

Eastern Queens Alliance

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Strategic Plan for the Preservation of Idlewild Park

Introduction

Idlewild Park Defined

Idlewild Park, up until 2001, was bounded by Rockaway Boulevard, Springfield Boulevard, 149 Avenue and Brookville Boulevard NYC Department of Parks and Recreation acquired the property in three stages between 1956 and 1964. The first parcel was conveyed to Parks through an agreement reached on April 26, 1956, with the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey. On May 8 1958, the Board of Estimate assigned additional acreage to the area. Idlewild Park's size peaked at 224.8 acres on January 27, 1964, through the purchase of private property. On August 24, 1965, Parks ceded 66.1 acres to the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey for the construction of the Nassau Expressway.

In January 2001 there were two major changes to the park: 1) One hundred (100) acres of high quality wetlands, formerly called Public Place were designated as parkland and became a part of Idlewild Park as supposed mitigation for 25.4 acres demapped as parkland in 1980. This land was acquired in 1966 as a buffer between the Rosedale community and the airport. In the 1970's, NYSDEC designated this acreage as wetlands. However, this newly added Park was also mapped as being in the right-of-way of the Nassau Expressway. It seems that at some point a decision was made to swap these wetlands for the air cargo site after plans for the Expressway apparently fell through. 2) At the same time, the New York City Council voted to turn over the 25.4 acres of alienated parkland to the Economic Development Corporation (EDC). EDC sold the land to the International Airport Corporation (IAC) to construct an Air Cargo Industrial Park. The adjacent communities in Southeast Queens strongly objected to this project.

It is important to note that the wetlands of Idlewild Park and the newly added 100 acres form a natural drainage outlet for Queens south of the Grand Central Parkway, draining out into Jamaica Bay.

Recently Idlewild Park has been designated as a Forever Wild Preserve. The community welcomes this designation as a means of protecting Idlewild Park from an onslaught of airport related projects that threaten continued diminution or eventual elimination of this valuable environmental/ecological resource. Forever Wild Preserves are natural areas within New York City that support diverse wildlife and plant populations, including numerous rare, threatened and endangered species. Parks Department has aggressively designated over 7,500 acres of these environmentally sensitive natural areas as Forever Wild According to Parks "These lands will be protected by the Parks Natural Resources Group and preserved in their natural states for years to come." Parks recognizes that without their protection, Idlewild Park along with other "natural areas face a constant threat of encroachment and degradation from development, transportation projects and other public works construction."

Ecological Restoration

From 1970-1976, two sections of Idlewild Park totaling roughly 100 acres were used by the Department of Sanitation as a construction waste landfill. The southern landfill area was located adjacent to Rockaway Boulevard and the northern landfill was located in the northwest corner of the park near the residential neighborhood. The northern fill is now the site for soccer field. This use by the Department of Sanitation ruined acres of valuable wetlands. The remaining parkland to the north and east was designated intertidal and high marsh wetlands in the 1970's by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC). These wetlands drain into Thurston basin and Jamaica Bay. A 1992 site investigation identified elevated concentrations of lead in the eastern portions of the landfill areas. In a 1995 report Toxic Targeting maintained that the construction debris contained hazardous wastes. At that time, they also reported that "preliminary groundwater analysis results confirmed the presence of various heavy metals, and subsurface soil analysis had detected polynuclear aromatic hydrocarbons (PAH's)." NYSDEC has delisted the site as a hazardous waste site. The Eastern Queens Alliance (EQA) is calling for the clean up and restoration of the degraded ecosystem acreage of Idlewild park. We are asking, as a part of the Clean Water Act, that it be returned to its original pristine, wetlands, uplands condition, replacing the structural and functional aspects of naturally formed wetlands throughout the entire park. This is highly possible.

The largest restoration effort to date is the Idlewild Park New York City Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) Sewer Construction Mitigation (1995-1998). The \$1.4 million ecological restoration that accompanied the sewer's construction - designed jointly by Park's Natural Resources Group (NRG) and DEP - has provided significant improvement to the local environment and the larger Jamaica Bay ecosystem, including:

- The restoration of 13 acres of tidal wetland planted with 80,000 marsh grasses;
- Providing tens of thousands of cubic yards of soil to restore uplands created on landfill, and planting 500 trees, 2 500 shrubs, 150,000 grasses and wildflowers; and
- The creation of a two-acre fresh water wetland planted with 22,000 marsh plants representing seventeen species.

