



City of New York Parks & Recreation



New York City Council Committee on Parks & Recreation

Highland Park and Ridgewood Reservoir: A discussion on the restoration and enhancement of a community resource

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**Testimony by
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INTRODUCTION

A little over one year ago, on Earth Day 2007, Mayor Bloomberg presented a long-term plan for a greener, greater New York. PlaNYC laid out 127 initiatives designed to address the challenges of a city whose population will grow by one million people by 2030; among those initiatives are providing significant improvements to eight regional parks. Today we are here to talk about one of the regional parks selected for improvement – Highland Park and the Ridgewood Reservoir.

REGIONAL PARKS

PlaNYC provides an opportunity for the city to re-envision eight regional parks sites across the city. With at least one new regional park in every borough, the Department plans to enhance these existing green spaces and turn them into destinations for the 21st Century; admired by residents and visitors from across the city. We have been working with community organizations and individual residents to create designs that respond to and address community priorities and needs and that also provide more recreational opportunities to keep New Yorkers healthy and active. As you know, we are confronting rising levels of obesity and related diseases, including diabetes and heart disease. Well designed and maintained parks are a foundation for recreational activities and fitness that are crucial to healthful lives.

Today we are here to talk about one of the eight regional parks - the Highland Park and Ridgewood Reservoirs in Brooklyn and Queens - but I would like to first give you an overview of our planning and design approaches for the regional parks.

In all of our PlaNYC work, we take in consideration the following:

- **Ecological assets**
 - Extensive research is done to identify the area's ecological assets and to outline a plan to preserve and restore valuable natural features by conducting an environmental inventory and assessment.

- **Community input**
 - The design of every park starts and ends through a planning effort with the surrounding communities, community boards and elected officials.
- **Accessibility and Recreation**
 - Opening up the park to additional users and upgrading recreation opportunities is a primary objective of our open space initiatives.
- **Stormwater Best Management Practices**
 - Using innovative and sustainable materials and methods is a priority.

HIGHLAND PARK AND RIDGEWOOD RESERVOIRS CONTEXT AND LOCATION

What kind of park is Highland Park and the Ridgewood Reservoir and how do those considerations impact their design potential?

Highland Park is in a unique location that borders both Queens and Brooklyn and serves diverse communities on both sides of the border. The park is bordered on the south and west by the original Highland Park. The nearest residential communities, including Cypress Hills and East New York, are largely low-density residential communities. To the East of Highland Park is Salem Field Cemetery, to the North is the Jackie Robinson parkway and two cemeteries farther north. Cypress Avenue connects the park to the Queens neighborhood of Ridgewood, which also consists of one- and two-family homes and small multi-family dwellings. The developed portion of Highland Park located in the southern area of the park contains several ballfields, two playgrounds, three comfort stations, tennis courts, basketball courts, a spray shower, a woodland grove (reported to have been designed by Frederick Law Olmsted) and a picnic area. Highland Park is also home to the first Children’s Garden in New York, a feature that is still active today. All of the amenities of Highland Park are heavily used and enjoyed by residents of Brooklyn and Queens.

The reservoir dates back to the early 1850s, when the growing populations of Brooklyn and Queens required more water and private companies began to purchase land to drill wells and divert streams to create a water supply network for Brooklyn. In 1858, the city of Brooklyn built the Ridgewood Reservoir that held almost 154 million gallons daily. In 1891, Brooklyn purchased the surrounding lands around the reservoir for park purposes, and in 1905 New York City connected Brooklyn to the Catskill aqueduct. By 1915, a music stand, shelter house, rustic bridge, football and baseball fields, 28 tennis courts, a flower garden, and the Children’s farm gardens existed in the adjoining Highland Park and by the mid-1960s, Brooklyn became less dependent on their own water system. The system became obsolete and two basins of the reservoir were decommissioned and drained in 1989. In 2004, the Department of Environmental Protection transferred responsibility for the reservoirs to the Parks Department.

CURRENT CONDITIONS OF THE RESERVOIR

The 50-acre site of the Ridgewood Reservoir consists of three reservoir basins, pump houses and a caretaker cottage. When the basins were drained, nature took over. The clay lining, however, continued to hold rain water, leaving a large body of open water in the central basin, and wet areas in the other two outer basins. Gradually, the basins became overgrown and partially filled with silt and trees, invasive plant species and other vegetation are particularly dense in basin 1. Basin 3 is partially filled with water and the pump houses and caretaker cottage are in disrepair with damaged roofs, cracked brickwork and windows missing and boarded up. The entire site is enclosed with chain link fencing that is frequently cut by vandals who use the basins for illicit purposes, the pathway lighting is vandalized and inoperable, and the perimeter staircases are in disrepair.

