



Parks for All New Yorkers: Immigrants, Culture, and NYC Parks



New Yorkers for Parks
The Arthur Ross Center for Parks and Open Spaces
355 Lexington Avenue, 14th Floor
New York, NY 10017
212-838-9410
www.ny4p.org

New Yorkers for Parks is a citywide, independent organization dedicated to ensuring that all New Yorkers enjoy a world-class parks system.

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Acknowledgements

New Yorkers for Parks would like to thank the New York Immigration Coalition and the Parks Collaborative for their assistance with this report.

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Flushing-Meadows Corona Park, Queens

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

More than one-third of New York City residents are foreign born. Because park preferences can vary depending on cultural background, as evidenced by research and the popularity of various sports in different parts of the world, the needs and opinions of foreign-born New Yorkers should be carefully evaluated to ensure that these populations are well-served by parks and recreational opportunities.

The Parks Department has worked to address the increased demand for soccer and cricket fields and offers some translated signage in parks. The agency's Language Access Plan will go farther in conquering the language barrier. These are good first steps, but New York City has the opportunity to enhance these efforts and better connect immigrants to parks through park stewardship and programming, public meetings, and more.

Advocates in the park and immigration communities highlighted three major issues during interviews that should be addressed to improve the park experience for foreign-born New Yorkers: overcoming the language barrier, improving the permitting process for sports and special events, and increasing the diversity of foods available in parks.

New Yorkers for Parks offers the following recommendations to better connect immigrants and parks:

1. To ensure timely implementation of the Language Access Plan, the City should support the Parks Department's efforts with dedicated resources.
2. Provide translation services for all public meetings related to park projects.
3. Increase the transparency of the permitting application process for events and athletic fields by creating a timeline that clearly states when items are due and when to expect notification.
4. Explore opportunities to lessen or remove the insurance burden for small, volunteer-based groups that hold special events in parks.
5. Offer translated permit applications and instructions on the Parks' website as soon as possible.
6. Formally declare the grandfathering rule for athletic fields and publicize it on the Parks' website.
7. Allow new leagues and teams access to high-demand athletic fields by limiting the number of years that a single group can continuously hold a permit.
8. In parks that contain heavily used fields with lights, accommodate the work schedules of new immigrants and expand permitted hours of play for all by exploring the extension of park open hours.
9. Encourage local economic development, welcome various cultural groups, and improve concession revenues by seeking out culturally relevant food vendors for parks.

INTRODUCTION

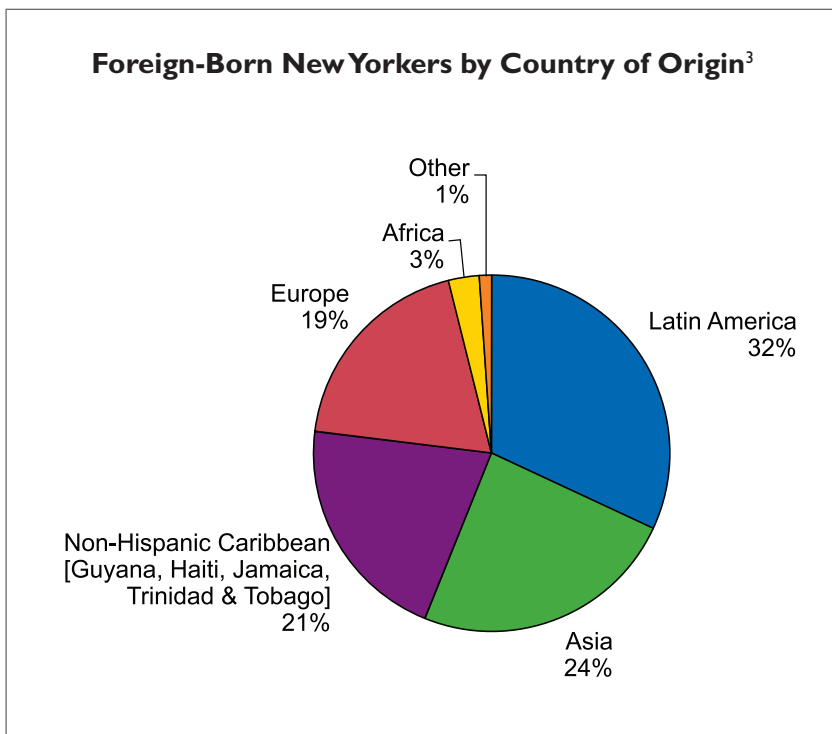
New York City is home to an astounding 2.87 million individuals born outside of the U.S.¹ Comprising 36% of the city's inhabitants, this historically underserved population tends to have extensive family and social ties in their neighborhoods but faces significant barriers to engagement with the larger community and government, in particular. Language access is perhaps the largest and most apparent challenge, but immigrants also must navigate unfamiliar and often complicated bureaucracies and systems.

