

CITY COUNCIL HEARING ON CONCESSION REFORM,

Parks Committee: Oct 24, 2007

FRIENDS OF DAG HAMMARSKJÖLD PLAZA

Testimony of Anne Saxon-Hersh, Director of Development

My name is Anne Saxon-Hersh and I have served as a director of Friends of Dag Hammarskjöld Plaza since its inception in 1993. I am one of the organization's founders and served as president for 10 years. I am currently Director of Development and Chair of the Garden Committee. From day one, I have pursued funds for our organization and I'm keenly aware of our costs and expenditures.

The report released in June 07 by the Citizen's Budget Committee speaks of fiscal stress in 1991 and 1992 when Parks suffered a 20 percent budget cut in operating budget. It was during this period that I resided in a building directly across from Dag Hammarskjöld Plaza and I was appalled by the condition of the park—a barren stretch of asphalt with a homeless encampment—a huge liability to the neighborhood. I said at the time, NYC can do better, and it did—thanks to the Turtle Bay community and CB6, who envisioned a world-class park befitting its name and historical legacy as a Gateway to the United Nations.

In 1999, a completely reconstructed park, built by the City, was opened to the public. But Friends was established six years EARLIER because many people opposed constructing

a new park , convinced that the City would not—and could not—take care of it. Thus to shore up public support, we promised to look after the park.

We have lived up to our promise, and in many ways, the partnership that the Parks Department fostered between nonprofit conservancies and the City has worked. However, as we have matured as an organization, we find the managerial responsibilities stretching us to our limits. We envisioned our role in the partnership to be one of bringing enhancements to the park; instead, we provide the essentials.

Dag Hammarskjöld Plaza is only 1.5 acres; yet it is one of city's most trafficked, heavily used, and internationally visible parks, and it should be on par with Bryant Park or Madison Square Park. It is not practical for the park to be in a BID (Business Improvement District) because of its location in a residential neighborhood surrounded by small businesses and diplomatic missions to the UN. But it does have a café concession, and a portion of those revenues should be dedicated to the park.

As the fiscal condition of the City has improved and thus the Parks operating budget, we have NOT seen any increase in park personnel in our park. In fact, the better we do our job, the more Hammarskjöld Plaza is off the radar screen of DPR.

Not until the lawsuit over the café concession in Dag park, did we become the object of attention. **Not until the lawsuit did we realize that despite our considerable contribution to the park's success and vitality, we had no role in administrative**

decisions that impacted us or the park. This came as a shock—WE DID THE WORK, WHERE WAS THE PARTNERSHIP?

This relationship needs to be reviewed in the context of concession reform. Our mission is to *assist* the City in keeping the park clean and green and to organize events that foster community. At present, we contract services that normally would be paid for by city revenues: litter pick up, fountain cleaning, and pressure washing the plaza. We tend the garden through volunteers, paying for plants and supplies. We have also made capital improvements, like installing an irrigation system. INSTEAD OF AUGMENTING THE PARKS DEPARTMENT, WE FIND OURSELVES IN THE POSITION OF MANAGERS.

Park workers come on site when there's an emergency, if the fountains or irrigations system floods, or the electrical systems falter and we call with an urgent SOS. They also support our events, sometimes loaning chairs and tables for special programs or garden tools for our larger volunteer groups. On a day-to-day basis, there is no presence of park workers on site. Maintenance of infrastructure—ironwork, the pump and irrigation system, masonry, tree-grids— consists of patchwork and band aids—because Parks simply doesn't have't skilled personnel to manage these repairs in a timely manner.

SO WHILE THE CONCEPT OF PRIVATE-PUBLIC PARTNERSHIP HAS BEEN GOOD FOR THE PARK, IT IS NOT SUSTAINABLE AS CURRENTLY PRACTICED. WE SEE THE REVENUE SHARING OF THE CONCESSION IN

**OUR PARK AS A MEANS TO EITHER CREATE PAID POSITIONS WITHIN
OUR OWN ORGANIZATION TO OVERSEE PARK MANAGEMENT, OR FOR
THE CITY TO PUT TRAINED PARK WORKERS ON SITE IN OUR PARK.**

CB6 has passed 2 resolutions on concession reform which we fully support. The report by the Citizen's Budget Commission should be required reading for anyone addressing this issue because it lays out all the different arrangements for revenue sharing that exist and suggests ways of creating greater equity in our park system.

Dag Hammarskjöld Plaza is a success today because of our partnership, but we need to have the responsibilities of both the City and our conservancy defined and transparent—and DPR must have the financial capability to maintain infrastructure, and provide surveillance. Only then, can this truly be—as Commissioner Benepe calls it—the Golden Age of Parks.

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