NRG reports that "even before the restoration was completed, muskrats, fowler's toads, marsh hawks, tiger beetles, and more than fifteen species of dragonfly and damselfly were cavorting in the new wetland. Many of the plant species used in the restoration have been extirpated, or largely absent from the Jamaica Bay area. This site is now an important nucleus for the dissemination throughout the region, of species such as serviceberry, butterflyweed, swamp milkweed, New York ironweed, American holly, turtlehead, and others."

Restoration opportunities abound in Idlewild Park. Idlewild Park contains the largest expanse of high quality salt marsh along the shores of Jamaica Bay. Tidal creeks running through the park are the most extensive in, and provide the largest volume of freshwater to, the Bay. The park's wetlands, together with grassland habitat on JFK airport are one of two sites in the city that provide nesting habitat for northern harrier (marsh hawk) and short-eared owl.

The US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), in a partnership with the National Park Service (NPS) and NYC DEP, is coordinating a Jamaica Bay Restoration Project. The project is identifying potential restoration sites around Jamaica Bay. The US EPA Habitat Estuary Program has identified Idlewild as a restoration priority, and NRG notes that the Army Corps has been supportive. As part of the Jamaica Bay Restoration Project, if a local government committed money to restoration, the Army Corps could provide matching funds on a 3:1 ratio. EQA is calling for USACE, NPS and NYCDEP to include Idlewild Park in the Jamaica Bay Ecosystem Restoration Project or other such initiatives now in the planning phase.

Potential Future Projects in Idlewild Park

The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) requires that Port Authority (PA) maintain a fund--the Jamaica Bay Damage Account--to provide ecological restoration as mitigation for PA operations that degrade the Bay. Parks has proposed a salt marsh restoration project in Idlewild Park that would use about \$650 thousand dollars from that account. The project was well received by DEC. If the project goes forward, and the Army Corps becomes involved, the scope of restoration could be enlarged three fold.

Mission

We recognize that our green spaces, our parks, and the wetlands are valuable community resources that should be preserved, and cultivated. We recognize that the intertidal wetlands in Idlewild Park and adjacent areas are some of the most valuable types of wetlands that exist. It is essential that even small tracts be protected.

We know that wetlands perform very important functions. The EPA tells us that wetlands provide flood protection by serving as natural sponges that trap and slowly release surface-water, rain, snowmelt groundwater and floodwaters. The trees, root mats and other wetland vegetation slow the speed of floodwaters. The combined water storage and slowing action lowers floodwaters and reduces erosion. Where wetlands lie downstream of urban areas, they counteract the large volume of surface water runoff that you get from pavement and buildings. The wetlands in Idlewild Park are critical in flood protection of the low-lying communities of Springfield Gardens and Rosedale areas. In fact, the destruction of wetlands over the years probably contributed to much of the flooding that our neighborhoods have experienced.

It is important to note, the wetlands in the Idlewild Park Preserve also contain the largest expanse of high quality marsh along the shores of Jamaica Bay. The tidal creeks running through the park are the most extensive in, and provide the largest volume of freshwater to, the Bay. These wetlands help to protect our open waters from pollution by serving as natural filters, replenishing groundwater, and controlling shoreline erosion. There has been much talk within the last few years about saving Jamaica Bay. Saving Idlewild Park Preserve is a critical component in that process. The powers-that-be need to realize this.

Also, one-third of the threatened and endangered species in this country live only in wetlands. The EPA tells us that nearly half use the wetlands at some point in their lives, particularly for nesting, feeding and

breeding. For many animals and plants like muskrats, beaver and cattails, the wetlands are their habitat. In addition, we use a wealth of natural products from wetlands, including fish and shellfish. We need to restore and maintain the habitats of many of the endangered species that live or lived in the Idlewild Park Preserve.

Furthermore, wetlands provide wonderful parkland for recreation, the enjoyment and appreciation of nature, and are great resources for environmental education. Too many, Idlewild Park is a barren tract of land with invasive exotic plants that seems ripe for development. This needs to change. Everyone needs to understand and enjoy the benefits of this potentially beautiful natural expanse of wetlands and uplands.

Finally, Idlewild Park lies just south of the Springfield Gardens and Rosedale communities and immediately north of JFK Airport, or Rockaway Boulevard. It serves as a natural buffer between the airport, airport-related businesses and the residential communities. We need to protect our communities against unbridled encroachment.

NYC Department of Parks and Recreation had the foresight to designate Idlewild Park as a *Forever Wild Preserve*. They recognize that it needs to be protected, along with other such natural areas, against the constant threat of infringement and degradation in the name of development. We recognize this too!