With more than one-third of New Yorkers born outside of this country, we must work diligently to understand what this growing population wants and needs in terms of park services.

This report will explore the connections between park services, cultural uses of open space, and immigrant communities. We will offer recommendations to show how the City and the NYC Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) can best serve these communities.

The diversity of the immigrant population in New York City requires a close look at the demographics of local neighborhoods. For example, Sunset Park, Brooklyn; has become home to a large Chinatown in the last decade; an enclave of residents from Guyana has grown in Ozone Park, Queens; and Dominicans are increasingly settling in the West Bronx.² The park needs of these various groups should be evaluated.

Foreign-Born New Yorkers by Country of Origin³



According to a recent study by the Pratt Institute and the New York Immigrant Housing Collaborative⁴, immigrants are three times more likely to live in overcrowded conditions than native-born New Yorkers. While few New Yorkers enjoy the luxury of a backyard, the basic need of open space is even more essential for those living in cramped conditions who depend on public space to relax and recreate. For immigrants who work long hours, recreational outlets are extremely important.⁵ Therefore, we must carefully evaluate open space provision in neighborhoods with high foreign-born populations to ensure that quality, enjoyable recreational opportunities are available.

Immigrants who are not proficient in English face barriers in terms of learning about park programs and getting involved in the care of their local park. In a significant gain for immigrant communities in fall 2008, Mayor Bloomberg signed Executive Order No. 120, mandating that all city agencies that provide “direct public services,” generally described as programmatic in nature, develop a language access plan to ensure that their services are available to New Yorkers who are not native-born English speakers. The Parks Department’s plan, which is expected to improve connections between parks and immigrant populations, is already on its way to implementation.

¹ “The Newest New Yorkers 2000.” New York City Department of City Planning, Population Division. 2000.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ “Confronting the Housing Squeeze: Challenges Facing Immigrant Tenants, and What New York Can Do.” Pratt Institute and the New York Immigrant Housing Collaborative, fall 2008.

⁵ Santucci, Christina and Noah Rosenberg, “Hard Workers Take a Break.” *New York Daily News*, Nov. 23, 2007.

OVERVIEW OF THE REPORT

The first section of this report offers a review of academic and other literature regarding culture and park use. Specifically, we analyze and highlight the New York City Parks Department's efforts in reaching the foreign-born population and recognize successes and studies on the topic from across the country as to best practices. We examine whether park needs differ between immigrant groups and U.S.-born residents and how governments and park managers can best serve all groups.

We also discuss the results of a park usership study that New Yorkers for Parks conducted last summer to help ascertain how immigrants use parks. In partnership with Baruch College's School of Public Affairs, we administered interviews and questionnaires with park users in two parks whose neighborhoods have significant immigrant populations: Queensbridge Park in Long Island City, Queens, and Seward Park on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. We will discuss the responses of native-born and foreign-born residents in light of their opinions and priorities for parks.



Columbus Park's playground is often crowded because of its location in Chinatown, a dense neighborhood with a high population of foreign-born residents.

The second section analyzes three prominent issues in providing parks for all New Yorkers, which were identified during a series of interviews with community and parks groups that are members of the New York Immigration Coalition's Parks Collaborative. The Parks Collaborative is a group of leaders and advocates concerned with improving connections between immigrants and parks. The group is facilitated by the non-profit New York Immigration Coalition. In addition, we conducted interviews with Partnership for Parks and the City's Parks Department. The section spotlights important challenges and successful programs and partnerships.

In conclusion, we offer recommendations for expanded, improved, or new programs and policies that can connect immigrants to parks to ensure that the needs of this underserved population are met.

