December 18, 2017

Michael Parkinson, AICP
Project Manager
Jerome Avenue Neighborhood Plan
Department of City Planning - Bronx Office
One Fordham Plaza, 5th Fl.
Bronx, NY 10458-5891

RE: Design for Corporal Fischer Park in Jerome Avenue Plan (Bronx Block 2520 lot 19 and de-mapped Cpl Fischer Place)

Dear Mr. Parkinson,

Thank you for your work of engaging local residents in creating their future neighborhood through the Jerome Avenue Neighborhood Planning process!

I am writing regarding the design of “Corporal Fischer Park,” the park coming to W 170th Street between Nelson and Shakespeare Avenues. As you may know, the bulk of this block was planned as a public park in the 1990s. Though a Parklands sign went up about seven years ago when NYC Parks took jurisdiction of the land, it has remained vacant, locked behind a fence, collecting trash and growing weeds. At the same time, local residents felt their dense neighborhood badly needed what a green space would offer.

In April 2016, Dian Hawkins, a neighborhood resident, advocate and community gardener, got tired of envisioning a green oasis here and seeing a dumping ground instead. She contacted my organization for assistance in making a green space here real. Gathering with a group of likeminded neighbors, they collected hundreds of signatures and created the attached plans to transform a portion of the promised public green space, particularly Bronx block 2519, lot 27 & 32, into a real one called Holistic Health and Wellness Garden. Dian and fellow neighbors’ testimonies from last December’s NYC Council Hearing on inaccessible Parks Department properties, enclosed, detail this experience further.²

Against the wishes of the neighbors who have wanted this portion of public land to finally become green space, as the city planned but did not fulfill decades ago, this space has now been alienated so that the city

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1 Reference page: https://livinglotsnyc.org/lot/59053/
can sell them to a senior housing developer. In light of this, **we are writing to request that the plans the group created for the space on W 169th Street be incorporated into the park that is coming to the block, on W 170th Street (Bronx Block 2520 lot 19 and demapped Cpl Fischer Place), as part of the Jerome Avenue Neighborhood Plan, instead.**

Dian and neighbors are pleased that capital funding will at last be allocated to make a green space here real! There are several examples of NYC Parks that have both passive recreation space maintained by NYC Parks, and community gardens inside them that are maintained by neighbors via GreenThumb; examples include the design for Little Claremont Park in the Bronx³ and the plan for Maple Street Community Garden in Brooklyn⁴. Doing this would be a great way to ensure those who have immediately suffered the consequences of public disinvestment in this area until now can have their visions and leadership honored, can benefit from this investment, and can build community and resilience through active stewardship of public land.

Attached, please find the design and description of the community sanctuary. My organization, 596 Acres, has helped residents transform 37 vacant lots across NYC into thriving community open spaces. We stand ready to continue supporting these residents in participating in the design and stewardship of this future public green space so it can become a thriving, successful and sustainable local institution!

For next steps, I suggest we all meet in early 2018 to move forward in planning this future park together. Since the plans for Holistic Health and Wellness Garden were created by longtime residents, implementing them will ensure the future park is as useful as possible. Further, this group knows best what the neighborhood wants and needs to thrive so will be a great resource to the Parks department in this design process.

Please contact us using the information provided in the letterhead to schedule a time to meet with everyone. Thank you in advance for working towards making these local leaders’ vision for a community open space here a reality!⁵

Sincerely,

Mara Kravitz
Stephanie Alvarado
Directors of Advocacy and Partnerships, 596 Acres

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³ [https://www.nycgovparks.org/planning-and-building/capital-project-tracker/project/7408](https://www.nycgovparks.org/planning-and-building/capital-project-tracker/project/7408)


⁵ You can see more pictures and gain more backstory at [596acres.org/holistic-health-letter/](https://596acres.org/holistic-health-letter/)
Encl: Project Overview for Holistic Health and Wellness Garden with Garden Design, June 21, 2017

Photographs of process: local organizing and planning meetings to transform this long-inaccessible Parks Department property into Holistic Health and Wellness Garden, November 2016 to present

Testimony from December 1, 2016 City Council Hearing: “An Examination of Parks Department Properties Currently Inaccessible to the Public” from residents Dian Hawkins, Sabeena Prescod, Sharon Griffin, Steven Jackson and Alix Fellman of the Women’s Housing and Economic Development Corporation on Corporal Fischer Park

