



OFFICE OF THE NEW YORK CITY COMPTROLLER

TESTIMONY BY

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NEW YORK CITY COMPTROLLER

Submitted to the
**NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL
PARKS AND RECREATION COMMITTEE**

**HEARING ON
THE USE OF ATHLETIC FIELDS
AT RANDALL'S ISLAND**

JANUARY 31, 2007

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Chairman Foster and members of the Parks and Recreation Committee, good morning and thank you for the opportunity to present testimony today regarding the use of athletic fields on Randall's Island.

First of all, I would like to state that I strongly support the development of additional sports fields on Randall's Island. I also support the policy of exploring public/private partnerships that can provide supplementary funds for capital projects.

However, as I have argued in recent months, the plan proposed by the City to designate a percentage of athletic fields on Randall's Island parkland to private schools in New York City is inadequate to address the needs of our children and our neighborhoods.

Randall's Island sits between three working class areas – East Harlem in Manhattan, Port Morris in the South Bronx, and Astoria, Queens. These neighborhoods have great needs for recreational space, such as additional soccer, baseball and softball fields, but no easy access to Randall's Island.

The fact that public schools and community groups representing these communities do not currently have the resources to utilize the athletic fields on Randall's Island, as independent private schools historically have been able to do, should not exclude them from the chance to do so in the future.

We cannot deny the children of our City this chance to participate in team sports and physical activity simply because they can neither afford the cost of a private academy nor access the physical space where such recreation takes place.

As a member of the Franchise Concession Review Committee, which must approve any deal on the use of these athletic fields, I have been following these developments very closely.

In recent months I have argued that the length of the agreement ought to be of a shorter duration than the 30-year plan that was originally proposed. I was heartened to see that the current plan has now been reduced to 20 years.

I further believed that the percentage of athletic fields originally proposed for use by 20 private schools during prime time after school hours – 80 percent -- was too high. I was encouraged to see that this figure, too, has now been reduced to two-thirds of such fields.

I recognize that there is currently less demand for the fields from public schools and local community groups than there is from independent schools.

However, the underutilization of Randall's athletic fields by public schools and CBOs reflects a problem first and foremost of access. Any agreement regarding Randall's Island should therefore include a commitment by the City to address transportation and other access issues.

Toward that end I have recommended a new task force representing both the offices of elected leaders and community based organizations. This task force would work with the Administration to devise, implement and monitor a realistic plan for community access.

Again, I was heartened to see the City include mention of a task force in its recent hearing notice. But details about the task force have yet to be resolved. For example, we would like to explore expanded bus service and other modes of transportation to the Island.

While mindful of the fact that the Administration controls the votes on the FCRC, and therefore the outcome, we will continue conversations with the Administration until the February 13 vote in order to improve access and availability of Randall's Island facilities to public schools and local community groups.

The current and proposed new fields are not merely a setting for competitive sports. They represent in a larger sense a form of opportunity: the opportunity for physical health and fresh air; the opportunity to learn teamwork and cooperation; and, at the most basic level, an opportunity for play.

With care and consideration, we may all benefit from the renovation of Randall's Island ball fields and the development of new ones. We can take advantage of public-private partnerships while ensuring that the children of New York City are not placed in the untenable position of having to pay to play.

Thank you very much.