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In the Bronx, a Place to Glide, and Fall, on the Ice

By DAVID GONZALEZ
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The skating rink is small, ringed by hay bales and dwarfed by walls of brick and windows. Prometheus — unbound or otherwise — is absent.

“It’s not Rockefeller Plaza,” said Cary Goodman as he prepared for preschoolers to hit the artificial ice. “It’s Concourse Plaza.”

Maybe it’s fitting that before Mr. Goodman could set up an ice skating rink in the South Bronx he had to go in circles for a while.

As the executive director of the 161 Street Business Improvement District — O.K., as the sum total of its staff — he thought it would be great to have a neighborhood venue where youngsters could skate. He proposed to the Department of Parks and Recreation that the business improvement district would put up \$7,500 to rent a rink, with the city providing a site, and perhaps some services.

While the other boroughs have public rinks, the Bronx has been without one since the 1980s, when Mullaly Park’s rink fell into disrepair and closed. It has since been reborn as a popular skateboard and stunt bike arena just north of Yankee Stadium. (And while some directories still list Kelton’s rink up in Kingsbridge, it has long been replaced by a Loehmann’s.)

“I thought we’d give the parks department the rink, and everything would flow from there,” he said. “I thought because of the Winter Olympics, it would be a great way to kindle interest among

children in the Bronx who could see themselves participating in a winter sport.”

Late in November, he approached parks officials, proposing the rink — a 20-by-40 kiddie rink — be placed by the Lorelei Fountain at the park’s southern edge.

That site was rejected, he said.

Parks officials countered with a site at the park’s northern edge.

Too out of the way, Mr. Goodman thought. And placing it on grass would require spending thousands more for a sturdy base to prevent the surface from buckling.

Could parks provide electricity, a tent and overnight security?

No. No. No. As in there are no funds for that, a parks spokeswoman said.

As these negotiations ran their course, the United States Figure Skating Association informed Mr. Goodman that a real-life Olympic skater was ready to inaugurate the rink in January.

“Only thing was, we didn’t know where the rink was going to be,” Mr. Goodman said.

Parks officials had kind words for Mr. Goodman’s effort. What they did not have was money in their budget. Liam Kavanagh, first deputy commissioner at the parks department, said that Mill Pond Park — one of the replacement parks next to Yankee Stadium —

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does have the water and electrical connections for a seasonal rink. What it does not have is a concessionaire willing to bid on the project.

“It’s very expensive to operate a rink, and that’s been one of the impediments,” he said. “Certainly, there has been a cry for ice skating in the Bronx, and we have tried to work with elected officials. But we have not yet found the right project.”

(The issue is likely to come up again Thursday night at a community briefing to discuss the progress of the replacement parks. So, too, might be the issue of when will the old stadium finally be torn down so that parks can be built on that site after years of waiting.)

With time running out, Mr. Goodman found an angel at the Mid-Bronx Senior Citizens Council, a local housing and social services agency that runs the former Concourse Plaza Hotel on 161st Street. The 12-story building was once a luxury hotel where the likes of Babe Ruth and Mickey Mantle once stayed. John F. Kennedy — a

onetime Bronx resident — campaigned there.

“We decided to have it here because it’s needed,” said Delores Moon, an executive with the council. “Other boroughs have ice skating facilities, why not ours? This is a start.”

Now children skate in the shadow of history.

Every day, they waddle in like puffy bundles, where they get a quick pep talk and lesson. They file out — arms held out like wings — to the courtyard rink, where they put on skates and slowly take to the ice. The parks department provides two instructors and two enforcement personnel to watch over the skaters.

Each session ends with a simple lesson familiar to anyone who ever lived in this neighborhood. They’re taught how to fall. More importantly, they learn how to get back up.

“O.K.,” said Mr. Goodman, as he rallied the next group of preschoolers to take the ice. “Follow me. Arms out. Like an airplane! Whee!”