EQA is, therefore, demanding that there be no further intrusions, construction upon or de-mapping of the wetlands or parkland in Idlewild Park or the wetlands in the surrounding public lands. As a part of the Clean Water Action Plan, it is seeking the return to the community the vital benefits of the intertidal wetlands in Idlewild Park through the restoration of the degraded ecosystem acreage to its original pristine wetland condition by replacing the structural and functional aspects of naturally formed wetlands. Towards this end, it is calling for the following Federal, state and city agencies--USACE, NPS, DEP to join with DEC and the US EPA Habitat Estuary Program-- to make the restoration of the entire acreage of Idlewild Park a priority.

EQA is also requesting that the city-owned lands along the south side of Rockaway Blvd., on the northern perimeter of JFK airport and Thurston Bay and adjacent to Idlewild Park, remain as open space and not be sold off by the EDC for commercial and/or industrial development.

EQA it is also seeking the provision of increased environmental/educational/recreational uses of Idlewild and adjacent parks-Springfield and Brookville- through the:

- Development of a full scale Environmental Center in Idlewild Park, including the development of a network of nature walks, and nature walk platforms through the wetlands, which will be an important educational resource for our schools, families and community at large.
- Restoration and maintenance of the waterways that flow through our parks—Springfield and Brookville. They are all a part of the same system of above and underground streams that should flow through the wetlands in Idlewild Park and out to Jamaica Bay.
- Improvement and maintenance of the Field of Dreams and the soccer field that are a part of Idlewild Park, and

- Improvement of the existing park facilities for the surrounding communities, i.e., installation of toilet facilities at the South end of Brookville Park so that the baseball, soccer, and football teams can use these facilities.

In summary our mission is:

- 1) ***To prevent any further encroachment on Idlewild Park and Preserve acreage and on the adjacent wetlands and open spaces.***
- 2) ***To preserve and restore the degraded ecosystem of Idlewild Park by causing, or bringing about the replacement of the structural and functional aspects of naturally formed wetlands and upland areas throughout the park with all of the attendant ecological benefits, and***
- 3) ***To design and implement the Idlewild Park Salt Water Marsh Environmental Center, including a network of nature walks and platforms through the wetlands, making possible a strong environmental education program for our children, families and community at large.***

Goals and Strategies

Goal 1—To protect Idlewild Park and Preserve and the adjacent wetland areas by placing them under a conservation easement to protect the significant features of these natural areas, prohibiting all activity that would alter the land’s present natural condition, allowing only restoration of the wetlands and structures necessary for and compatible with preservation and restoration.

- a. *To petition NYC and NYS to grant wildlife preserve status to Idlewild Park or a conservation easement to protect its acreage from further encroachment and alienation.*
- b. *To petition NYC to return to the jurisdiction of the Department of Parks and Recreation all adjacent wetland areas and open spaces along Rockaway Boulevard.*
- c. *To establish the Mitigation Taskforce recommended at the ULURP hearing of the Land Use Committee of the City Council regarding the air cargo industrial park to address the mitigations and safeguards requested by the Eastern Queens Alliance*
- d. *To develop a GIS database and maps identifying all parcels of wetlands within one block of Idlewild park that are in private ownership.*
- e. *To petition NYC to issue conservation easements to all private property containing wetlands that are immediately adjacent to Idlewild Park to maximize the spatial extent of wetlands available for restoration purposes.*

Goal 2—To restore and protect Idlewild Park to allow natural processes, functions, cycles and biota be reestablished and maintained in perpetuity.

- a. *To restore wetland and upland areas in the degraded landfill acreage of Idlewild Park thereby replacing the structural and functional aspects of naturally formed wetlands and uplands throughout the park.*
- b. *To clean up all areas now plagued by dumping and design and implement a plan to protect the park and its waterways from further pollution.*
- c. *To design and implement a plan to suppress and/or eliminate exotic invasive plant species.
Exotic plant invasions not only displace native plant communities, but lead to the loss of critical habitat for a number of threatened endangered species.*
- d. *To plant and encourage the growth of native plant species indigenous to the area.*

- e. *To recover endangered animal species indigenous to Idlewild Park and the adjacent wetlands.*

Goal 3—To insure that the water quality in the Wetlands be unimpaired.

- a. *To monitor all park inflows, ground water and surface water and cause the address of water quality concerns.*
- b. *To clean up all debris and other matter dumped in wetland areas.*
- c. *To establish those strategies and procedures needed to prevent further dumping and pollution and maintain the water quality.*
- d. *To clean up and maintain the waterways flowing through Springfield and Brookville Parks, the Twin Ponds and any other waterway/streams that flow into Idlewild.*
- e. *To review current adjacent industrial uses that may be impacting on the wetlands and seek the appropriate mitigations or remediations.*

Goal 4—To improve the air quality in Idlewild Park and the surrounding residential area.

