



New York City Planning Commission

**Public Hearing Regarding Proposed USTA Tennis Center Expansion
in Flushing Meadows Corona Park**

April 24, 2013

Testimony of Holly Leicht, New Yorkers for Parks

Good morning, I'm Holly Leicht, Executive Director of New Yorkers for Parks, the citywide independent organization championing quality parks and open spaces for all New Yorkers in all neighborhoods.

The USTA is proposing a \$500 million expansion of its 42-acre Billie Jean King National Tennis Center complex in Flushing Meadows Corona Park, including the replacement of the 10,000-seat Armstrong with a 15,000-seat stadium, a new 8,000-seat grandstand on the campus' southwest corner, widened pedestrian paths, and a 2-story parking facility.

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, park-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 time that they invest in the park as well as in 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, new facilities that will increase capacity by 10,000, a parking facility, 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 remotely comparable in price to 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 unacceptable public policy. 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 rampant 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 U.S. Open nets upwards of \$250 million a year, not a dime of which goes into Flushing Meadows Corona Park.

Before any approval is given for an expansion that would allow the USTA to profit further from this park, the USTA – which, according to a recent *Crain's* review, reported a \$17 million surplus in 2010 – must commit to a significant, long-term investment in Flushing Meadows Corona Park and a meaningful relationship with the surrounding community. This doesn't mean just funding one-time capital projects to sweeten the pot during the public review of this proposal. This means:

1. replacement of equal or more parkland than the USTA proposes to alienate;
2. an ongoing, annual contribution to the park's maintenance, as well as an upfront commitment to fund immediate capital projects selected in consultation with the Parks Department and the community;
3. active participation on the board of a new nonprofit dedicated to maintaining and operating the park;
4. a commitment to cease using public lawns for parking during the U.S. Open; and
5. a redefined relationship with park-users and the surrounding community to make the tennis complex a truly public facility.

Thank you.