PARK USE AND CULTURE

Cultural background clearly has an influence over an individual's preferences regarding recreation, made obvious when demographic shifts bring changes in the popularity of various sports. The open space component of the City's PlaNYC sustainability agenda acknowledges the diversity of NYC's park users and their need for a variety of recreational opportunities; however, the City should go one step further and create a master plan for parks. Such a plan would include a public process to assess individual neighborhood needs in terms of park services, with a particular focus on changing demographics.

In Minneapolis, a large influx of immigrants from Somalia has resulted in an increased need for soccer and cricket pitches, while demand for the many tennis courts throughout their park system has decreased.⁶ Similarly, in New York City, sports such as cricket, soccer and volleyball have grown in popularity due to an increase in immigrant populations from areas such as Central and South America and the Caribbean, who prefer these sports. The Parks Department has made significant efforts to address the increased demand for recreation and to accommodate new immigrant groups.

In 2003, the Parks Department installed its first official cricket pitch for what has been deemed one of the fastest-growing sports in the city.⁷ When the field was built in Spring Creek Park in Canarsie, Brooklyn, immigrant users from Trinidad, Barbados, Jamaica, India, and Pakistan — places where the sport is popular — felt welcomed and encouraged to play in the park.⁸ Today, there are about 14 cricket fields in New York City parks.⁹

Accommodating the myriad groups that have settled in New York City is not easy, however. Demographic shifts are constantly occurring in our neighborhoods. Because the Parks Department manages a finite amount of land, they must make decisions about which sports and groups to accommodate, and this can lead to tension and conflicts over park usage. For example, soccer players convert the outfields of baseball diamonds into soccer fields, sometimes using park trash cans as goal posts. Volleyball players often set up makeshift courts¹⁰ because the few courts designated for volleyball in city parks do not meet the demand.



Kids play cricket at Austin Playground in Jamaica, Queens. Cricket is particularly popular in South Asian and Caribbean communities.

While demand for particular athletic facilities is relatively easy to measure, due to the permit process to which teams and leagues must adhere, there are other, more nuanced connections between culture and parks. The Public Space Research Group at the City University of New York Graduate Center has contributed vast research on the topic through needs assessments and studies of parks in New York City and beyond. A 1998 study of Prospect Park, Brooklyn, which is frequented by people from all over the globe, noted certain differences in the ways that the diverse surrounding neighborhoods used the park. Hispanic populations were more likely to enjoy the park in large social groups, rather than privately. Similarly,

⁶ Swope, Christopher, "Christopher Swope's Urban Notebook." *Governing*, April 2008.

⁷ DPR, *The Daily Plant*: "Brooklyn Goes Batty for Cricket," May 7, 2003. <http://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/B165/dailyplant/16727>

⁸ *It's My Park*: "Cricket." Season 1, summer 2006. NYC TV, Channel 25. http://www.nycgovparks.org/sub_newsroom/video/index.html?key=16 ⁹ NYC Office of Management and Budget. Adopted Budgets, FY 1986–FY 2008.

⁹ DPR, "Activities and Facilities: Cricket Fields." <http://www.nycgovparks.org/facilities/cricket>

¹⁰ Santucci, Christina and Noah Rosenberg, "Hard Workers Take a Break." *New York Daily News*, Nov. 23, 2007.



Older adults participate in a group dance class in this well-maintained park in Beijing, China.

most of those who were eating or grilling in the park were either Hispanic or black, rather than white.¹¹

Research Around the Country

In studies of parks across the country, the Public Space Research Group has noted important ways to ensure that people of various cultures are served by urban parks. In Philadelphia, the group examined cultural associations with Independence National Historic Park, which is best known for housing the Liberty Bell. Vietnamese and Latino groups felt that learning about American history was important, yet their park experience was hindered by the lack of translation services. And the history of slave and free African American involvement in constructing the park had been virtually erased. The study concluded that offering translated signage as well as recognizing and appreciating the cultural groups that have played a role in the history of a place will strengthen the relationship of those groups to the park.¹²

A recent University of Illinois study examined the recreational use of trails and pathways by minority populations in Chicago.¹³ Through observational and survey research in Lincoln Park, researchers found that while the trails in the park were designed primarily for walking or biking, Latino users tended to navigate slightly beyond the paths and use the area for relaxing, hosting family events, or playing team sports. Latino visitors went to the park on weekends more often, in larger groups, and stayed longer than non-Hispanic visitors — characteristics that correspond with picnics and other social activities. Since the goal of the study was to expand the health benefits of parks for this population, park designers can build on the ways that Latinos are already using the parks by installing a picnic spot that requires some walking or by constructing sports facilities near the trails.

