Dear Committee on Parks and Recreation,

My name is Wendy Brawer. I’ve lived and worked on the Lower East Side since 1987.

I am here to testify about the impacts of the inaccessible parks department building in Sara D Roosevelt Park, specifically the Stanton Building (on Stanton Street between Chrystie and Forsyth). I live and work near this building. It used to be a community center, but Parks stores materials for the entire Borough in it.

Given its prime location outside lower Manhattan’s extensive Flood Zones, I believe the Stanton Building would be an excellent Resiliency Center, where community members can learn impact-reducing skills (such as bike repair, energy efficiency, waste reduction, and other sustainable living habits) and preparedness skills. The building can double as an emergency center, and provide communications, power and other services when needed during a disruption.

Like many Park Houses, the Stanton Building was closed as a community center in the 1970’s or 80’s. As far back as 1998, Parks indicated the building would be returned to the community. We were permitted to see the inside in September 2015, with City Councilmember Chin, Parks staff and members of SDR Park’s Community Coalition. The exterior looks good, but inside, it needs extensive repairs. The first funding ($1million) for new bathrooms has been allocated by MBP Gale Brewer and Councilmember Chin. A design for the bathrooms will be presented by Parks at
the January 2017 CB3 Parks committee meeting. No community input has been requested, although Parks was invited to three visioning sessions held in July 2016 (see attached).

The community surrounding SDR Park includes many deaf residents, low income immigrants and their families, as well as other new arrivals to NYC. Approximately 150 diverse community members took part in the three events (see attached). Held in conjunction with NYC Commons, one disproportionate fact stood out – the Lower East Side has more underutilized Park Houses than any other Manhattan district. We also have less parkland per capita than other districts.

With trucks coming and going all day long in this narrow park, using this building as a storage facility creates a safety hazard. Moreover, pollution that impacts all New Yorkers is generated by trucks coming all the way downtown to collect supplies each day. This expensive and time consuming, and at minimum, storage should be more central. Parks uses two other buildings in SDR Park, and perhaps the storage can be relocated further south (we have also suggested other locations and tactics such as procurement subscriptions so less space is needed to store products).

The Stanton building could serve the community as an innovative Resiliency Center. Community members want to learn repair skills, how solar energy can be installed where they live and work, how to co-develop innovative waste reduction and rainwater catchment, and do more to support everyday sustainability. We could have a community meeting space, tool library and even a kitchen. People also like the idea of including cultural exchange and recreation, and providing services for homeless community members.

As a member of LES Ready (post-Sandy long term recovery group), I am well aware of the need for emergency space, and this place is ideally located for that purpose. Moreover, there is no other location for the kinds of capacity building described here; indeed, we are losing community spaces all the time. In an era when the effects of climate change are just starting to impact our city, many of us, including Rob Watson, the ‘father of LEED’ agree that resiliency is dependent on community engagement of this kind, and that the Stanton Building is very well suited for it.

I am eager for the Parks Department Building “Stanton Storehouse” in Sara D Roosevelt Park to be returned to public use. It is just one of dozens across NYC that the public cannot access. These are opportunities for community centers, public restrooms, cooperative food businesses and more. Reopening these buildings to serve the public, and planning for their future use in collaboration with local residents, will ensure their lasting benefit to our neighborhoods and City.

Wendy Brawer
Director, Green Map System
Member of the Stanton Building Task Force and SDR Park Community Coalition
3 events in July to expand the vision and learn how to effectively generate change with the Stanton Building Task Force and NYCommons

Wednesday July 6, 13 and 27 in Sara D Roosevelt Park

In 1998, residents were promised their community space would soon be returned. Instead, it's being used for storage and in poor condition, which attracts other misuse of the Park as well as trucks coming and going in an area where children play and bicyclists ride.

This coastal community needs a space to generate relationships and resiliency. Located one block south of Houston Street and a block east of the Bowery in a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood, the Stanton Building could be an important anchor to the community and a gateway to Sara D Roosevelt Park. As one of the few public buildings located outside all the flood zones below Houston, it could function well as a refuge in times of disruption. It is in the heart of a community that is being priced out of financially viable democratic spaces.

