The City of New York

Queens Community Board 11

Serving the Communities of Auburndale, Bayside, Douglaston, Hollis Hills
Little Neck and Oakland Gardens

Paul DiBenedetto Chairperson **/ Joseph Marziliano** District Manager

TO: All Board Members

FROM: Paul DiBenedetto, Board & Committee Chair

DATE: April 3, 2025

RE: Buz O'Rourke Playground
Van Nostrand Court, Little Neck, Block 8261, Lots 70 and 81

Committee Members
Paul DiBenedetto
Henry Euler*
George Hadjiconstantinou
Ralph Ruiz*
Christina Scherer*
Matt Mamek

CB11 Staff
Joseph Marziliano, District Manager
Jane Bentivenga, Community Coordinator*
Christina Coutinho, Community Associate*

Guests
Irene Papadopoulos, Deputy Chief of Staff, NYC DPR, Queens Commissioner's Office
Alex Sokol, Queens Commissioner's Office, NYC DPR
Liz Asaro, NYCDPR Parks Manager
James Mituzas, Director, DPR Landscape Architecture, Queens
Quennelle Rothschild, Project Designer
Sun Jin Park, Landscape Designer
Gary Dearborn, NY Restoration Project
Charlie Reynoso, NY Restoration Project*
Carlos Martinez, NYC DPR Green Thumb*
Alie Ziraschi, Chief of Staff, CM Paladino*

*Via Zoom

On Wednesday, April 2, 2025, at 7:30 pm, the CB11 Parks Committee met to hear a presentation from the NYC Dept, of Parks & Recreations (DPR) regarding the proposed reconstruction of Buz O'Rourke Playground and a request to have the ownership of Lots 70 and 81 in Van Nostrand Court, Little Neck, transferred to NYC DPR (Dept. of Parks).

Mr. DiBenedetto called the meeting to order. Ms. Rothschild, screen-shared a PowerPoint presentation showing the proposed reconstruction of Buz O'Rourke Playground in Crocheron Park. She stated the playground has not been updated in approximately 25 years. The presentation outlined the proposed updates to the playground. The plans include renovating existing play areas, adding a new fitness area, and improving accessibility. Key changes involve reorganizing the play areas for 2-5 and 5-12-year-olds, adding a wheelchair-friendly water play area, and incorporating sensory play items. The design aims to preserve existing trees (some will need to be removed due to their condition), reduce entrances from five to three, and maintain a perimeter fence at a reduced height of four feet (explaining that the 4-foot fence is a compromise between the current 7-foot fence and no fence). The design policy is to have lower fences for better surveillance. Additional features include more shade trees, picnic tables, and low-maintenance plantings. The basketball court will be reconstructed in its present location.

Discussion ensued regarding the addition of security lighting, the pathways being lit and the potential for a lockable gate. Mr. Marziliano stated that if the park is in partnership with the local school, the decision to lock it is left to the principal's discretion. The addition, the planting of native species was also mentioned. The construction is expected to take one year to complete and will require the park's closure during that time. Ms. Scherer suggested making accommodations for park users during the construction period, such as moving picnic tables for people to use. DPR representatives made note of that suggestion and feel it is a good idea.

The project has been in design for about 4 months; DPR has up to a year to complete that. Then there is up to 10 months for procurement. Therefore, it will be roughly two years before construction begins. Ms. Ziraschi from CM Palladino's office asked about a locked trash box in the playground and the cordoning off of a small portion of the park due to low levels of arsenic being found in the soil. The locked trash box is for use by DPR personnel for maintenance operations only and the arsenic-contaminated soil will be excavated and tested before being trucked off-site. Ms. Ziraschi expressed some concern CM Paladino has regarding water features in parks, particularly plumbing issues, but overall, CM Paladino is happy with the project.

Mr. Marziliano stated that a recommendation and vote could not be taken at this meeting as there was no quorum present. However, a vote for a letter of support of this project will be taken at the April 7, 2025 full Board Meeting.

The next topic discussed was a proposal of two lots on Van Nostrand Court in Little Neck being transferred to DPR. Several residents from Van Nostrand Court were present along with representatives from New York Restoration Project and the Parks Department's Green Thumb program. Resident, Karen Dinegar, gave a brief presentation requesting these two lots be converted to NYC DPR Green Thumb Gardens.

Ms. Dinegar presented the Van Nostrand Court Homeowners Association's request to support converting these two open spaces, known as Block 8261, lots 81 and 70, into New York City Parks Department Green Thumb Gardens. Ms. Dinegar explained the historical significance of these lots as parkland since 1925 and their current use by various community groups. The Van Nostrand Court Homeowners Association seeks support from the Community Board to have both lots purchased by the Parks Department, with lot 81 being sold back to the City by the NY Restoration Project. Van Nostrand Court Association has continually maintained these lots through the years. The process of transferring ownership was discussed, including the right of first refusal by the NYC Economic Development Corporation (EDC) and the involvement of the NYC Department of Citywide Administrative Services (DCAS) before final management by DPR.

Mr. Dearborn added that the due to the deed restriction placed on Lot 81 at the time of NY Restoration's purchase, the lot can be reverted to the City at no cost. Lot 70 is currently held in a land trust. James McBride, President, Van Nostrand Court Association, stated that they had a general meeting last week and the membership voted unanimously to request the transfer of these lots to DPR. Mr. McBride said that in addition to Community Board 11's support, they would also like the support of CM Paladino. Mr. Martinez, NYC DPR Green Thumb, expressed his support for this transfer of property. Ms. Ziraschi expressed some concern about EDC and the City of Yes. She requested to be put in touch with the Van Nostrand Court residents. Mr. Marziliano said he would do so. Mr. Dearborn said there are two right-of-ways and an easement that he is not sure was ever extinguished that are associated with this property. Mr. Dearborn said they would not initiate any property transfer process with EDC until there is unanimity to the path forward with these lots.

Mr. Marziliano stated that it has been a long-standing policy of Community Board 11 to support parcels of land that could become any type of parkland as that prevents possible overdevelopment. Mr. DiBenedetto stated the Board will need to vote on this request but sees no reason for not supporting it. Mr. Marziliano added that CM Paladino assisted with a similar situation in Douglaston with a NYC Housing Preservation and Development-owned property next to St. Sarkis Church that the church had maintained for years.

Mr. DiBenedetto inquired if Van Nostrand Court Association would be interested in entering a "Friends of…" type of agreement with DPR to maintain the lots. Mr. McBride and Ms. Dinegar said they would absolutely want to do that. Ms. Dinegar said they would be happy to continue being stewards of these lots. Mr. Marziliano added that once it becomes under the auspices of DPR, capital funding can be requested for things such as lighting, benches etc.

Ms. Ziraschi requested she be given contact information for all involved to discuss this further. Mr. Marziliano said he would do so. This request will be brought up for a vote at the May 2025 CB11 Board meeting.

Respectfully submitted April 3, 2025