Petition with of approx. 300 signatures from local residents in support of a community garden at this location

cc: NYC Parks Bronx Borough Commissioner Iris Rodriguez-Rosa; NYC Parks Chief of Planning and Neighborhood Development Nicholas Molinari; NYC Council Member Vanessa L. Gibson; NYS Assemblymember Latoya Joyner
Vision and Mission Statement
The vision of the West 169th Street Holistic Health and Wellness Community Garden is to create an organic and green environment that is…

- Peaceful
- Safe
- Therapeutic
- Educational
- Rewarding

To fulfill this vision, the garden seeks to…

- Enrich the health and well-being of the people who visit and have a lasting positive impact on the residents and surrounding community
- Provide opportunities for all ages to learn about sustainable lifestyles through horticultural workshops; composting; a congenial space for growing fresh organic vegetables and medicinal herbs; nutritional programs; and fitness programs
- Partner with neighboring soup kitchens and daycares to “plant-grow-learn” and provide fresh produce
- Be accessible to all who wish to visit

Section I: Project Purpose
The project seeks to establish a community garden on West 169th Street between Nelson and Shakespeare Avenue in the Highbridge neighborhood of the Bronx (block 2519, lots 27 and 32). The residents envision a garden that serves multiple communities with varying needs, revitalizing the abandoned lot that has blighted the neighborhood for almost a decade. The garden will be a positive and functional space where all members of the community can actively engage around issues of sustainability, health, and wellness. The garden will not only transform a vacant lot, but will provide educational opportunities and space for stress-free relaxation for members of the community.

Section II: Project Scope
When completed, the Holistic Health and Wellness Garden will include the following features as shown in the attached sketch:

- Greenhouse: 1300+ square feet, which will sustain plants and vegetables year-round for the community
- Children’s educational area
- Relaxation and meditation area
- Chicken coop

Section III: Project Milestones
A finalized timeline for the garden is to be determined, pending the approval of the NYC GreenThumb application. However, progress milestones associated with the project are anticipated to be as follows:

1. Obtain letter of support from Community Board #4
   a. Gather letters of endorsement from local businesses, organizations, and community leaders
   b. Present at September 2017 Parks Committee and full board meetings
2. Receive approval from NYC GreenThumb office
a. Complete GreenThumb application, including identifying 10 community stewards
b. Agree on group bylaws

3. Secure funding.
   a. Complete grant applications through local non-profits and businesses (e.g. Green Guerrillas, Sustainable Bronx, Home Depot)
   b. Seek funding from city councilmember and other municipal resources

4. Design greenhouse and other structures
   a. Work with Green Guerrillas

5. Build the garden! 😊

**Section IV: Group Bylaws (TBD)**
Planning for the future of inaccessible public land in the South Bronx on Earth Day (April 22, 2017)
Top: Public-led visioning sessions, March and May 2017

Bottom: Some of the fliers that neighbors created for meeting outreach
Oral and Written Testimony on Parks Department Properties
Currently Inaccessible to the Public
December 1, 2016 NYC Council Committee on Parks and Recreation Oversight Hearing

My name is Dian Hawkins. I am here today from the Bronx. I have lived in the Highbridge neighborhood for over 30 years.

I am here to testify about the impact of the inaccessible Parks Department properties in my neighborhood, Council District Bronx 16 and Bronx Community District 4. Particularly I am going to tell you about a fenced off area located between West 169th and 170th Street between Nelson and Shakespeare Avenues – Bronx block 2519 lot 32 and Bronx Block 2520 lot 19, which is adjacent to a vacant public DOT lot. The sign on the fence, which has been closed for the decades I have lived here, says it is called Corporal Fischer Park.

I lived near this property and often walk by just to see what’s new. In the summer days, it brings much sadness to the neighborhood. Sometimes it’s an eyesore. When I stand by it and observe, children playing on the sidewalk ask me, Why is this park always closed? Is there something wrong with it? Why can’t we use it?

Over the past years, it has been very much neglected. You used to not even be able to walk on the sidewalk outside the fence of this public lot. In 2016, the Parks Department finally started cutting the grass and cleaning it up. The lots remain enclosed by fence and padlock, but now are sometimes cleaned.

The City has owned the land for 20 years. Parks Department took jurisdiction over it about 7 years ago to create a park meant to honor Corporal Irwin A Fischer, a New Yorker who served in the Army Air Corps during World War II and flew in locations including Iwo Jima, the Philippines and Saipan. It is kept locked up because it’s undeveloped. I was also told by Elizabeth Gonzalez from the CD4 District Manager’s office in April that the Parks Department does not have the funding to develop it, and it’s a major capital improvement to make a park.

