

Front Page News from the Queens Tribune:

Don't Fence Me In

August 10, 2006



Willow Lake Closed Due To Neglect

By JEFF FEINMAN AND BRIAN M. RAFFERTY

One of Queens' most vibrant and luscious natural resources, the 55-acre Willow Lake preserve, has been locked off from pedestrians and bicyclists for the past several years. In that time, the lake's former long-stretching trails and paths have been allowed to fade away as invasive vegetation has completely engulfed the area.

The Parks Department seems to be empty-handed when it comes to plans for restoring the lake, and Queens residents have grown frustrated. Two entranceways, one crossing over the Van Wyck Expressway and the other stretching over the Grand Central Parkway, are gated off, allowing no access to the overgrown park. The Parks Department could not say when the entrances were closed.



The grass near the pedestrian ramp is taller than a person. Tribune Photo by Jeff Feinman

"Why are we letting these safe access paths go to waste because of a bit of overgrown brush?" asked Forest Hills resident and bicyclist Cheryl Lifton. "It would probably take less than a week and a bulldozer to provide to provide safe access to Willow Lake for pedestrians and bicyclists."

Lifton wrote to Councilwoman Melinda Katz (D-Forest Hills), who quickly came to her support. In a recent letter to Department of Parks Commissioner Adrian Benepe, Katz wrote, "My constituents have notified me that the only means to enter the Flushing Meadow Park by bicycle is by crossing over the Grand Central Parkway at Jewel Avenue, which is extremely dangerous to cross. The safe access paths are locked because the path around Willow Lake is overgrown and therefore can no longer be used. I respectfully request that the existing safe paths be cleared so that area residents are able to utilize and enjoy this beautiful park safely."

Parks Department spokeswoman Abigail Lootens said that the crossways were closed due to a fire that had obliterated Willow Lake Bridge in the late 1990's. Because there is no bridge over the southern tip of Willow Lake, pedestrians would meet a dead end on the paths when coming to the lake, according to the Lootens.

"During the late 1990s, we experienced several incidents of vandalism, predominantly arson, that forced us to close Willow Lake Bridge to pedestrian and bicycle traffic," the Parks Department said in a statement. "We are aware of the need for restoration to Willow Lake area, and it was included in the original plans for the 2012 Olympics. Although those plans changed, we are still committed to rebuilding the bridge and are working with the Department of Transportation to obtain a consultant for this purpose."

Former New York City Parks Commissioner Henry Stern, however, said that he was unaware of any such fire that had burned the Willow Lake bridge.

"When my watch ended Feb. 4, 2002, at that time Willow Lake was on line," Stern said. "I don't know what happened in the last four years."

According to the Parks Department Web site, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation designated the Willow Lake a protected freshwater wetland on November 10, 1976. In 1996, students from John Bowne High School reconstructed the nature trail around Willow Lake. The Parks Web site said that as part of the trail's restoration, the Department of Agriculture's Urban Resources Partnership Program provided a \$22,000 grant for the path.

In addition, millions of dollars in private funds, from the National Wildlife Service, state Environmental Bond Act grants and other sources, had been procured to remove invasive plant species from the Willow Lake area, according to Marc Matsil, the former Chief of Natural Resources for the Parks Department.

Working in collaboration with Rutgers, Cornell and other universities in the late 1990s, Parks acquired two types of beetles that attacked the invasive Phragmites and Purple Loosestrife that has begun to take over the area.

The insects cleared out most of the weeds, but without proper maintenance of the property, with crews going in every 12-18 months to check progress, the site could easily have become overgrown once again, Matsil said.

"We did significant restoration, laying down crushed stone and wood chips to make the paths," he added. "We used to get hundreds of visitors a months. There was an absolutely tremendous response from the community. We even got international attention from the United Kingdom for this project."

"In its peak, the Parks Department was the premiere natural areas management organization in the country," Matsil said. "It was a priority. We had teams of restoration ecologists that would assess potential gems, who would seek funding."