When we look at open space to determine appropriate land-use and management, existing conditions are relevant. But existing conditions are a snap-shot, a moment in time. We need to examine site history to see how conditions developed and the rate and trajectory of change to predict how fast the site is changing and divine what future conditions will be.

The Ridgewood Reservoir site is a unique, highly contrived site. Some of my favorite New York City natural areas are highly contrived including:

- The sandy dredge-derived landscape around Jamaica Bay where various public works, including the construction of the Belt Parkway, and JFK and Floyd Bennett airfields inadvertently resulted in high quality maritime grassland and shrubland; and among others
- Pelham Bay Park's Orchard Beach Meadow, among the highest concentrations of rare plants in NY State, created when topsoil was scraped away to contribute fill for the construction in the late 1930s of the Orchard Beach parking lot.

But, on the other hand, most of the city's most highly contrived natural areas are also its most ecologically constrained. A very narrow range of invasive, non-native plants dominate landscapes that bear cultures deepest hand prints.

Ridgewood Reservoir exhibits both extremes.

Basin 1

Most plant communities in Basin 1 are dominated by native trees, shrubs, and herbs. Many of the dominant plant species are adapted to seasonally or permanently wet conditions. When NRG visited the site with Dr. Andrew Greller, Queens College Emeritus Professor of Botany, in the late 1980s, the site was mostly an open wet meadow with diffuse tree saplings. Professor Greller remarked that the site appeared as if it would one day turn in to the largest, finest red-maple swamp in western Long Island. Today it could be characterized as a complex mosaic of vegetation communities, many of which are wetlands, containing substantial areas of coastal hardwood swamp dominated by a mix of red maple, sweet gum, and pin oak trees. Professor Greller was correct. He had intuited that ecological processes in Basin 1 had a positive trajectory that would result in greater stability and habitat quality. These are raveling processes. What Dr. Greller did not see 20 years ago was that by the 1990s birds would disperse to the site the seeds of invasive exotic shrubs and vines. Overall, the conditions in Basin 1 are very good, and raveling processes are still in play. However, the invasive species are rapidly gaining and absent intervention by natural resource managers will in the near-term overtake much of the area and

cause a steep decline in native species diversity and habitat quality. Invasive exotic species promote unraveling processes.

Basin 2

The most conspicuous feature of Basin 2 is its large expanse of open water ringed by a wide border of common reed, *Phragmites australis*. Basin 2 appears much as it did 20 years ago, with perhaps now a larger area of Phragmites. Phragmites is an exotic invasive wetland grass that provides some water quality and habitat values that tends to overwhelm native wetland plant communities that many consider possessing more diverse habitat values.

Basin 3

The southern portion of Basin 3 exhibits a mosaic of vegetation communities very similar to Basin 1. Wetland plants are dominant, but trees appear to be generally more sparsely distributed. This western-most basin exhibits a split personality. The northern portion – roughly half – is composed almost entirely of invasive exotic trees forming a canopy over invasive exotic shrubs and herb. This appears to be the driest part of any of the basins and is unambiguously not a wetland. The largest part of this area is dominated by a scant two species: 1) invasive exotic black locust in the canopy; and invasive exotic mugwort as ground cover. This part of the basin exhibits the ecological nadir of the reservoir complex. The ecological trajectory here is a flat-line; as far as forest quality goes it is abysmal and there is no reason to expect it to get better in any sense of a human time-scale.

The Parks Department recognizes the ecological importance of the area despite concerns about the danger of invasive species. These ecological assets will be a critical design consideration and as Parks continues in the planning phase with the community, we will preserve and protect a vast amount of diverse flora and fauna species in and around the reservoir. However, I would like to emphasize that doing nothing at the reservoir is not the best way to manage the site.

It is a fallacy that nature takes care of itself. Even huge wilderness area in undeveloped regions such as Yellowstone and Everglades National Parks – each larger than one million acres – require management to reduce the ill effects of invasive exotic species. As Mike mentioned earlier, the clay-lined basins are not ideal for many of our native trees and plants to take root. Invasive species can push out whatever native growth has established itself there, and ultimately overwhelm more valuable and sustainable natural features.

