



THE COMMITTEE TO PRESERVE THE UPPER WEST SIDE

**Testimony of LANDMARK WEST!
Certificate of Appropriateness Committee
Before the Landmarks Preservation Commission
Riverside Park and Riverside Drive-Scenic Landmark
101st Street Ballfield
May 13, 2008**

LANDMARK WEST! is a not-for-profit community organization committed to the preservation of the architectural heritage of the Upper West Side.

The Certificate of Appropriateness Committee wishes to comment on the application to replace artificial turf at West 101st Street in the Riverside Park and Riverside Drive-Scenic Landmark, an English Romantic-style park, built in 1873-1902 and designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, with modifications and additions built in 1934-1937 and designed by Clifton Lloyd and Gilmore D. Clarke.

We have heard the arguments in favor of using artificial turf at this location, have extensively discussed this issue as a committee, and have decided that we cannot support this application for an in-kind replacement of artificial turf for the following reasons: inappropriateness of artificial materials in a scenic landmark; health concerns about artificial turf; environmental concerns and ongoing maintenance.

The proliferation of artificial turf in New York City parks and scenic landmarks has been cause for concern—stretching from King Manor in Queens to the West Side’s Riverside Park, the masterful product of several generations of designers, namely Frederick Law Olmsted, Samuel Parsons and Gilmore D. Clarke. Despite concerns about the environmental and health risks of artificial turf, the New York City Parks Department has been cited by parks advocates as the largest municipal buyer of artificial turf in the United States. This trend shows no sign of abating. Where will it end? Will it someday become more expedient to cover sections of Riverside Park’s signature grassy lawns with a simulacrum of turf in order to cut down on maintenance costs? It is the Commission’s role to curtail this trend in New York City scenic landmarks—where authenticity and beauty should be valued above all else.

Health Risks:

Artificial turf was the subject of a recent *New York Times* article citing that the Parks Department had requested the Department of Health “investigate potential health and safety problems” — namely the presence of potentially carcinogenic toxic rubber in the material.¹ To our knowledge, the findings of this investigation have yet to be released to the public. It is unclear

¹ Timothy Williams, “City Parks Officials Seek Safety Review of Synthetic Surfaces,” *The New York Times* 23 Jan 2008.

why this material is being considered before its potential risks have been fully explored and publicized.

The applicant has stated that EcoFill, the material proposed for Riverside Park, is not composed of the cancer-causing recycled tires, but no evidence has been presented to allay concerns about potential public health problems. As of now, this is an untested material in New York City parks. Is the Riverside Park scenic landmark—one of the city’s best known and best loved parks—really the best guinea pig for this latest brand of turf?

And is it not worth waiting for additional research on this material to see if it indeed is toxic to humans?

Environmental Risks:

As a result of PLaNYC, the city government is devoting much attention to reducing the affects of climate change: through an extensive tree planting program, reduction of impermeable surfaces and green roofs. Among the many virtues of this ambitious campaign is the reduction of the urban heat island effect. According to a report in *Environmental Health Perspectives*, “many physical properties of synthetic turf—including its dark pigments, low-density mass, and lack of ability to vaporize water and cool the surrounding air—make it particularly efficient at increasing its temperature when exposed to the sun.”² Studies conducted at Columbia University of the cooling benefits of urban trees and parks has revealed that a number of the hottest spots in the city turned out to be synthetic turf fields. For these reasons, it is unclear why the Parks Department—a city agency—would endorse installing this material, which is known to retain heat?

In conclusion, we advocate for the use of natural materials in the Riverside Park scenic landmark and feel that management of its ballfields to allow cultivation of real grass is the better alternative to this problematic material.

² Luz Claudio, “Synthetic Turf: Health Debate Takes Root,” *Environmental Health Perspectives* 116(2008): 121.