As for what has happened since 2002, Matsil can only say what he hoped would never happen.

"If the site has reverted back to its invasive 'grandeur,' it's a travesty," he said.



This end of the crossway above the Van Wyck Expressway leading into Willow Lake has been closed off because the trails have been grown over. Tribune Photo by Jeff Feinman

See next page for the
Queens Tribune Editorial

In Our Opinion...

August 10, 2006: Editorial

A Straight Answer

When longtime Parks Commissioner Henry Stern left office Feb. 4, 2002, the area around Willow Lake was open to the public, had a beautiful bike trail, had undergone millions of dollars in clean-up to eradicate invasive plants, and had a relatively new overpass that welcomed hikers and cyclists to explore one of the few permanent natural preserves in the city.

Just more than four years later the entire area is overgrown, the entries chained closed and the public kept out. The reason? Well, we're not sure. We couldn't get the Parks Commissioner to answer our questions, and the best we could get was a press spokesman who said that a footbridge caught fire some time in the 1990s, leading to the closing of the area.

That's a bunch of hooey, according to Stern, who now, along with us, wonders just what Adrian Benepe is planning to do with the 105-acre site.

We want Mr. Benepe to get to the bottom of this, to answer why Willow Lake is closed off, why the new, multi-million dollar footbridge is not open, to explain to Queens what the heck is going on and to give Queens back its park.

Can't somebody please give us a straight answer?

**See next page for
continued coverage in the
Queens Tribune.**

Continued News from the Queens Tribune:

Keys To Willow Lake Held In DOT Bridge



*The entrance to walking paths into Willow Lake is currently closed off to the public.
Credit: Jeff Feinman*

August 17, 2006

By JEFF FEINMAN

As the walking paths of Willow Lake remain fenced off and overgrown, many have said the key to the lake's restoration lies with the Willow Lake Bridge, a small wooden walking bridge apparently burned down by vandals in the late 1990's.

The responsibility of replacing the Willow Lake Bridge is in the hands of the Department of Transportation, and though there is funding available to rebuild the bridge in the DOT's capital budget, there have been complications in lining up a contractor for the bridge's replacement.

"We defaulted the contractor earlier this year for poor performance, and are negotiating a contract with the second highest bidder so that they can begin work as soon as possible," said DOT spokesman Kay Sarlin.

According to Councilman James Gennaro (D-Fresh Meadows), Chairman of the City Council Environmental Committee, the original contractor had started work on the bridge, and then walked off the job. Gennaro said he offered money to the Parks Department from this year's budget to restore Willow Lake.

"Even when I offered money to do this, they said 'No, Councilman, we've got the money.' They indicated that they had the funds for the bridge."

At press time, the DOT was unable to provide the amount of funding set aside in the capital budget for the Willow Lake Bridge.

Flushing Meadows Corona Park Conservancy President Pat Dolan said that she lives three blocks away from Willow Lake. Dolan said that through the late 1990's, there were a number of vandalism incidents in the park, though neither the FDNY nor the Parks Department were able to confirm specific incidents.

"I would say it's been closed off to the public for at least 10 years," Dolan said. "The only way they can open up the park is by replacing the bridge. The bridge is burned out. They're not going to be able to repair it, it's beyond repair."

Inquiries via email to both New York City Parks and Recreation Commissioner Adrian Benepe and Queens Borough Commissioner Dorothy Lewandowski were not returned.

Flushing Meadows Corona Park World's Fair Association President David Oats said that in the past, his organization has fought numerous attempts by the city to develop the Willow Lake site. "It is the only section of this 1,258-acre park that was never used for structures or any other active purpose so it could be allowed to grow into a unique nature environment," he said. "Its present condition is an outrage, and we demand the city restore this area to its natural beauty."

