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local

Union Square's restaurant bill

How a \$2 million playground project became a \$19 million food fight

by patrick arden / metro new york
JAN 25, 2007

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UNION SQUARE. The most curious example of the private use of public parks might be the plan to put a restaurant in the granite pavilion at the north end of Union Square Park — and the anonymous donor who gave \$5 million to put it there.

In 2002 local City Councilwoman Magarita Lopez secured \$1.9 million to improve the two tiny playgrounds on either side of the pavilion. Two years later, Mayor Michael Bloomberg announced the city would kick in \$8 million to fund a new \$14 million renovation of the entire north end, with the balance being paid by the Union Square Partnership, the area's business improvement district, which currently helps take care of the park. The plan now included a restaurant in the pavilion, and the playgrounds' upgrade has been held up ever since.

That hasn't stopped the USP from spending \$1.78 million on a project that may never be realized, and it will owe contractors, architects and lawyers another \$1.74 million if the plan goes through, according to a Nov. 6, 2006, agreement with the Parks Dept. obtained by Metro through the Freedom of Information Act.

In November, Parks Commissioner Adrian Benepe told Metro the delay was caused by logistics — a new, expanded playground would sit next to the pavilion, which would need to be renovated to house the restaurant. But by then, according to the document, the

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total cost of the project had ballooned to \$19.6 million.

The city will now pay \$11.75 million, with the rest raised by the USP from private donations, said Parks Dept. spokeswoman Jama Adams yesterday. When one anonymous donor gave \$5 million, Benepe had told the Villager in 2004, “It’s a no-strings gift and always has been.” But at a breakfast meeting last month, USP co-chairs — attorney Eric Seiler and restaurateur Danny Meyer — told a different story.

“We’ve always known the \$5 million donation was contingent on there being a restaurant,” said Geoffrey Croft, president of NYC Park Advocates, who attended the breakfast with Ernie Raab, vice chair of the Union Square Community Coalition. Both groups oppose the restaurant plan. Raab said the playground was “being held hostage to the BID’s business agenda.”

Jennifer Falk, the USP’s new executive director, defended the restaurant plan, noting “the pavilion is in dire need of repair” and moving an existing café into the pavilion will “free up space to build a playground that will be three times the [current] size.” Benepe repeated this last contention in a letter published in Metro, but a document from project architects said the new playground space would be slightly less than doubled.

When protests caused the restaurant to become seasonal rather than year-round, companies tossed \$794,377 worth of work. The USP has retained the law firm LeBouf, Lamb, Greene & MacRae, which has billed \$59,200 and, according to the Parks’ document, expects another \$30,000. One of the firm’s partners is Gordon J. Davis, the former Parks commissioner and co-founder of the Central Park Conservancy. Davis did not return calls for comment.

Another restaurant foe is Carol Greitzer, the area’s councilwoman from 1969 to 1991. She has collected letters from mothers who recalled the pavilion housing a children’s playgroup in the 1970s. She was surprised USP had retained Davis’ firm.

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“Why should they go to an outside law firm?” she asked. “The city and the Parks Dept. have their own lawyers — and their own architects, too.”

On the menu

Landscape architect Michael Van Valkenburg Associates has billed \$763,822 and expects another \$813,000. Architecture firm ARO has billed \$566,680 and expects \$677,103 more. Project managers Levien & Co. have charged \$306,051 and expect \$169,749.



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