Thank you to Council Member Chin and Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer for allocating $1 million for new restrooms in the building – now it’s time to consider all that can be done to building community capacity in this building. For more information, see http://sdrpc.mkgarden.org/. To RSVP, contact apple@greenmap.org

#1 • Envision a New Community Space at the Stanton Building!
Weds July 6th • 3 to 6pm – Stanton Street between Forsyth and Chrystie

It's a blank slate! Drop by and make a big impression. Explore resilient possibilities with the Stanton Building Task Force and NYCommons. Get inspired by:

--- Gardening via It’s My Park Day by M’finda Kalunga, Sara Roosevelt Coalition & the LUNGS Youth Program
-- Bike Repair by The New York Mechanical Gardens Bike Co-op
Thank you to Council Member Chin and Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer; Jina Porter, Interpreter for our deaf neighbors; the Sara D Roosevelt Park Community Coalition, NYC Parks Department, Partnerships for Parks, Bowery Rescue Committee, Materials for the Arts, NY4Parks and the Collective for Culture, Community and Environment.

#2 • Return of the Stanton Building Workshop

July 13, 6:30-9PM

BRC at Sara D Roosevelt Park
30 Delancey (between Forsyth & Chrystie) on the Lower East Side

For all those who are committed to working on the campaign to return Stanton Building to the neighborhood, this event is focused around:

Building a Grassroots campaign
Learning the “how” of Parks
Claiming Your Park Building
This event, co produced by the Stanton Building Task Force and NYCommons, will help you gain valuable skills and build networks.

#3 • Land! Money! Power! Workshop

Weds, July 27 from 6:30 to 9pm

BRC at Sara D Roosevelt Park
30 Delancey (between Forsyth & Chrystie) on the Lower East Side

Come Learn How to Take Control of Our Parks and Community Spaces.

Led by NYCommons, with the support of the Stanton Building Task Force, this gathering intends to build capacity for the leadership, membership and park-going public of New York City to insure that designated public spaces remain accessible to the public and under the stewardship of the public and their representatives. Public parks and public open spaces are among the few places left in an increasingly segregated city that are truly democratic preserves.  

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Could This LES Park Building Be Turned into a Communal Kitchen or a Bike Co-Op?

Whose park? Their park. If they can just get their ducks in a row.

Lower East Side stakeholders gathered yesterday evening to discuss how best to rally together as they call for the transformation of a derelict building into a vibrant community center.

Last week, the Sara D. Roosevelt Park Coalition, in cooperation with other community organizers, staged a brainstorming session and awareness-raising campaign in front of the Stanton Building, a brick edifice near on the northern side of the park that’s currently being used as a storage facility by the Parks Department, in order to get a general sense of what people would like to see happen with it. Yesterday’s meeting aimed to concretize those visions, and to provide the community with the logistical tools needed to advocate for their interests.

Among those who met in the park at the BRC Senior Center were Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer, representatives of City Council member Margaret Chin and State Assembly member Alice Cancel, and Kathleen Webster, the president of the Park Coalition. Webster said the goal was to help create an “advocacy community” by letting people know how their voices could be heard in local government. “A lot of people don’t know how things actually work,” she said.
Susan Lerner, the executive director of Common Cause New York, echoed this sentiment. “What we’re doing is giving the community tools to be included in the public conversation,” she said, which could be anything from awareness-raising campaigns on social media, understanding the chain of command in city government, and knowing which elected official to contact in order to champion a community cause. Susan Stetzer, district manager of the Community Board 3, explained the importance of issues being placed at the top of the capital priorities for the Community Board’s budget cycle, and how that could be achieved.

At the meeting, people were split into two groups, with one group drawing and describing their own personal visions for the space on photocopied prints of the building’s exterior and its inside space, and the other group getting advice from representatives of the New Yorkers for Parks nonprofit, Common Cause New York, and CB 3. Afterward, the two groups switched.

During the “visualization” session, excitement about the building’s potential began to rise as everyone shared their thoughts. Some of the most popular ideas were the creation of a bicycle repair co-op, as well as solar-powered WiFi and device-charging stations.
Wendy Brawer, the founding director of Green Map System, a nonprofit that maps green spaces in urban areas, said that, in addition to a bike repair co-op, a space where people could learn the basics of mechanics, repairs, and home economics (sewing, mending, etc) could be a valuable addition to the neighborhood. “A lot of us don’t know how to use tools as all. Wouldn’t it be nice if we could help each other learn these basic life skills?”

She also added that she would like to see the creation of a cart repair station, that would serve the many seniors in the neighborhood.

Other popular ideas were the establishment of showering and toilet facilities for the homeless, as well as a computer center, library or book exchange, and an activities area for people to play sports, board games, or hold meetings. Adding better lighting to the space was another priority, everyone agreed.

