

## **Kids At Play, Men At Work** **by Dan Jacoby**

The job of maintaining New York City's myriad parks, playgrounds, greenstreets, and greenways is enormous. To serve that need, the city's Parks Department has created a variety of innovative methods designed to get the public involved in the public parks, including the Partnership for Parks, Adopt-A-Park, and various park conservancies.

But most of the work must still be done, or overseen, directly by the Parks Department. As is true with any large bureaucracy, sometimes things don't go as well as planned.

A recent example is the repair of the fence at the Thomson Hill Playground in Sunnyside, Queens. About one-third of the 1.1-acre playground is a fenced-in area designed as basketball and handball courts, and also used for soccer, football, and many other recreational activities. On a warm summer day this area is packed with over 100 children of all ages.

The fence surrounding this area is about 10-12 feet tall, and has three openings where people can easily enter and exit the area. This fence has fallen on hard times, and a contractor was hired to repair it. The contractor has a long record with the Parks Department, so there was no reason to believe that this job would cause any problems.

The first thing the workers did was seal off the three entrances with chain-link fencing. Over the next week, they took their time painting the fence poles. Then they turned to repairing the fencing itself. During that time, they worked from early in the morning until early in the afternoon – never working a full, eight-hour day. In addition, the entrances remained closed after they left for the day and through the weekends. As a result, the children were denied a place to play.

The entrances were required to remain sealed off, because from the time the contractor began work in the area it became a construction zone and the contractor assumed responsibility should anyone in that area be injured – even if they weren't there at the time. The problem was that there are a lot of children who normally play in that area because they have nowhere else to go. Naturally, they climbed over the temporary fencing, and tore holes in the "permanent" fence, in order to gain access.

For the first few days, the contractor would begin each workday by repairing the damage done by children – who just wanted a place to play – the night before. After the first few days, however, the contractor gave up, and allowed the gaping holes to remain.

For two weeks this situation deteriorated, as the contractor's workers spent less and less time on the site – and more of their time on site just sitting around rather than actually working. Meanwhile, more holes in the fence were created and left open. Eventually, the workers failed to show for three consecutive workdays.

Meanwhile, some people in the neighborhood filed complaints and informed local elected officials. As a result, a Parks Department inspector arrived to look over the site.

Following the inspection, the contractor was required to repair the holes in the fence, and to unseal the entrances. Kids are now playing, even though the job is not complete. In addition, the Parks Department has placed a note in the contractor's record that this contractor is taking on too many jobs and cannot fulfill all of its duties.

(One more note about the contractor. Not all the holes in the fence were repaired; one hole was left open. Either the workers didn't bother to check the entire fence, or they didn't care about finishing the job.)

The Parks Department will probably conduct a review of their contracting process to determine, before contracts are rewarded, whether contractors can fulfill the contracts they sign. This is a good start, but it is only a start. Other city departments should conduct their own reviews; unfortunately, until the flaws in their contract bidding and rewarding processes are exposed, they probably won't bother.

The real lesson here is that people speaking up can make a difference. If enough people take an interest in their own neighborhoods, if they demand action, if they don't stop until they get results – then they will get results. It can take a lot of patience and persistence, but eventually good things happen.

For now, the kids who live near the Thomson Hill Playground have a place to play.

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