Dolan said that she would like to see the park restored, but has concerns over future acts of vandalism. "I am totally in favor of limited public access," she said. "I would not want to see that part of the park just open to anyone who simply wanted to walk in and do whatever he or she wanted. That is how we got this problem in the first place."

"We have to have a larger discussion of what makes most sense for the use of this overall space," Gennaro said. "We have to clear out some of the invasive shrubbery that has taken everything over. Fortunately, there's no shortage of concern about Willow Lake."

Former Parks Commissioner Henry Stern has said that Willow Lake's trail and bridge were open and in good shape when he left his post in 2002.

... And, finally, after three weeks ...
Queens Tribune August 24th



Parks Puts Willow Lake Back On Track

By JEFF FEINMAN

Willow Lake will reopen to the public within the next few years, according to the head of the New York City Dept. of Parks and Recreation.

In an exclusive interview with the Queens Tribune, Commissioner Adrian Benepe laid out the department's intentions for Willow Lake.

Located in the southern portion of Flushing Meadows Corona Park, the area has been closed to the public since 2000. Once an extensive recreational site for walkers and joggers, Willow Lake has since been closed off at access points over both the Van Wyck Expressway and Grand Central Parkway.

Benepe said that \$1.2 million has been put aside in the capital budget to reconstruct Willow Lake Bridge, which was burned by vandals in 2000. Earlier this year, the Department of Transportation defaulted a contractor who was to reconstruct the bridge, and is currently negotiating a contract with the second highest bidder to repair the bridge. A \$1.1 million grant from New York State will also be used in the lake's restoration, and it is possible that a grant for habitat restoration in Meadow Lake could be transferred to Willow Lake. Benepe estimated that overall costs for the area will be between \$3-4 million.

"The plan is to restore the area and reopen it to the public, possibly on an interim basis," Benepe said. "I think we'll get these things done over the next few years. The full restoration of the bridge, no matter who does it, is probably a couple of years away.

"The reason the area is closed off is because effectively, without the bridge, you have a cul-de-sac. You're sort of stuck in no man's land once you get into the park."

Former Queens Borough Commissioner Richard Murphy confirmed that the bridge was closed in 2000. "In the spring of 2000, when that bridge burned, that was the end of non-guided tours in Willow Lake," Murphy said.

Benepe said the Parks Department will either allow the DOT to continue work on the bridge, or if need be, do it on their own through their own funding. The bridge may be built at smaller dimensions because it is not a vehicular bridge, he said.

The Parks Department is also going to see if there is any possibility that temporary repairs could be made to allow public use before completion. Benepe said that the supporting structures may be in better shape than the top planks, and if the engineers determine that the support is salvageable, a temporary wooden bridge could be built.

In the near future, the department will also present City Council Environmental Committee Chairman James Gennaro (D-Fresh Meadows) with a list of park restoration items that could be funded with a capital allocation for the fiscal year 2008 budget, something Gennaro has expressed a willingness to do in the past.

Benepe said that the best way to remove invasive Phragmites, which has been a problem in Willow Lake, is by physically removing it from the ground. Herbicides and pesticides, Benepe said, would not be used because the area is a protected wetland.

Some park advocacy groups have expressed a need to allow limited access to the park when it is reopened, preventing future acts of vandalism. "This is a conundrum we face in parks across the city; it's not the only place we have difficulty policing," Benepe said. "A likely scenario is to see if the bridge can be constructed with steel. On the other hand, if we look at history, all parks are badly vandalized."

"That's why the job didn't get done sooner; it should have been done sooner..."

Certainly, the Parks Department should have kept its eye on the ball on this project when it didn't move for a couple of years."

-- NYC Parks Commissioner Adrian Benepe

Benepe said that Willow Lake's restoration was included in the plans for the 2012 Olympics, and after those plans fell through, the restoration was stymied.

"That's why the job didn't get done sooner; it should have been done sooner," Benepe said. "Certainly, the Parks Department should have kept its eye on the ball on this project when it didn't move for a couple of years."

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