I’ve been an active member of my community, engaged in communal activities from helping the homeless to cleaning up litter to maintaining our parks and community gardens. Through this, I worked with New York Restoration Project, Bronx Botanic Garden and GreenThumb, and realized the potential of this space. Over the past couple of years, I started feeling connected to it. I see so much potential each time I stop by. I develop more ideas and fondness for it as a respite for a hot summer heatwaves, especially for seniors who live in the senior housing across the street.
Now we are organizing to make Corporal Fischer Park real and planning for what kind of park we want it to be.

We see the potential for it to become a flourishing and rewarding community green space for the growing community’s residents in a neighborhood where open space and growing space is limited. It will expose students to environmental and sustainable urban environment in their communities, providing teaching and learning opportunities for all residents willing to learn about the environment and how plants grow. It will be the location of community activities that will enrich and have lasting benefits to our residents and neighborhood. It will help to promote health and wellbeing in today’s stressful environment – and organic oasis to meditate, relax, rejuvenate.

Thank you for holding this Oversight Hearing to examine Parks Department properties currently inaccessible to the public. Though there is inaccessible and underutilized NYC Parks property in my neighborhood, I wouldn’t have known about this hearing without an invitation from 596 Acres. Turning these properties into real parks in collaboration with local residents will ensure their lasting benefit to our neighborhoods.
Oral and Written Testimony on Parks Department Properties
Currently Inaccessible to the Public

December 1, 2016 NYC Council Committee on Parks and Recreation Oversight Hearing

My name is Sabeena Prescod. I live in West Concourse. I am here to testify about the impacts of inaccessible parks department properties located at Block 2519, Lot 32 and Block 2520, Lot 19 located at W 169th and W 170th Streets between Shakespeare and Nelson Avenues. I live near and bike past these properties, and they are sadly abandoned, fenced off, and full of potential -- especially in an area that already has many new multifamily buildings and will continue to see an influx of new residents in the coming years but lacks adequate greenspace for everyone to comfortably enjoy.

The properties are and have been Parks Department properties for at least 6 years. Previously, city records show that any buildings that were on these lots were demolished by 1981, and they have been empty ever since.

I am eager for the land at Block 2519, Lot 32 and Block 2520, Lot 19 to become open parks with resident participation in planning. Locals are already organizing to create a vision for this park. We would like green space for communal vegetable and flower gardening, picnic space, and a space for children to play. We are also set on having space accessible and safe for the many seniors in who live within a block of either lot. A space with a combination of active and passive uses would be ideal. We also have connections to community members and organizations vested in establishing long term community projects that will create employment and educational opportunities for residents of all ages.

Thank you for holding this Oversight Hearing to examine Parks Department properties currently inaccessible to the public. Even though I live near two of these properties, I would not have known about today’s hearing if not for the assistance of 596 Acres. More needs to be done in the future to advertise these hearings to the public which offer valuable insight into the process and limitations of making iconic and important public spaces accessible. Turning the properties in my area into real parks in collaboration with local residents will ensure their lasting benefit to our neighborhoods and City.
Testimony on Parks Department Properties Currently Inaccessible to the Public
December 1, 2016 NYC Council Committee on Parks and Recreation Oversight Hearing

My name is Sharon Griffin. I live and work in Highbridge in the South Bronx. I am testifying about the impacts of inaccessible Parks Department properties located at West 170th Street (Bronx block 2520, lot 19) and at W 169th Street (Bronx block 2519, lot 32), both between Shakespeare and Nelson Avenue.

Since 1978, I have lived in the neighborhood, right near these properties. They have been abandoned the whole time.

The one on W 169th street has a sign that says Corporal Fischer Park. There used to be a building on this site. Once it was demolished, the site was abandoned. It has been vacant for over 20 years. There has never been a park here, but there has been the Parks Department sign. It is has never been accessible.

My neighbor Dian has been inquiring about how to transform the vacant lots in the neighborhood into green community space for years, attending Community Board 4’s Parks Committee meetings. She found out this lot is already in the Parks Department, and began organizing for community access to an open green space here starting last spring. Now we are coming together to plan what kind of park we want it to be.

I am eager for these abandoned NYC Parks properties in my neighborhood to become real parks. I definitely want community green space – a tranquil environment for seniors to gather and children to play. I want a picnic area with nighttime lighting, flower beds, and space to grow food.

