



Queens Borough President Helen M. Marshall

Land Use Public Hearing Regarding Proposed USTA Expansion

April 4, 2013

Testimony of Alyson Beha, New Yorkers for Parks

Good morning, I'm Alyson Beha, Director of Research, Planning & Policy at New Yorkers for Parks, the citywide independent organization championing quality parks and open spaces for all New Yorkers in all neighborhoods.

The USTA has proposed a \$500 million expansion of its 42-acre Billie Jean King National Tennis Center complex, including the replacement of the 10,000-seat Armstrong with a 15,000-seat stadium, wider pedestrian paths, and a new 8,000-seat grandstand on the campus' southwest corner.

What complicates this proposed expansion is that the complex, which hosts the U.S. Open for several weeks each summer, is located on mapped parkland within the confines of Flushing Meadows Corona Park (FMCP), the largest park in New York's largest borough. It's among the city's most heavily used public spaces, especially by residents of surrounding, open space-starved communities like Flushing, Corona, Elmhurst and Jackson Heights.

Park-users will tell you – and have told us – what a critical public resource FMCP is for Queens, both as a recreational mecca as well as a gathering place for family picnics and barbecues. But you'll also hear frustration about the park's endemic maintenance woes, from flooding and drainage problems to a constant battle against litter.

Given these challenges and the park's international exposure as the backdrop for the U.S. Open, one might expect the USTA to be an avid steward of FMCP. But historically there has been little relationship between the tennis complex and the park. Now, as the USTA looks to increase its footprint in and impact on this critical park, it's high time that they invest in the park as well as their own facility.

The proposal calls for about 7/10 of an acre of parkland to be alienated, as well as an increase in the USTA's leasehold, the construction of a 2-story parking garage, and a new access road through passive open space. The USTA and the City maintain that the parkland that would be alienated does not need to be replaced because the USTA campus is “public” 11 months of the year. But the tennis

courts, for which the USTA charges \$40-\$66 an hour during peak times, are not comparably priced with other Parks Department tennis courts and are too costly for most neighbors. Though the Center holds occasional clinics with camps and schools, local outreach has been sorely lacking.

While the potential lost acreage is relatively small, sanctioning parkland alienation without acre-for-acre replacement is a slippery slope. If an expensive pay-to-play tennis facility that contributes no annual funding to the park is deemed "public," where is the line drawn to protect city parkland from privatization? Right now, USTA's annual rent payment – which wouldn't increase after the expansion – goes entirely to the City's general fund, not to the park.

The USTA – which, according to a recent *Crain's* review, reported a \$17 million surplus in 2010 – needs to commit NOW to a significant, long-term investment in and partnership with Flushing Meadows Corona Park. This doesn't mean just funding one-time capital projects to sweeten the pot during the public review of its expansion proposal; this means an ongoing, annual contribution to the park's maintenance and active participation in a new nonprofit dedicated to the park, a commitment to cease using park lawns for parking during the U.S. Open, and either replacement of the parkland it proposes to alienate or a redefined relationship with park-users and the surrounding community to make the tennis complex a truly public use.

Thank you.