

Playground Fight

by Corey Kilgannon

Where else but the West Side would a children's playground be at the center of a two-year debate?

A dispute over the renovation of the West 67th Street Playground, just north of Tavern on the Green in Central Park, wages on. Opposing sides will now meet with the Parks Department Commissioner to try to "find some common ground."

The often heated debate — largely an argument over safety vs. aesthetics — has pushed back the playground's renovation, funded by a \$500,000 donation from financial tycoon Michael Bloomberg, at least until the fall. Two factions of West Side parents support different design plans. At the center of the controversy is a large wooden pyramid play structure that is now 30 years old and splintering. Supporters of the original design want to replace it with a similar structure, but park policy now discourages the use of wood for playground equipment.

"The fact is that the pyramid structure is no longer safe," said Suzanne Cochrane, chair of Playground Partners, a Central Park Conservancy program that helps fund the maintenance of the park's 21 playgrounds.

Parks Department spokesman Parke Spencer explained that this unusually protracted debate is part of the system. "That's the beauty of New York City," he said. "That we have democracy on a community level."

But the public review process has produced barb trading, petty fighting and lengthy delays over two years.

"We will not compromise child safety just to have something that fits into the original aesthetic context," said Erana Stennett, director of community relations for the Conservancy.

Battle lines have been drawn. Anne Mathews, a member of the committee of Playground Partners and the group's designated captain for the playground, distinguished between the two factions: the New Mothers/New Parents, who adhere strictly to the park's safety guidelines rather than the playground's original design; and their rivals, Friends of the Adventure Playground (the playground's nickname), also safety conscious but fiercely dedicated to the preservation of the original design.

"We have tried to be very polite and understanding to what the playground meant to these women, but they have been extremely rude to us," said Mathews, who has three "playground-age" children and complained of the delays caused by Friends. "We just have a sense of time on this."

"The past really deserves a future," argued Arlene Simon, who represents Friends and was also instrumental in delaying the demolition of the old Children's Zoo with her preservationist group Landmarks West. Simon called the playground a pioneer in modern design and creativeness, "one of most important in the country."

"We've come up with four different designs, and they've opposed all of them," said Cochrane about Simon's group. "They ask, 'Why are we letting regulations drive the design?' My feeling is, why not? All we want is a safe playground. They basically want the same

design as the 1960s. It's like GM trying to manufacture a car now that doesn't have seat belts."

"This opposition from a segment of the Landmarks Committee over, quote, preservation issues in the park is highly unusual for a playground," said Stennett. "I could see if it was the Bandshell or the Children's Zoo. These are not mausoleums or works of art. We're talking about something that has to function."

"You could not build that playground today," she continued. "The height of the pyramid is not in compliance."

Stennett says parents have been beg-



A wooden pyramid is the focus of a two-year debate over the West 67th Street Playground.

ging her for more than seven years to renovate the playground. Crawl playspace caverns where rats once convened were sealed up and slippery surfaces were repaired. A user survey and evaluation recommended replacing the pyramid and two other structures. The Conservancy based their renovation design on 1989 policy guidelines that stipulated use of metal over wood because it is cheaper to maintain and wood has a tendency, in open-access parks that receive heavy usage, to deteriorate and splinter, causing safety risks.

When it became known that the Parks Department might allow wood in park playgrounds, Community Board 7 issued a resolution, earlier this month, asking the Conservancy to withdraw plans for a metal pyramid and directing both

parties to continue to meet with the conservancy urging "a consensus on the remaining elements of the proposal on which there is continued disagreement." The sides will meet with Parks Commissioner Henry Stern and submit a list of revisions.

The exhaustive review process (which park officials say is technically not required) involves the proposal going first to local community boards, then to the Landmarks Preservation Commission, to the Arts Review Commission and finally back the community board.

"We don't have time to change the system," Mathews complained. "We have to come up with a plan that will get our children a playground. They're stuck on the past. It was designed by an architect on his first playground. Yes, it has become a very big issue, but we feel that this playground is just a time bomb for a major injury. There have been minor injuries already on a consistent basis." Mathews held that parents whose children are "playground age" should shape the playground's design.

"They don't have young children," she said of Simon's group. "They are not current users of the playground."

"We seek input from current users," said Stennett. "We try to respond to people who are using our playgrounds today."

"Does Mr. Bloomberg use the playground?" countered Simon, one of the mothers who helped organize the 1960s design. "What are the age of his children? I think it's outrageous that they bring up our age. How about Suzanne Cochrane? I don't think she has young children. When the Conservancy asks for my money, do they ask for my age or how old my children are?"

Arlene Simon has not given a cent to Playground Partners and has not been involved in this area of the park before this," responded Cochrane, who said she does have young children, but will only take them to the playground once it is renovated.