- a. *To collect air quality data within the park for visibility, ozone, fine particulates, acidic precipitation (sulfates and nitrates), and heavy metals.*
- b. *To assess the impact of air pollution on human beings living in Southeast Queens areas, particularly within the vicinity of Idlewild Park, and on the flora and fauna in Idlewild Park and adjacent open spaces with a view towards using the compiled data to inform decisions regarding further plans for commercial and or industrial development in the community with a focus on Rockaway Boulevard.*
- c. *To use this data to monitor and make decisions about development plans in the adjacent commercial zones.*
- d. *To cause the necessary action to reduce hazardous aircraft emissions from JFK Airport and those from the heavy truck traffic on Rockaway Boulevard.*

Goal 5—To establish a full-scale environmental center in Idlewild Park, including the development of a system of trails/nature walks and nature walk platforms/boardwalks through the wetlands to serve the schools, families and community at large.

- a. *To develop an overall master plan concept considering location, design elements of center, access to public and private transportation, types of contiguous uses that may help support and fund the center, supportive partnerships, and projected operational costs.*
- b. *To conduct a Phase I Study—Site Investigation and Outreach that will include identification of site criteria for an environmental center, determination of jurisdiction and funding issues, phasing needs, production of a graphic representation of master plan, and identification of specialists needed for next design and cost estimating phases.*
- c. *To conduct Phase II-Preliminary Design and Cost Estimates of engineering, architectural and landscape architectural fees for the construction of an environmental center and wetland trail system.*
- d. *To complete Phase III, the actual construction of the environmental center and the wetland trail system.*
- e. *To obtain the necessary permits, structures and utilities to immediately establish a temporary nature center using modular space to begin to offer environmental education services prior to the accomplishment of items b-d..*

Goal 6—To educate the public about the natural resources in Idlewild Park based on adequate scholarly and scientific information.

- a. To develop partnerships with local universities and agencies for the purposes of research and dissemination of information.
- f. To bring to Idlewild Park programs of the Urban Park Rangers, i.e., Ranger Conservation Corps, Parks Conservation Corps, AmeriCorps, the Natural Classroom, and Explorer Programs.
- g. To maintain natural collections for Idlewild Park Preserve including the preservation, cataloguing, display and use for educational purposes
- h. To acquire environmental educational materials that will be housed in the center and the necessary equipment for their use.
- i. To develop slide programs, interactive software, pamphlets, and newsletters to educate children and adults about the value and features of Idlewild Park Preserve.
- j. To provide appropriate signage along the trails to educate those who visit the park.
- k. To enlist and train a cadre of volunteers to assist with maintenance, research, collection management, and to serve as guides, docents, etc.

Goal 7—To develop public understanding and appreciation of the park's resources, its ecological processes and value to increase the public's desire to preserve and protect the community's natural resources.

- a. To educate the community through workshops, presentations at meetings, newsletters, pamphlets, etc.
- b. To launch a public relations campaign reaching out to the media to keep the public informed about the importance of the park and its wetland environment, problems, issues and concerns as well as the progress made in preserving this vital resource.,
- c. To sponsor a 5K Run for the Wetlands during American Wetlands Month to heighten community awareness about the importance of wetland areas.
- d. To provide information and orientation, interpretation, and educational services through our environmental center program, i.e., walks, talks, exhibits, films, videos, and printed materials.

Goal 8—To provide an adequate management system to ensure the security and supervision of the park to guarantee park-appropriate uses and prevent dumping, vandalism, and other negative human impacts.

Goal 9—To provide visitors to Idlewild Park with the opportunity to experience the park's unique wetland and upland environments through the provision of appropriate park facilities, services and recreational opportunities.

- a. To provide high quality park programs—educational and recreational.
- b. To assure the maintenance of all facilities and services whether provided by NYC Department of Parks, a concessioners or permittees.

Goal 10—To ensure visitor safety and security in Idlewild Park and the Environmental Center.

- a. To develop an operational plan to preserve, protect, restore, operate, maintain, monitor and/or evaluate all park facilities for the protection of visitors.
- b. To communicate, collaborate and consult with those agencies such as law enforcement and fire protection that will directly contribute to the safety and security of visitors.
- c. To acquire the resources to enable Idlewild Park to offer local park security during visiting ours.

