an outdoor terrace for a year-round exclusive restaurant. That proposal was roundly rejected by the public and in the latest proposal the playground will be expanded to the maximum space available--14,687 square feet instead of a mere 8,200 square feet. The Parks Department, however, still intent on privatizing the pavilion, now proposes a seasonal restaurant in the pavilion during the season of greatest public use.

The opposition of elected officials to privatization helped tremendously to win the playground expansion and to defeat the Department’s and local BID’s attempt to establish a year-round restaurant in the park. Strong opposition to such plans are even more important now. The tenacious efforts of the Parks Department to continue its attempt to privatize the pavilion with not so veiled threats of withdrawing funds from the project must be countered by the City Council. You can help ensure that funding for the renovation is kept intact in order to support the whole community’s fight and to secure the pavilion’s 2,500 square feet of space for public, not private use.

Unfortunately, the City Council and the public too often learn of many of these maneuvers after the fact. Without an official antidote and regulation of the Parks Department’s privatization agenda, the public interest will continue to be ignored. As City Council Speaker, you can ensure, for a grateful public, an administrative process to oversee the out-of-control Parks Department.

Members of the committee for the Campaign to Save Union Square Park and approximately 1,000 park users who signed our petition, 60 block associations, city and statewide organizations and local political clubs, as well as 20 national, state and local elected officials and other countless members of the community, are opposed to the latest plan. We urge you to reassess your position regarding this unneeded and unwanted restaurant. We welcome you to stand with the citywide community that is united in its determination to reject the Parks Department’s misguided proposal for “fixing” the pavilion. A better proposal would be to privilege the public’s need for more space in which to continue the park’s great tradition of free and open access for everyone to enjoy all sorts of community-enhancing events.

Sincerely,

Eadie Shanker

cc: Assemblymember Carolyn Maloney
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