

BRONX COMMUNITY BOARD NO. 8

MINUTES OF THE PARKS & RECREATION COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON OCTOBER 23, 2013, AT VAN CORTLANDT PARK GOLF HOUSE

Attendees

Committee members: Bob Bender (chair), Sylvia Alexander, Rosemary Ginty, Marvin Goodman, Mike Heller, Maria Khury, Robert Press, James Rather, Mercedes Zegarra-Soja (CB8);
community members: Herb Barret, Tom Durham, Christina Taylor (FVCP)

Other CB8 Members: Robert Fanuzzi

DPR: Margot Perron, Dennis Burton, Charles McKinney, Brittany Quale

Community: Fran Garfinkel, Mary-Lynne Bancone (Seton Park Dog Run); Lawrence Moiatto (Memorial Grove); Suzanne Corber, Debbi Dolan, Matt Turov, (Save the Putnam Trail); Bette Clark (VC Track Club); Margarita Eremeyev; Kate & Barry Freed; Filip Comdeesa (FIDO); Catherine O'Brien; JC Blaetnor; Andrew Sandler (Councilman Koppell's office); Daniel Ranells; David Gellman; I-C L'Engel (BCEQ)

Agenda

The meeting began at 7:10 pm. Minutes of the September meeting were approved with this addition: "Robert Press asked VCP Administrator Margot Perron to report on the first year of operation of the ice rink. Ms. Perron reported that the ice rink met its targeted attendance and that no concession revenue was due to the city for the first two years of operation." Minutes were approved unanimously by committee members who had attended the September meeting (Alexander, Bender, Goodman, Heller, Khury, Press). Committee members Ginty, Rather, Zegarra-Soja abstained because they were not present in September.

The committee voted on the revised plan presented by DPR for renovation of Ewen Park at the September meeting.

In favor: Alexander, Bender, Goodman, Heller, Khury, Press. Opposed: none. Abstained: Ginty, Rather, Zegarra-Soja (all of whom did not attend the September meeting).

Presentation of VCP Master Plan

VCP Administrator Margot Perron introduced Charles McKinney, who has spent the past two years meeting with various user groups to draw up a new master plan for VCP.

Mr. McKinney explained that the master plan is intended to guide VCP for the next twenty or so years. He said that when Riverside Park developed a master plan, it brought attention to the park from elected officials, which resulted in increased funding for the park. He said that master plan maps on display in the room would be available on the DPR website.

These are some highlights from Mr. McKinney's presentation. He began by listing some of the park's assets, followed by some of its problems:

Assets

The Parade Ground may be largest park lawn in the country.

The health of the forest in VCP has been studied but there has been no landscape plan for VCP. The forest in VCP is New York's largest and oldest native forest.

VCP contains the premier cross-country and cricket fields in New York. *(Two days after the meeting, the New York Times featured a story about Van Cortlandt's cross-country course.)*

The park contains nodes for regional walking and biking trails.

One-half of the park has been designated as Forever Wild. However, there is ample space for recreational opportunities.

The Van Cortlandt mansion and grounds are intact as they were constructed.

Tibbets Brook flows through the park to VC Lake. The brook's bed could be cleared through the park, helping to restore the adjacent landscape

Problems

There has never been a master plan for VCP

Highways have cut up the park. Among the consequences, pedestrian circulation is discontinuous

Vines are destroying native trees, and Norway maples are increasing, causing a loss of biodiversity.

Highways exit/enter from local streets to and from the park, causing pedestrian hazards.

A sewer on Broadway empties into Van Cortlandt Lake

There is a need for after-school activity in the community that the park is not meeting

Community health is a concern and obesity is increasing

The northwest corner of the park has no playground

Master Plan proposals

The John Muir trail can be reconfigured to avoid the unattractive narrow path between the HHP exit onto the eastbound Mosholu Parkway extension and the golf course fence

A pedestrian/bicycle bridge can be constructed over Mosholu Parkway and another over the Major Deegan Expressway to help re-unite parts of the park separated by highways

The park deserves an attractive entrance in each community

Food concessions can be an attraction and ought to be available in areas of high use

A playground should be located in the northwest corner of the park

A community garden should be established at the Mosholu entrance to the park and also at an entry point on Broadway

A restroom should be built at W. 251 and Broadway, where plumbing is already in place. A small food concession could be located in the same place.