Goal 11—To identify and acquire peripheral uses of Idlewild Park that are consistent with the environmental focus, are environmentally friendly, and may serve as possible sources of supplementary income

- a. *Improve and maintain the Field of Dreams, currently a cricket field, and the soccer field on the northern borders of the park.*
- b. *Review and finalize a list of peripheral uses that will provide sources of revenue for the operation and maintenance to the environmental center, i.e.,*
 - o *Theater/band shell,*
 - o *Roller/Ice Skating Rink*
 - o *Ornamental Gardens/Restaurant—Special Events*
 - o *Green Market*
 - o *Composting Establishment*
 - o *Commercial Partner, i.e., Garden World or other garden shop*
 - o *Labyrinth of bulrushes, cattails*
 - o *Museum—Aeronautics*

Goal 12—To secure adequate funding to support the restoration of Idlewild Park and Preserve and the establishment of the Idlewild Saltwater Marsh Wetlands Environmental Center .

- a. *To identify those sources of revenue that will be available from Federal, state, and city agencies.*
- b. *To procure mitigation funds from the International Air Cargo Center constructed on 25.4 acres of land that was previously alienated from Idlewild Park and sold by NYC Economic Development Corporation to IAC for the development of an air cargo park.*
- c. *To procure mitigation funds from the Port Authority Jamaica Bay Damage Account as a source of revenue for restoration, development of the environmental center, greenways or public wetland acquisition .*
- d. *To become knowledgeable about and apply for grants that will assist in the long-term and/or short-term funding of this project.*
- e. *To develop a membership/gifting program to acquire contributions for the support of the environmental center.*
- f. *Identify environmentally appropriate concessions for the lease of public space in Idlewild Park to provide a source of revenue for the environmental center.*

Goal 13-To enlist potential partners who will be committed to the implementation of this strategic plan to cause the restoration and conservation of Idlewild Park and the development of a full-scale environmental center within it.

- a. *To compile a database of possible partners.*
- b. *To reach out to possible partners to seek their expertise and willingness to be involved in the restoration project and development of the environmental center.*
- c. *To acquire the active assistance of all of our elected officials in achieving wetland restoration and the development of the environmental center by asking them to interface with involved government agencies and allocate discretionary funds to implement aspects of the strategic plan*
- d. *To initiate the Idlewild Park Preservation Committee, a broad-based coalition of community leaders, elected officials, agency representatives, representatives of environmental*

organizations, environmental scientists, and other experts and individuals who will be dedicated to operationalize this strategic plan.

Goal 14—To identify and engage institutional partners to provide educational opportunities within Idlewild Park and to use the park for appropriate and compatible research

- a. *To identify potential institutional partners to develop education programs for the environmental center.*
- b. *To undertake joint educational and or research programs within the park that will benefit the constituents of the institutional partners.*

Operational Plan to Accomplish Our Goals

1. Organization—The Idlewild Park Environmental Center Organization and organization chart is to be determined but will include the following categories:

- Administration including a director, fiscal manager
- Visitor and Resource Protection
- Visitor Services and Education including lecturer/tour guides, rangers, volunteers from colleges, universities, public, etc.
- Facility Design, Operations and Maintenance
- Ecosystem Planning, Compliance and Safety
- Concessions Management

2. Financial Resources—It is envisioned that the Annual budget will be supplemented by in-kind services provided through various relevant city agencies as well as donated funds or equipment in the form of a gifting program, as well as funds generated through fees/admissions, concessions franchise fees, grants, etc. The Idlewild Park Environmental Center’s budget is still to be determined, but will include the following categories:

Design and Construction

- Phase I Study \$12,000
- Phase II Study (8 – 15% of design and construction costs)
- Design and Construction

Annual Expenses

- Resource Preservation and Management
- Environmental Center Administration
- Operation and maintenance of visitors center
 - Personnel,
 - Maintenance,
 - Utilities,
 - Insurance,
 - Public relations,
 - Materials,
 - Equipment, etc.
- Maintenance of Nature Trails

- Ranger-led activities
- Curriculum-based environmental materials and equipment
- Management of activities related to concessions that provide food service and tours.
- Visitor protection activities.
- Facility Operations and Maintenance of facilities such as center, roads, trails, exhibits, etc,

Facilities—Elements of the Environmental Center

- Visitor Center
 - Exhibit Hall
 - Assembly Hall—Capacity 500 with room dividers for classroom/meeting space
 - Gift Shop
 - 2 Offices for administration
- Greenhouse
- Trails, walkways, boardwalks
- Educational signs and exhibits in park
- Park entrance/collection station
- Garden
- Parking lot
- Environmentally compatible concessions:
 - Theater
 - Rink, Labyrinth or other recreational use.
 - Ornamental Gardens/Restaurant
 - Green Market
 - Composting Center
 - Commercial Partner, i.e., garden shop