



THE COMMITTEE TO PRESERVE THE UPPER WEST SIDE

**Testimony of LANDMARK WEST!
Before the New York City Council Parks & Recreation Committee
Oversight Hearing on Concessions in Public Parks
April 27, 2010**

LANDMARK WEST! is a not-for-profit community advocacy organization committed to the preservation of the architectural heritage and sense of place of the Upper West Side of Manhattan. This commitment extends not only to the bricks and mortar resources of our neighborhood's historic built environment, but also to the urban oases of our landmarked public parks, achievements in landscape design.

In our dense city, public parks are our communal back yards. Where millions of New Yorkers and visitors alike gather to enjoy the benefits of open space, fresh air, and to take pleasure in recreation of all kinds. It was recently—just this past March—that LANDMARK WEST! learned of a concessions proposal by the Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) which threatened all of the characteristics fundamental to the greatness of our city's first Scenic Landmark, Central Park. We're here to report to you "from the field"; to let you know from our own experiences that the present practice of soliciting concessions in parks is in desperate need of reform. Without change, our public parks risk being sold off to the highest bidder, their designs degraded, their democratic existence undermined by sky-high fees, and we, the community, will have no say about it.

The need for concessions reform is embodied by the DPR's recent proposal to install four 35-foot-high bubbles over tennis courts in Central Park. This proposal grossly underscores three of our primary concerns:

The concessionaire selection process (ie: the Request for Proposals [RFP] process) is not transparent. In Central Park, the DPR was still "gathering information" from the community, going through the motions of soliciting and responding to our concerns, while behind the scenes, a contract was already being hammered out (indeed, the RFP had been making its rounds since March 2009, a full year before its public review at Community Board 7). To ensure genuine and substantive community consultation, a broad range of stakeholders must be assembled when an RFP concept is still in the stages of inception, not after months (years?) of internal DPR project development.

In landmark-protected parks, such as Riverside Park and Central Park, early consultation with fellow City agencies is not practiced. Projects within these two parks require the oversight of the Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) and Design Commission, professional experts on landmark stewardship and design appropriateness. Yet when inquiring of the LPC as to how the agency might proceed with its review of the proposal for tennis bubbles in Central Park, the public was told that the Commission had no official knowledge of the project, and could not assess how they might be involved until an official application was filed by the DPR. A signed contract should come long after discussion with these agencies, not prior. Like the community, fellow city agencies with expertise on parks stewardship should be involved in RFP brainstorming and development, rather than apprised of RFPs after a deal is effectively done.

Over, please



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Finally, we cannot allow our public parks to mutate into privatized cash cows. The issue currently threatening to lay siege to Central Park—that of privatization—has plagued other public city parks as well: on the East Side at York Avenue under the 59th Street bridge, on Randall’s Island, and in Union Square under the guise of a restaurant. Private concessionaires have sought to monopolize park land for private gain. In other words, this is nothing new, but it is something we must change. Through thoughtful reform that brings negotiations out from behind boardroom doors and into the open, before the public who rightfully owns these democratic parks, we can protect the integrity of our parks and ensure their accessibility for all for years to come.