The Parks Department has a long history of working to preserve and improve natural areas, starting in 1984 with the establishment of the Natural Resources Group by Commissioner Henry Stern. The Department manages over 9,000 acres of natural areas – woodlands, wetlands, meadows – and we have restored hundreds of acres of natural areas to improve their value, wildlife habitat and opportunities for environmental education. We have 73 miles of hiking trails and 16 nature centers, and over 100 park rangers offer environmental education in our thousands of acres of outdoor classrooms. We partner with national and local environmental and conservation organizations, including the Audubon Society at the national, state and local levels. In working with Audubon, we converted the boathouse in Prospect Park into the nation's first urban Audubon center.

There is also a long history of healthy co-existence of natural areas and recreational facilities. Examples include the Great Lawn and Turtle Pond and the Ramble in Central Park, both teeming with wildlife; Central Park's North Meadow and natural woodlands; Prospect Park's Long Meadow and adjacent Woodland Ravine; and playing fields of Alley Pond and the adjacent woodlands and trails; Pelham Bay Park picnic grounds and sports fields and the natural trails of Hunter and Twin Island.

PLANNING STATUS AND PROCESS

Before PlaNYC came into existence, there was already a lot of programming in Highland Park, and money allocated for capital improvement projects. The funding started with \$250,000 from the City Council and an additional \$250,000 from the Borough President in Fiscal Year 2004. Then, Council Member Dilan allocated \$2,200,000 in Fiscal Year 2006 for a total of \$2,700,000. With this money, work is underway to convert old clay tennis courts into a multi-use field. We will also be repairing an existing spray shower as part of the contract. This project is currently about 10 percent complete, with construction scheduled to finish in January of 2009.

Using requirements contract money, we are replacing the mesh backstops, painting the frames and replacing the baseball hoods on ballfields 3 and 4, and in August we will be upgrading the picnic area and installing four volleyball courts.

Our Highland Park Administrator Debbie Kuha has organized a number of community events and festivals, including a Garden Hoe down at the Children's garden, a Strawberry festival, puppet shows, dancing under the stars, live theatre performance by the Puerto Rican Traveling theatre, Russian American Kids circus, Junior Gardening program, and a fall festival. We have assigned a full time supervisor, crew chief and staff to the park and designated Highland Park as a district operation separate from District 5 Queens.

With all the activity and improvements taking place in Highland Park, I should note that Highland Park is a large park, and the reservoir is only a portion of it. Therefore it is important to understand how any work in the reservoir area will compliment the areas outside of it. As part of the design process, we will look at the park as a whole to determine what areas our project can strengthen, and what areas we can draw inspiration from. We will set the priority for work in the park based on the two listening sessions, five tours with elected officials and community representatives, (including groups such as Community Boards 5 in Queens and Brooklyn, ballfield permit holders, the Save the Ridgewood Reservoir coalition, Brooklyn clergy and others) and six meetings with elected officials. We also take into account the opportunities and constraints that the park provides and in the end, this great new park will only be viewed as a success if it serves the needs of the local and regional community groups, neighbors and stakeholders in the area.

Ideas we have heard so far include:

- **Educational opportunities:** Provide interpretive maps to highlight the importance of ecosystems and wildlife areas, and convert one or more of the currently degrading structures for an Urban Park Ranger station;

- **Nature Center:** Consider a small Nature Center near Basin 2, with bathroom facilities for public use at the active recreation areas. Adaptive reuse of the pump houses and a museum about the history of the Brooklyn Reservoir system has also been proposed.
- **Active and Passive Recreation:** Repair and add bikeways and walking paths, enhance and add new athletic facilities including but not limited to cricket, soccer, volleyball, track, skateboarding, and basketball

NEXT STEPS IN DESIGN PROCESS

We anticipate full registration of the design contract by the end of June 2008. Once registered, the consultant will immediately start preparing an in-depth site analysis. While he has done valuable work to date that has informed our discussions, he has been limited by his contract status. Based on this site analysis we will start developing conceptual plans which will be the basis for discussion with the various community groups, elected officials and the community boards. We realize that this is an important project to the local community and look forward to working with them closely. We anticipate a phased construction of work on the Park, contingent upon the design. Our goal is to start the first phase in fall 2009 with a completion date in spring 2011

CONCLUSION

As always, it is a pleasure to be able to present to the Council the opportunities available at Highland Park and Ridgewood Reservoir. The work of restoring natural areas and creating community involvement in caring for and protection natural habitats is paramount to the success of this park and the region. In addition, the work we'll be doing to enhance active recreational opportunities for the Brooklyn communities of Cypress Hills and East New York to the south, will be transformational for the children of those neighborhoods. They will be able to exercise, interact and learn about nature and their community in ways not available before.

With the Council's continued support, we look forward to seeing a truly transformational project become a reality.