Borough President Brewer said she would also really like to see the addition of kitchens in the Stanton Building. “A lot of people cook at home and try to sell it outside, which is actually illegal,” she said, citing the Department of Health’s strict regulations regarding kitchens used for the preparation of food intended for sale. Having regulation kitchens in the building would allow these small business owners to legally make an income.
For Brewer, Webster, and other attendees at the meeting, the real issue lay with the Parks Department, though. Webster said she was tired of hearing that the Parks Department needed the space for storage, particularly when so many other parts of the park where already being used by the department (one part of the park houses its citywide communications center, and another part at the Hester Street walkway houses the district headquarters for Community Board 3 as well as various staff resources for the department).

“Ask the other five boroughs for storage space. We’ve been more than fair with our park space,” Webster said.

There will be a Community Board 3 meeting tonight at 6:30 pm to discuss district budget priorities (which will include the Stanton Building), and the Sara D. Roosevelt Park Coalition will be holding its final meeting on the subject (entitled “Land, Money, Power”) on July 27 at 6:30pm, at BRC.
‘Father of LEED’ hopes to help spark LES Park building’s return to use

November 23, 2016 | Filed under: Community, News, Recreation | Posted by: The Villager

BY DENNIS LYNCH | Lower East Siders are organizing another push to open a city-owned building on Stanton St. in Sara D. Roosevelt Park to the public. A coalition of local stakeholders want the Parks and Recreation Department to make good on a promise it made almost 20 years ago to reopen the former recreation center that the agency has used as an operations facility since the 1980s.

Members of the Sara D. Roosevelt Park Coalition and other neighborhood groups will take their fight to City Hall at the City Council’s Dec. 1 Committee on Parks and Recreation meeting to discuss Parks Department properties closed to the public. Longtime Bowery resident and coalition member K Webster plans to testify about the tremendous community support to transform the building.

Advocates gathered outside the Stanton St. building in S.D.R. Park this past July during one of three workshops held over the summer to brainstorm about ideas for the building’s reuse. Villager file photo

“Everybody around would like to see it used,” she said, “whether it’s a place for homeless people to come and get their bearings, a resiliency center or a general community center. Any use would be better than what it is now.”

The one-story building sits where Stanton St. crosses the slim seven-block long park. The Parks Department converted the structure from a community center into an operations center in the
Advocates recently gained a valuable ally and colleague in Robert Watson, a leading environmental scientist. Watson, often called the “Father of LEED” (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) for helping found the green-building certification program, became involved with the park and visits weekly to help garden. He pushed state Senator Daniel Squadron to support the project at the senator’s town hall earlier this month.

Watson, like Webster and others involved in the effort, believes the Stanton St. building should be a “resiliency center” along with a year-round community center. The place could provide people with essential services in the event of a storm, he added.

“I think it would be important as these major storms become more normal to have a place where people can go during times of crisis that are more or less self-sufficient,” he said.

Watson said that the Red Hook Recreation Center is a viable model to replicate. The Parks Department outfitted that center with solar panels in 2013, so that neighbors can charge their phones and computers there in the event of a major blackout. The Brooklyn center will also provide refrigeration for food, emergency medicine and basic heating and cooling.

Watson said a year-round community space in the L.E.S. building would be an extension of this idea.

“Public resources where people can get together and engage socially is important. It can end up being a life raft in times of disruption,” he said. “Resilience has many components. There’s an economic and social component — the ability to withstand and come back, a community ethos, a spirit is part of that.”

Squadron will look into the project and will wait for Community Board 3 to weigh in before moving forward any further. If the initiative gains the board’s support, he would be happy to champion the cause, according to the spokesperson.

The City Council and borough president allocated $1 million to overhaul the building’s public restrooms, which should be completed by fall 2017.

Meanwhile, the Parks Department plans to continue to use the Stanton location for daily operations. The location is essential for “the efficient operation” of the agency’s Manhattan parks system, according to a Parks spokesperson. It is a “fixed-post site” for the cleaning crew for neighboring park properties six days a week. All borough districts pick up supplies for their daily operation from this location, which are delivered by vendors five days a week. In season, on average, six operational staff work out of the building; off season two to three.

“The perception that this is a storage unit is a mischaracterization,” the spokesperson said. “We have staff stationed at the site and our maintenance and operations staff goes there every day.”

But Webster said that community organizations are ready to run programs at the building and that advocacy groups were even willing to help raise the funds to convert the space. What they want is a concrete guarantee that the building will be coming back into the public’s hands — which would help them raise the money, she said. Either way, the activist appears ready to get tough on pols and Parks to get things moving.

“We’re not really in the mood to hear a lot of excuses about why this can’t be returned,” Webster said, “not when we’ve offered to help with the space.”