These studies show the importance of seeking public input from all communities, particularly when renovating or constructing parks. Knowledge of demographic and population shifts is extremely important in ensuring an open process that considers the needs of all groups. Translation services should be provided in all parts of the planning process. Through thoughtful design and a comprehensive public process, parks can welcome and serve all populations.



Many New Yorkers enjoy hosting barbecues in parks, like this one at Pelham Bay Park in the Bronx.

¹¹ Low, Setha, Dana Taplin and Suzanne Scheld. *Rethinking Urban Parks: Public Space and Cultural Diversity*. University of Texas Press, Austin, 2005.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Mitchell, Melissa. "Researchers suggest parks should adapt to better serve Latino trail users," News Bureau, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Feb 4, 2008.

New Yorkers for Parks Field Research

Community input is an essential component of park planning. A sound public process that engages all populations can ensure that the needs of particular user groups are addressed. Last summer New Yorkers for Parks conducted a pilot program to survey park users, taking special measures to include and track foreign-born respondents.

Methodology

During July and August 2008, New Yorkers for Parks administered a park usership survey in partnership with Baruch College Survey Research in the School of Public Affairs. The study took place in two parks: Seward Park on the Lower East Side, Manhattan, and Queensbridge Park in Long Island City, Queens. Surveyors were graduate interns hired by New Yorkers for Parks and trained by Baruch College and New Yorkers for Parks. They counted every user exiting the park. They also interviewed or distributed questionnaires to every tenth park user exiting Seward Park and every park user exiting Queensbridge Park (due to the smaller volume of visitors at Queensbridge Park). This method is used to prevent surveyor bias. Park users were asked for demographic information as well as opinions on their park. The survey was available in English, Chinese and Spanish, and two of the questions were designed to measure place of birth (in the U.S. or elsewhere) and country of origin. A total of 145 and 120 surveys were completed in Seward Park and Queensbridge Park, respectively.

The parks and their neighborhoods:

	Queensbridge Park, Queens	Seward Park, Manhattan
Characteristics of park	On the East River, the park is made up of open lawns, baseball fields and picnic tables. It also contains a playground and synthetic turf play area.	Largely paved and devoted to active recreation, the park includes playgrounds and basketball and volleyball courts. It also contains a small community garden and tall trees.
Acreage of park	20	3
Characteristics of surrounding neighborhood	Residential and industrial with nearby public housing complex	In busy commercial and residential Chinatown
Percent foreign-born in zip code area¹⁴	39%	50%
Most prevalent foreign-born population in zip code area¹⁵	Mexican (15% of the foreign-born population)	Chinese (75% of the foreign-born population)
Percent foreign-born survey respondents	29%	49%
Number of surveys completed in foreign language	10% (Spanish)	29% (Chinese)
Estimated daytime visitorship to the park over six weeks in July and August	9,000	60,000

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ By the zip code that encompasses the park. NYC Department of City Planning, "The Newest New Yorkers," 2000.

Findings of the Usership Study

Perceptions of the parks differed among U.S.-born and foreign-born respondents.

Immigrants visiting Seward Park gave higher ratings to safety and overall conditions of the park. While 88% of foreign-born respondents rated the park overall as either “excellent” or “good” (versus “fair” or “poor”), only 75% of U.S. born respondents assigned these positive ratings.

Unlike Seward Park users, immigrants at Queensbridge Park were more likely to rate their park lower than non-immigrants. 77% of foreign-born Queensbridge Park visitors said that overall the park was either “excellent” or “good.” In contrast, 88% of the U.S.-born respondents assigned these ratings. Different than in Seward Park, U.S.-born respondents also rated Queensbridge Park higher on cleanliness and safety than foreign-born visitors.

