

Kiss some of those trees good-bye?

Village residents worry about loss of foliage, private group running Washington Square

by patrick arden / metro new york

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GREENWICH VILLAGE — A 49-year resident of this neighborhood, Jessie McNab is vice president of the West Village Committee, a group started by activist Jane Jacobs, who's often credited with stopping Robert Moses' plan to build an expressway through Washington Square Park. Last spring McNab spotted a notice in The City Record soliciting contractors to bid on the Parks Dept. project to redesign Washington Square.

“We got our hands on the document — 68 large maps and hundreds of pages of accompanying text to explain to the contractors what was required by the drawings,” she recalled. “I was looking at where they had to put down their cost estimates for every single item, and there it was: 32 trees cut down, just in the first of three phases.”

Washington Square Park is home to 356 trees, many of them more than 100 years old. The elimination of trees isn't mentioned in the Environmental Assessment Statement completed by the Parks Dept. on Sept. 1. That document questions the health of some of the mature trees, but it doesn't mention removal — or the reason McNab found in the bid documents: “They want more lawns,” she said.

McNab was in the audience last Thursday night when a resolution came before Community Board 2 demanding “a detailed, accurate, current, and to-scale plan” for the park before construction begins. Community Board 2 had already approved the redesign last year, but this summer a state Supreme Court judge found that “essential aspects of the Parks Department's plans ... were not adequately revealed” to the board before its vote. The city is appealing the judge's ruling, which ordered the Parks Dept. to reapply to the board.

“We need to get the Parks Dept. to tell us what they're doing,” said the resolution's sponsor, Keen Berger. “The park that we want is the one we should get.”

But if the appellate court rules in favor of the city, McNab worries, the

park could be reconstructed without the neighborhood learning the full details.

In the wings

At the end of the Environmental Assessment is a table that shows costs for a new conservancy, a private nonprofit to oversee the park.

“They’re going to spend \$99,000 on the parks and \$1.27 million on salaries,” she said. “There’s going to be a director, and an assistant director, four full-time [parks enforcement patrols], a manager — all of these salaries before they even think about maintenance.”

‘Arborcide’

- City park renovations increasingly involve the cutting down of trees, observed Geoffrey Croft of NYC Park Advocates. “When [former Parks commissioner] Henry Stern was in office, you couldn’t touch a tree — he created a term called arborcide,” said Croft. “Now it’s open season. They want to cut down trees in Union Square Park too — and it’s totally unnecessary.”