

# Thin Ice in Central Park

The never-ending fight over New York's Central Park always heats up with warm weather. Preservationists concerned with landscape and tranquillity are battling those who want the park for active pleasures and entertainment. Underuse means curtailing the park's social value; overuse means its destruction. Policy has to land somewhere in between.

The latest skirmish concerns the Wollman Rink. Built in the 1930's for an unassailable park use, ice-skating, its brick bunker style has always been a scar on Olmsted's naturalistic landscape. Later overloaded by summer rock concerts, the concrete slab cracked and the surrounding terrain was reduced to bare earth. The issue thus raised has little to do with anyone's taste in music; it is the misuse of the facility by a spectator activity that drew huge crowds.

The Wollman is now being restored for skating, with the rink designed to be flooded as a pond in summer. Concert lovers call the pond useless, but by that reasoning so are the lakes, rocks and rambles of the original design. Arguments for the concerts are made in the name of democracy, but democracy cannot become the enemy of public parks.

It is just as pointless, however, for others to say that the rink should be removed. It is there, and ought to be repaired as planned. The useful debate now would concern the way in which the rink is operated.

Because of the deficits so often incurred by public facilities, the Parks Department has been experimenting with private leases. Called "load shedding" or "privatization," this promises financial relief. But it is also risky. The facilities must be adapted to make a profit for the operators. At Wollman and other park sites, that means enlarged eating and drinking concessions, creating problems of delivery, garbage disposal, litter and wear. Faced with seven such concessions, Parks Commissioner Davis has set up a study to estimate the gains and costs.

Calling a halt to park concessions would be better than calling a study. Any lease of public land and facilities that requires an adjustment to private rather than public priorities is already in trouble. The system creates demanding entrepreneurs and escalating controversy. The work on the Wollman Rink should go ahead, with more attention to the suitability of the design and less to restaurant facilities. That should also be the emphasis in restoring the Boathouse and other park features.

To help cover costs, Boston is trying a different approach by leasing its swimming pools and ball fields to private but *nonprofit* community organizations and raising operating funds from the business community. That may be a harder path, but it avoids some obvious pitfalls.