When asked to rate various park features, immigrants at Seward Park responded more favorably than non-immigrants to conditions of nearly all features, including play equipment, lawns and gardens, and drinking fountains. At Queensbridge Park, immigrants responded less favorably to conditions of several features, particularly play equipment and bathrooms.

Activities in the parks differed among U.S.-born and foreign-born respondents.

In Seward Park, U.S.-born respondents were more likely to come to the park for “relaxing or reading” and “meeting friends and family”; foreign-born visitors came for “exercise and sports” and “playing on the playground” more frequently.

Queensbridge Park visitors who were born in the U.S. came to the park more frequently for “picnic and grilling,” “playing on the playground,” and “meeting friends and family.” Conversely, foreign-born respondents came to the park for “exercise and sports” or “relaxing and reading.”

Lessons from the Park Usership Study

The results of the user survey reiterate the fact that the immigrant population is not a homogenous group that can be easily described. The populations visiting the two parks have various needs, expectations, and preferences, as shown in their responses to the questionnaire.

While the foreign-born visitors to Seward Park generally felt more positive about the park than U.S.-born visitors, further surveys that include focus groups and observational data could provide a more in-depth look at this population and what sorts of park improvements (if any) they would enjoy.

If a project were launched to survey users and — importantly — non-users, the facilities in the park could be improved or changed to better serve and attract the populations that live nearby. For example, several park visitors mentioned that they would like to see a swimming pool installed in Queensbridge Park. Perhaps such a project would draw more local residents.

This initial look at the ways that foreign-born and U.S.-born New Yorkers use parks shows the value of data on park



Surveyed users noted that although Queensbridge Park features a lovely view across the East River, the waterfront has been closed off and is in need of remediation.

usership.¹⁶ In addition, the high number of surveys filled out in languages other than English show the value of language access programs that enable more people to participate and offer their opinions.

In 2010, New Yorkers for Parks is partnering with the Parks Department to conduct a larger study of playground usership in a variety of parks. Once again, we will offer translated materials to increase access to foreign-born populations.



Chinatown residents practice tai chi in an unused court in Seward Park.

¹⁶ At Seward Park, 16% who were approached took the survey, while 59% refused. The rest were missed, typically because the park was crowded. At Queensbridge Park, 23% accepted, 36% refused, and the rest were missed, usually because they exited the park in a car, prohibiting the surveyors from approaching them.

PROVIDING PARKS FOR ALL NEW YORKERS: THREE CHALLENGES

For this report New Yorkers for Parks identified and interviewed several community and parks groups that are working to better connect immigrants with parks through participation in the New York Immigration Coalition’s Parks Collaborative. The project is supported by the J.M. Kaplan Fund. Groups interviewed included the New York Immigration Coalition, Queens Community House, Greater Jamaica Development Corporation, Queens Museum of Art, Hester Street Collaborative, and the Riverside Park Fund. The case studies below highlight some of the issues consistently mentioned throughout the interviews: language access, permitting for sports and events, and vendors.

Overcoming Language Barriers: A Step in the Right Direction

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. To ensure timely implementation of the Language Access Plan, the City should support the Parks Department’s efforts with dedicated resources.
2. Provide translation services for all public meetings related to park projects.

A primary struggle for newcomers to this country is the issue of language. While some city agencies, including the Parks Department, have taken the initiative to offer some translated signage, there has been no overarching policy regarding translation services in the city. But in 2008, the mayor signed an executive order requiring agencies who administer “direct services” to develop a “language access plan.” Certain requirements are consistent across agencies, such as translation of essential documents and training for workers on the policy; but in general, the executive order offers flexibility in terms of implementation.

The Parks Department’s Language Access Plan was approved by the Mayor’s office in January 2009. The plan outlines the ways in which the Parks Department will work to serve those with limited English proficiency, including expanding signage in foreign languages based on the local population, translating essential documents such as rules signs and permit instructions, and developing an internal language bank staffed by Parks employees or an external party if possible. Parks will also make an effort to ensure that bilingual staff are posted at the entrances of all walk-in facilities, such as recreation centers.

Many of the language-based issues that parks groups raised during our interviews are addressed in the plan, including the lack of translated signage in parks; the prevalence of “negative” signage (listing of rules) rather than offering directions or explanations of park features; and the fairly limited number of Parks employees that speak languages other than English. Once the plan successfully reaches its goals, the city’s largest parks will contain directional and mapping signage, and the language bank will help provide interpretation where there is no bilingual staff onsite.