Thank you for holding this Oversight Hearing to examine Parks Department properties currently inaccessible to the public. Though there is inaccessible and underutilized NYC Parks property in my neighborhood, I wouldn’t have known about this hearing without an invitation from 596 Acres. Turning these properties into real parks in collaboration with local residents will ensure their lasting benefit to our neighborhoods.
Testimony on Parks Department Properties Currently Inaccessible to the Public
December 1, 2016 NYC Council Committee on Parks and Recreation Oversight Hearing

My name is Steven Jackson. I live in Highbridge in the Bronx.

I am testifying about the impacts of inaccessible Parks Department properties located at West 170th Street (Bronx block 2520, lot 19) and at W 169th Street (Bronx block 2519, lot 32), both between Shakespeare and Nelson Avenue.

This property is behind a seven foot fence. It’s been vacant for the last 13 years that I have lived in the neighborhood. The Parks Department has keys to it and recently started to clean it up. The building that was there before was demolished, but nothing else was ever done. I’m working with a group now to try to gain access to this property.

I am eager for our neighborhood to have a real park - we really need it! I envision a playground, a sprinkler system, an area for seniors, a picnic area with barbeque grills, and night lights.

Thank you for holding this Oversight Hearing to examine Parks Department properties currently inaccessible to the public. Though there is inaccessible and underutilized NYC Parks property in my neighborhood, I wouldn’t have known about this hearing without an invitation from 596 Acres. Turning these properties into real parks in collaboration with local residents will ensure their lasting benefit to our neighborhoods.
Testimony Prepared for the Committee on Parks and Recreation
An Examination of Parks Department Properties Currently Inaccessible to the Public
December 4, 2016, 1:00 PM

Good afternoon, my name is Alix Fellman and I am a Senior Program Manager at the Women’s Housing and Economic Development Corporation (WHEDco). Our community development work focuses on improving quality of life for families and individuals in the South Bronx; parks and open space are essential components of healthy, vibrant communities.

NYC Parks has been a partner on several of our past projects to revitalize and activate underutilized parks and open space. We have hosted clean-up days and painted murals, and we’ve installed Boogie Down Booths – colorful temporary installations that provide seating, solar-powered lighting, and music – in two Parks properties, including Seabury Park, a Community Parks Initiative site. However, we regularly hear from residents in all our neighborhoods that they need greater access to parks and open space.

Today I’d like to focus on City Council District 16, which overlaps the southern portion of the Jerome Avenue Study Area currently being considered for rezoning. Although the area has some large Parks properties, such as Mullaly Park and Macombs Dam Park, the quantity, quality, and accessibility of parks severely declines north of 167th Street and west of the Grand Concourse, all the way north to the Cross Bronx Expressway. Of the few Parks properties in this area, two are closed to the public, behind fences and locked gates: Corporal Fischer Park, which consists of two unconnected, undeveloped, and overgrown parcels, one on West 170th Street and one on West 169th Street and Nelson Avenue; and Jerome Playground, on a former handball court on Jerome Avenue overlooking the Cross Bronx Expressway. Together, these properties represent almost an acre of public park land.

While we applaud DCP’s proposal through the rezoning to de-map Corporal Fischer Place and open Corporal Fischer Park, we believe that the Parks Department, which purchased the park in the 1990s and has left it closed off for years, has a responsibility to invest in this park independent of the rezoning. Additionally, DCP’s Draft Scope of the Environmental Impact Statement does not include plans for the West 169th Street lot of Corporal Fischer Park. We hope that Parks recognizes that opening and investing in only one of the park’s two lots will not be sufficient for this growing community.

The neighborhoods surrounding Corporal Fischer Park and Jerome Playground are very dense, with a high percentage of seniors and families with young children. The City considers this area adequately served by open space, but while some parks may technically fall within a half mile radius of people’s
homes, this measurement does not take into account physical barriers that limit accessibility for many of our community members, such as steep hills and dangerous major roadways. This measurement also does not take into account the size or quality of nearby open space. According to New Yorkers for Parks, City Council District 16 has just 2.6 acres of parks and playgrounds per 1,000 children, compared to a citywide average of 13.3 acres. The district also has just 9.2 acres of parks and playgrounds per 1,000 seniors, compared to a citywide average of 23.3 acres. Opening Corporal Fischer Park and Jerome Playground will add nearly an acre of public space, but this community still needs more parks and playgrounds, especially since the proposed rezoning is expected to bring 12,000 additional residents to the neighborhood.

We encourage NYC Parks to work closely with community residents to redesign and open Corporal Fischer Park and Jerome Playground, and to invest in improvements to other Parks properties that are little more than concrete and benches, like Inwood Playground or Keltch Park. We also hope that future assessments of park accessibility will take into account physical barriers, size and quality of available open space. Thank you.