



Public-Private Partnerships for Green Space in NYC

Epilogue

The November 2013 election of Bill de Blasio as mayor of New York City occasioned a reevaluation of the city's partnerships with the private sector. De Blasio had campaigned as a reformer, highlighting New York's increasing inequality; he had endorsed State Senator Daniel Squadron's scheme to compel deep-pocketed parks conservancies to contribute to the upkeep of underfunded parks.¹ In March 2014, de Blasio appointed Brooklyn native Mitchell Silver as parks commissioner. The veteran city planner, most recently director of planning for Raleigh, North Carolina, also stressed the need for equity in city services and amenities.²

In early 2014 parks advocates, neighborhood groups, conservancies and politicians debated New York's parks funding and the city's relationships with private entities. In April, the City Council convened a hearing on parks equity. Despite strong pushback and questions about his scheme's legality, Senator Squadron argued that the parks department could alter its agreements with the wealthiest of the parks nonprofits to redirect a fifth of their operating budgets to less well-funded green spaces. This could yield as much as \$15 million annually. Others argued that it was better to encourage the large conservancies to help other parks through training, assistance with maintenance and other outreach than risk alienating donors by redirecting their contributions.³

Negotiations over the de Blasio administration's first budget focused on ways to bolster less well-served parks (the majority of neighborhood parks and playgrounds were unable to count on private donations) and to address the system's chronic shortfalls in operations and maintenance funds. De Blasio's preliminary budget included \$80 million for capital projects in neighborhood parks (as opposed to "destination" parks) but omitted an additional \$27.5 million the City Council

¹ Michael Howard Saul and Melanie Grayce West, "[De Blasio Parks Stance Unsettles Some: Backs Idea of Well-Funded Conservancies Sharing Money With Poorer Parks](#)," *Wall Street Journal*, October 13, 2013.

² Lisa Foderaro, "[New Parks Dept. Leader Shares de Blasio's Goal of Addressing Inequities](#)," *New York Times*, March 21, 2014.

³ Matthew Taub, "[Squabble Over City Parks Pits Independent Associations Against Neighborhood Inequity](#)," *New York Observer*, April 29, 2014.

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and parks advocates had proposed for maintenance and operations.⁴ The additional funds, over and above the mayor's proposed \$380 million maintenance budget, would have gone toward hiring 15 fulltime gardeners and maintenance workers in each of the city's five boroughs and roughly doubled the number of parks enforcement patrol officers to about 300.⁵

Mark Levine, chairman of the City Council Parks and Recreation Committee, had pushed for the extra money, noting that New York's commitment to parks had dropped from 1.5 percent of the total budget in the 1960s to only 0.52 percent in 2000. He told the *New York Times*: "This amount is low not just by New York City's historic standards, but is far less than most other big cities in the nation devote to their green spaces."⁶ He laid part of the blame on the city's reliance on targeted private sector giving. He told the *Times*:

The clear downside of the rise of conservancies is that it has dampened the political will of the city's most influential citizens for robust public funding of the parks department, because such high-income individuals mostly live adjacent to parks benefiting from private donations.

While Mayor de Blasio lauded the goals of the Squadron plan, he hedged his position by stressing that it was only one of a number of possible approaches.⁷ The parks system had gained about 800 acres during the Bloomberg administration (2002-2013), which invested nearly \$1 billion in capital projects in new marquee parks like the High Line, Brooklyn Bridge Park and Governors Island. These parks, run through public/private partnerships, involved complex and sometimes controversial real estate development, whether through zoning changes or developments within park boundaries.

Brooklyn Bridge Park was financed partly through the construction of luxury condominiums inside the park, with the justification that revenue from the development would make the park self-sustaining. Some neighbors and parks advocates objected to the inclusion of housing, arguing that it ran counter to the purpose and nature of public open space and made parks dependent on commercial development. Mayor de Blasio in May 2014 introduced a wrinkle when his administration advanced plans to develop more housing in the park. While critics questioned the impact of more residential towers and private buildings on the waterfront park, de Blasio said the new project would address another aspect of the city's troubling inequality by allocating 30 percent of an estimated 400-plus apartments to moderate- and middle income residents.⁸

⁴ Dana Rubinstein, "[Mayor continues city parks funding policies, for now](#)," *Capital New York*, May 9, 2014.

⁵ Lisa Foderaro, "[Focusing on Lesser-Known Open Spaces in New York](#)," *New York Times*, May 6, 2014.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Dana Rubinstein, "[De Blasio backs away from a parks redistribution idea](#)," *Capital New York*, March 24, 2014.

⁸ Charles Bagli, "[Brooklyn Development Plan Stirs Debates on Affordable Housing and Park Funding](#)," *New York Times*, May 12, 2014.

De Blasio also sought to eliminate another cause of disparities in the parks system, so-called member items, funds inserted in the budget during negotiations between the mayor and City Council. This fiscal horse-trading exacerbated the uneven allocation of resources by subjecting parks to the political priorities and calculations of local representatives.⁹

In general, the leadership of parks nonprofits had been criticized for lacking diversity and for conducting much of their business out of public view.¹⁰ Whether intended to counter criticism or not, the nonprofits stepped up their outreach within the parks system and local communities. The Central Park Conservancy announced plans to increase outreach to other city parks in the five boroughs. Doug Blonsky, the Conservancy's chief executive and city-appointed Central Park administrator, estimated that the Conservancy had already spent \$3-4 million on such assistance.¹¹

Downtown, work on the third and final section of the High Line was expected to wrap up in fall 2014. The award-winning and much-visited elevated park continued to drive real estate values in the West Chelsea neighborhood, where development parcels adjacent to the park sold for record sums.¹² The park drew throngs of tourists and out-of-towners. Jenny Gersten, who in January 2014 replaced founder Robert Hammond as director of the Friends of the High Line, spoke about improving relations with the surrounding community, including residents of local public housing.¹³

As he took the helm at Parks and Recreation in May 2014, Mitchell Silver listed equity as his top priority, although he was short on specifics. As he toured the Parks headquarters in the historic Arsenal building in Central Park, Mitchell told the *New York Times*:

People know when they're not getting their fair share. So equity and fairness to me is absolutely paramount. How we figure that out, I don't know. There'll be a lot of meetings, both internally but also externally with our partners, to figure out how we can have a fair parks system.

⁹ Jill Colvin, "[Bill de Blasio Says 'It's Time to End Member Items.'](#)" *New York Observer*, May 8, 2014.

¹⁰ Michael Powell, "Parks Department Takes a Seat Behind Nonprofit Conservancies," *New York Times*, Feb. 3, 2014.

¹¹ Andrew Hawkins, "[Central Park shares the green: Affluent park helps poorer ones; should it do more?](#)" *Crain's New York Business*, May 12, 2014.

¹² Daniel Geiger, "[Two parking lots near High Line could fetch \\$200 million.](#)" *Crain's New York Business*, May 13, 2014.

¹³ Matthew Katz, "[High Line's New Director Wants Park to Serve Locals Before Tourists.](#)" *DNAinfo New York*, May 7, 2014.