Although the plan makes an effort to improve language access in large parks, overall there is a lack of provisions for smaller parks, which serve as the backyards for many immigrant communities. Future iterations of the plan, which is scheduled to be revised annually, should address the need for bilingual staff in neighborhood parks and playgrounds, rather than simply in



The Parks Department has made an effort to translate safety signage at New York City parks and beaches.

offices and recreation centers. In addition, future efforts should be made to incorporate language access and interpretive services in community meetings hosted by Parks, particularly since the majority of community boards do not have translation services.

Though the plan's goals and timeline are impressive, unfortunately the mayor has not allocated additional funding for agencies to meet these goals. Instead, the Parks Department is forced to assign these supplementary duties to existing Parks staff while, at the same time, the Parks Department's operations budget has been significantly cut by nearly 10% over the past two years. The Parks plan also relies heavily on the participation and assistance of community groups and volunteers, which may not be as steady. Advocates are concerned that such ambitious targets may not be achievable without additional funding.

Increasing park stewardship through language access.

As part of their regular work, Partnerships for Parks works to connect local communities to their park through programming and stewardship opportunities. Partnerships and the many groups involved in this type of work acknowledge the challenges in communicating these efforts to non-English speakers.

The Riverside Park Fund also hosts a stewardship component, where community members are notified via email or flyers about clean-up events in the park. However, the group has had a difficult time reaching beyond the English-speaking park users. Significant resources are needed to produce a well-translated flyer and conduct the outreach necessary for this population. Recent immigrants are sometimes hesitant to attend an event not directly tied to their culture; however, through providing children's programming, the Fund has had some success in encouraging adults to become involved in the park.

Language and Public Participation: "People Make Parks"

The "People Make Parks" initiative is a collaboration between Partnerships for Parks, which improves connections between communities and their parks, and the Hester Street Collaborative, a design/build non-profit focused on open space and based in Manhattan's Chinatown. The groups will create a toolkit to illuminate the process of designing park renovations and increase community involvement in park design. Although the final toolkit can be applied to any group, it incorporates strategies to address language barriers.

For example, when Hester Street Collaborative conducts workshops to obtain public feedback on capital projects, community members are provided with materials to create models or drawings to show their vision, rather than asked to contribute verbally. This is a great way to address the needs of non-English speakers while working to improve the public process for all. The toolkit will bring these ideas to managers.



Translated signage can encourage non-English speakers to attend park events and programs.

To address similar issues, the Friends of Travers Park and Queens Community House are working together on what they hope will be a four-language (English, Spanish, Bengali, and Urdu) brochure for Travers Park. The park is in Jackson Heights, Queens, a community with a large South Asian population. The brochure will include a history of the park, map, events, volunteer opportunities, and photos to try and connect the many communities in the area with the park.

While these efforts are impressive, most parks throughout the city do not have a private partner or associated volunteer group to support them. The efforts of Partnerships for Parks are very important in these sites. It is vital that resources be provided so that communication and outreach can be improved in smaller and lower-profile parks throughout the city.

Navigating the System: Reserving Park Space for Sports and Events

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Increase the transparency of the permitting application process for events and athletic fields by creating a timeline that clearly states when items are due and when to expect notification.
2. Explore opportunities to lessen or remove the insurance burden for small, volunteer-based groups that hold special events in parks.
3. Offer translated permit applications and instructions on the Parks' website as soon as possible.
4. Formally declare the grandfathering rule for athletic fields and publicize it on the Parks' website.
5. Allow new leagues and teams access to high-demand athletic fields by limiting the number of years that a single group can continuously hold a permit.
6. In parks that contain heavily used fields with lights, accommodate the work schedules of new immigrants and expand permitted hours of play for all by exploring the extension of park open hours.

Reserving a park space, whether for athletics or a special event, requires a permit. Little Leagues, schools, and corporate teams often reserve fields for their sports seasons, and any group can reserve an area of a park for a special event, such as a community fair or large celebration.

