

Controversy Bubbles from Fountain Plan Washington Square redesign rankles residents

by Amy Zimmer / metro new york

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CITY HALL — Street performers who use the pit in the Washington Square Park fountain as a makeshift theater-in-the-round may have to find another spot soon.

A controversial \$16 million plan to renovate the park, which proposes moving the fountain 22 feet east to align it with the iconic arch and to make it level with the ground, won unanimous support Monday from the city's Art Commission.

The Parks Department's next step is to find a firm to relocate the fountain. The Garibaldi statue and Holley monument will be on the move as well, said spokesman Warner Johnston. "We plan to break ground in the summer," he said.

In the three hours of public testimony Monday, several residents spoke in support of the plans, like Lisa Smith, whose terrace at 2 Fifth Ave. overlooks the park. "A new level area would be more accessible and aesthetic," she said.

Smith, an industrial designer who walks her dog in the park every morning, thought park use would be improved by changing the paths and sightlines. "I don't think moving the fountain would be a problem for performing artists," she added.

"It's critical the renovation of the park gets started immediately," said Robert Guida, a Fifth Avenue resident who works on Wall Street. "This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to put the fountain where it belongs. We all have nostalgic views of what kinds of parks we played in as kids, but they were not always the safest and cleanest places. People aren't looking to the future."

But many more voiced opposition.

Marilyn Dorato, secretary of the Greenwich Village Block Associations, remembers how the park's arch used to frame the World Trade Center and she worries that moving the fountain so that the arch would frame it could ruin the view when the Freedom Tower is built. "I'd rather frame the Freedom Tower than a new fountain," she said. Taking a cue from the medical profession, Dorato said park plans should "first, do no harm."

"This is a neoclassical design imposing on a non-neoclassical community," said Dorato, also a designer. Neoclassical design, she said, "never inspires affection."

Dorato felt the plans excluded neighborhood input and the Parks Dept. presented "no good reason" for the move. After the vote, she said, "I had no faith in that process [at City Hall]. The community is dead set against this, so they're imposing something we don't want."