A covered recreation area should be constructed adjacent to the stadium and a use found for the area occupied by the ice rink during the months the rink does not operate

The DEP is developing a “blue belt” plan to retain more rainwater in the park and prevent overwhelming the storm sewers and sewage treatment plants

Improving the natural areas (e.g., removing Norway maples) would help support existing species

VC Lake empties into the city sewer system. Tibbets Brook could be continued and daylighted to the Harlem River so that the water empties there. The lake could be restored to its natural beauty

Create a natural areas management plan

Identify priority projects and put a price tag on them so that elected officials are aware of the community's priorities and the cost of fulfilling them

Mr. McKinney took questions from the audience. Below are some of the questions and answers.

How do Norway maples inhibit biodiversity? They don't allow ground cover and other plants to grow. They must be removed and replaced with native plants.

Won't playgrounds and other facilities encroach on the natural areas in the park? They will go only in open areas, not in forested areas.

Asphalt is a toxic substance. Why are you permitting it on the Putnam Trail? How can you say you are removing so few trees there? Asphalt fumes contain PAHs, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, which are also released from tires, basketballs and charcoal-grilled hamburgers. The fumes are hazardous to workers during installation. After the asphalt cools, the chemical release is minimal, and any leachate is safe for ground water. There will be very few living mature trees removed for the work being done on the Putnam Trail.

Won't paving the Putnam Trail cause safety problems for pedestrians? There are shared pathways in Riverside Park and they seem to work well. There are other places in VCP where people can stroll and meander, such as the Old Croton Aqueduct trail.

What time period does the master plan cover, and what happens next? It's a 20-year plan – which should be understood to mean “a long time” – and various phases and priorities will have to be identified now.

What is the next important date? We will have further discussion, perhaps in December.

How can the Memorial Grove be maintained? There should be a “Friends of” association to care for it.

Can't the nursery in VCP help with native plantings in the park? The nursery serves the entire city, and it is being used for native plantings in the park.

Is there a plan to handle growth in use of the cross-country course? Cross-country use has actually declined slightly in recent years. We do want to make other park paths more easily accessible.

Can't you remove invasive plants selectively? Birds need plants that grow under the tree canopy. Is it necessary to use toxins to remove invasives? Monocultures limit wildlife, including bird habitat. The shrub layer is critical habitat. DPR uses the least noxious herbicide on the market. Without herbicides, a larger work force would be necessary. Let's start with sample areas as we proceed to remove invasives, then evaluate.

We need not just recreation but natural areas that provide relief from the city. There is “poetry” in this plan – it enhances natural areas. Nothing in this plan diminishes the natural areas in the park.

Is it possible that the golf courses could be used in the winter? They were once used for sledding and skiing. The golf courses are under-utilized. We are discussing the fence locations with the concessionaires and it may be possible to change some of the locations of the golf courses.

We need more water fountains in the park. Agreed.

How is the VC Golf Course doing? How much revenue does it contribute to the city? We will get those figures. The golf courses should be figured into the use of park land.

Goose poop impacts the park. Why can't we have border collies to manage the geese flocks? Good idea.

Andrew Sandler, representing Councilman Koppell: *The stable concession is being reviewed by DPR and an RFP for a new operator of the concession is going to be issued. There should be some changes made: restoration of the pony ride, for example.*

This question precipitated a brief discussion involving Mr. McKinney, Mr. Sandler, and Christina Taylor of FVCP, at the urging of the chair. DPR had recently notified CB8 of the impending RFP. Other suggestions for the RFP included rehabilitating the bridle paths, requiring community benefits such as rides for disabled people who have the ability to ride a horse. Ms. Taylor observed that at present only horses boarded at the stable are allowed on the bridle paths. It should be possible to rent horses for rides, as can be done in Pelham Bay Park. There is an after-school pick-up program for young riders that serves Manhattan but not the Bronx. The chair observed that these suggestions will be forwarded via the CB8 office to DPR.

The chair thanked Mr. McKinney for his excellent presentation and for answering questions. He noted that the pedestrian bridge over the Major Deegan Expressway is a high priority of the Croton Filtration Monitoring Committee and is under active discussion.

A walk-through of part of the proposed final draft route for the Hudson River Greenway will be held at noon on Nov. 3, meeting at the corner of Independence and Kappock streets.

Herb Barret invited everyone to attend the Veteran's Day ceremony at the Memorial Grove, 12 noon on Nov. 10.

The meeting adjourned at approximately 9:10 pm.

Submitted by,

Bob Bender, Chair
Parks & Recreation Committee