Multiple interviewees discussed challenges in requesting and receiving event and field permits. Although these problems could apply to any user group, the difficulties are heightened for immigrant groups and leagues that are frequently more recently formed and sometimes faced with language barriers.

Sports

Groups must have a permit to use an athletic field or court for a one-time event or to reserve a field for a full season. Separate applications are required for the spring and fall seasons. Applicants must list first and second choices for locations, attach league guidelines and by-laws, and adhere to the official rules of the Parks Department. Although reserving fields for soccer, baseball, and football are more common, DPR does issue permits for basketball courts and outdoor roller hockey rinks. Tennis courts have a separate permit requirement, which costs \$100/season and does not apply to any particular location. The maximum length for a permit is six months, but an unwritten grandfathering policy increases the likelihood that groups are awarded the same field for consecutive years.

Like the special events permit, the sports permit application and instructions are available in English only, making it difficult for some groups to apply. Once implemented, the agency's Language Access Plan will offer translated forms as well as revamped signage and interpretation services at permit offices.

As reported in *The New York Times*, the demand for field permits has more than doubled over the past 10 years.¹⁷ To address



Athletes play football at Maria Hernandez Park in Bushwick, Brooklyn. Permits for athletic fields are in high demand all over the city.

¹⁷ Williams, Timothy. "Too Many Men on the Fields (And Women and Children, Too)," *The New York Times*, Apr. 1, 2007.

demand and ease the challenges for leagues in the city, DPR has an informal grandfathering system that prioritizes previous permit-holders over newcomers in many cases. Several groups called attention to the lack of transparency in the Parks Department's grandfathering policy. This policy is not stated on the DPR website. New teams can spend time and money applying for permits in particular parks where an existing group will likely be grandfathered.

Interviewees reported that there is very little available permitted play time for those who form a new league, particularly for sports like soccer, which is very popular with many immigrant groups. In addition, immigrant athletes are often deterred from joining a league because it can be expensive, but without a league, several interviewees reported, it is very difficult to obtain a permit to play. Many of these individuals are members of teams that cannot secure dedicated playing fields and thus play informally where they can.

While some teams are interested in playing later in the day, many parks close at dusk. Volleyball players at Flushing-Meadows Corona Park would rather that the park stay open past its closing time of 9 p.m. The Parks Department has made an effort to install lighting on fields in many parks. There may be an opportunity to conduct a pilot program to extend the hours that certain parks are open to the public in order to allow for more play. This could relieve some of the competition for fields that are in high demand.

Event Permits

Special events permits are required when 20 or more people will be gathering in a park for an event or activity. Park users may apply online or by mail and must pay a \$25 processing fee. According to the Parks Department's website, most permits require 21 to 30 days to be processed. There is an added fee and application for amplified sound, which is obtained through the New York City Police Department.

Cultural events in parks are a popular way to celebrate the particular characteristics of a neighborhood, and immigrant groups are natural sponsors of such events. High-profile events, such as the Dragon Boat Festival in Flushing-Meadows Park, offer exciting ways of celebrating culture. But less established groups looking to host smaller cultural events often have a difficult time navigating the permitting system. Established groups sometimes help steer newer organizations through the permit process, resulting in a smoother experience.

Language access can be a significant barrier, as the permit application and instructions are offered in English only. Translation of these documents is one of the first improvements that will be made under the Parks Department's Language Access Plan.

Communication between the permit office and the applicants is another challenge. The permit office is open only during work hours, which can make it difficult for volunteer-based groups to connect with Parks staff.



Dancers celebrate Latin American culture in an organized event at Thomas Jefferson Park in Manhattan.



Parks are natural gathering places for many communities, such as this group in Captain Tilly Park, Jamaica, Queens.

Groups reported a need for clear timelines that delineate submission requirements, as well as notification of receipt of the application and denial or acceptance of the permit. Lack of information can be frustrating for groups that are working under a deadline.

In addition, small groups typically do not have the liability insurance that is required if more than 100 people are expected at an event. Many groups end up hosting events without obtaining a permit to avoid this requirement. If they are well-connected, smaller groups will sometimes partner with larger organizations that hold such insurance. For example, the Queens Museum has sponsored less established groups that wanted to hold such events in the park.

Diversifying the Park Experience: Concessions

RECOMMENDATION: Encourage local economic development, welcome diverse cultural groups, and improve concession revenues by seeking out culturally relevant food vendors for parks.

Great food attracts people to public spaces; it welcomes groups into parks and can contribute to community building. The Greenmarket program, which hosts farmers' markets, draws crowds to parks throughout the city. The Shake Shack in Madison Square Park has become so popular that the burger stand launched a webcam so that visitors could monitor the wait-time online.

However, regardless of the demographics of the surrounding neighborhood, the majority of vendors sell the standard hot dogs and ice cream. The popular vendors in Red Hook Park in Brooklyn are one exception. For fifteen years, entrepreneurs have set up stands selling tacos, tamales, and more to serve the primarily Latin American community that gathers for soccer every weekend in the park. In our interviews, community groups voiced a need for a greater diversity of food vendors in Queens parks, similar to Red Hook.

Unfortunately, ethnic food vendors make up only a small portion of permitted vendors in parks.



Refreshments draw visitors to a park, like this vendor selling piraguas at Orchard Beach in the Bronx.

Revenues from concessions operated on most parkland go into the City's General Fund rather than back into the Parks Department's budget. A few public-private partnerships, such as the Central Park Conservancy, are able to keep a portion of their concession revenue through special arrangements with the City. In 2007, the Citizens Budget Commission, a fiscal watchdog, published a report commissioned by New Yorkers for Parks titled *Making the Most of Our Parks*. The group recommended that the Parks Department be allowed to keep a percentage of the \$50 million earned annually through concessions. They argued that the revenue would provide incentive for creative concessions and would be a good source of dedicated funding for the agency.

Some believe that incentivizing concessions could result in over-commercialization of parks. First and foremost, city agencies must engage with local community boards and other stakeholders to determine whether a concession is appropriate for their neighborhood park, and if so, what type is best-suited for the site.

The diversity of New York City warrants inspired, varied food options to best serve park visitors. Concessions also present an opportunity to enhance neighborhood economic development efforts by targeting RFPs to local providers.

When the Parks Department announced in 2007 that they would adhere to standard policy and issue an official RFP for the concession at Red Hook Park, visitors and food lovers perceived this as a threat to the existing vendors. The agency recognized these concerns and the value of the food stands and added “cultural relevance” as a priority attribute in the RFP. Eventually the original vendors were awarded the concession.

The Parks Department has a great opportunity to expand the issuance of similar RFPs in ethnically diverse neighborhoods across the city. For example, Flushing-Meadows Corona Park serves a diverse population, including Latin American, South Asian and East Asian residents. Targeted RFPs could boost local restauranteurs as a form of economic development, allowing them to open low-cost operations in the park.

When appropriately balanced with the needs and desires of the community, food sales can significantly enrich the park user’s experience. The Parks Department can enhance connections between parks and immigrant communities by engaging diverse concession opportunities in partnership with local neighborhoods.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While it is essential for the Parks Department and the City to reach out to all park users when initiating a capital project, making park renovation decisions, or offering public programs, the foreign-born and immigrant populations represent a traditionally underserved group. Although the specific makeup of New York City's diverse population is ever-changing, the city will always be a home for people from all over the world.

The recommendations below offer ways that the City's park services can best provide for the needs and preferences of all New Yorkers:

1. To ensure timely implementation of the Language Access Plan, the City should support the Parks Department's efforts with dedicated resources.
2. Provide translation services for all public meetings related to park projects.
3. Increase the transparency of the permitting application process for events and athletic fields by creating a timeline that clearly states when items are due and when to expect notification.
4. Explore opportunities to lessen or remove the insurance burden for small, volunteer-based groups that hold special events in parks.
5. Offer translated permit applications and instructions on the Parks' website as soon as possible.
6. Formally declare the grandfathering rule for athletic fields and publicize it on the Parks' website.
7. Allow new leagues and teams access to high-demand athletic fields by limiting the number of years that a single group can continuously hold a permit.
8. In parks that contain heavily used fields with lights, accommodate the work schedules of new immigrants and expand permitted hours of play for all by exploring the extension of park open hours.
9. Encourage local economic development, welcome various cultural groups, and improve concession revenues by seeking out culturally relevant food vendors for parks.



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355 Lexington Avenue, 14th Floor, New York, NY 10017
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