WILL A MASSIVE “SKATE GARDEN” BE THE COOP’S NEXT NEW NEIGHBOR? TWO MEMBERS HAVE THEIR (VERY DIFFERENT) SAY

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PHOTO BY JENNIFER MACFARLANE

By Susannah Jacob

Supporters and opponents are rallying for and against an advancing plan to build a skate park in Mount Prospect Park—the nearly eight-acre, altitudinous, tree-filled patch overlooking Eastern Parkway and abutting the Brooklyn Museum and Botanic Garden.

In his January State of the City Address, Mayor Eric Adams announced a $24.8 million project to build four new skate parks in Brooklyn and the Bronx. As reported by *Gothamist*, *The New York Times* and others, the 40,000-square-foot "Brooklyn Skate Garden" in Mount Prospect Park will consume an estimated 12% of the park's total surface area, according to the Skatepark Project, famed skater Tony Hawk's private foundation, which is a consultant to the city on the park's design and management. Skate Garden opponents counter that the Skatepark Project's calculation includes fenced-off and inaccessible portions of the park, and it would eat up at least 40% of the park's core area. The design is not yet firm.

Everyone agrees that the "Brooklyn Skate Garden" will be among the largest skate parks on the East Coast. While the "Skate Garden's" location has been decided, its design is still open to public input. On May 1, the Parks Department hosted a Community Input Meeting over Zoom, drawing some 400 participants to discuss the design of the "Skate Garden." The Parks Department held a previous meeting on March 25. Opponents object that both meetings restricted speakers to discussing the design of the "Skate Garden," not its location.

Mount Prospect Park is about a ten-minute-walk from the Coop and a regular destination for many members and their families. *The Gazette* interviewed two longtime Coop members, one who opposes and another who supports the plan to build a skate park in Mount Prospect Park.

PHOTO BY JENNIFER MACFARLANE

THE SKEPTIC

Aidan Screwvala, 22, was born in Prospect Heights and raised in Park Slope. She is a self-described “Coop kid.” An “extreme New Yorker, [who] finds something comforting in small, cramped spaces…and battling crowds to get my grapes,” Screwvala says. She has fond memories of attending the Coop’s daycare as a child, and bargaining with her mother to push their groceries up the hill in exchange for an ice cream bar. Today, her favorite shift is checkout.

She shares a similar, lifelong affinity for Mount Prospect Park. Flatbush Avenue divides the park from Prospect Park, lending Mount Prospect Park a sense of remove and relative calm. It was a safe place to sled on a snow day, away from the busy hills and bigger kids in Prospect Park; the place she posed for prom photos; and where she goes today to touch grass. “Prospect Park can get so busy,” she said. “When you want quiet, Mount Prospect Park is a tucked-away, slice of park to go to instead.” It’s a park, she says, with a well-sized clearing where dogs can run loose, without their owners worrying about their pets running too far.

Screwvala majored in Economics, Environmental Studies, and Philosophy at Goucher College. Her concentration, environmental economics, focused her schoolwork on balancing economic growth, expansion and preservation. She returned to Brooklyn after graduating in 2023. In January, she learned of the plan to pave a portion of the park. “It made no sense to me,” she says. “I thought the climate crisis was well understood by most if not all New Yorkers. The more I read, the more confused I got. I read people saying the park is under-utilized, just dust, but I see people there every day from my bedroom window.”

Screwvala joined the Friends of Mount Prospect Park as an intern. The group is opposed to the “Brooklyn Skate Garden’s” location in Mount Prospect Park. Alongside a college classmate she recruited to join the effort, Screwvala recently helped deliver a presentation during a news conference listing “inconvenient truths about paving Mount Prospect Park.” Among these: its considerable size, its impediment to rain drai-

nage and potential to increase flooding; its $11.16 million price tag of public money; and its lack of community input on the site's location. While the site's proponents argue it was chosen by over 3,000 people through participatory budgeting, the Friends of Mount Prospect Park argue the site was voted on in District 35. The chosen site is located in District 39, where no community meetings were held to decide its location.

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Screwvala emphasized she does not oppose the "Skate Garden," just its location. She wants the city to renovate an existing skate park, and make trees and greenery integral to such a project. "It's a wonderful project, a fantastic idea for a currently paved space that can be turned green," she said, referencing a central aspect of the plan to make the "Brooklyn Skate Garden" a sustainable, natural setting with trees and greenery. "Paving green space and adding back some trees to compensate for concrete will not be enough. It's a very important distinction between looking green and being green—being environmentally advantageous for our city, storing rainwater, adding shade, reducing heat. If it's paved, it will not do those things."

Finally, Screwvala seeks to raise awareness about the project among Coop members. "I've learned that far too many members of this community have no idea that this is happening," she said.

PHOTO BY JENNIFER MACFARLANE

THE SKATER

Patrick Cranston, 47, has been a member of the Coop since 2007 (he is a production editor on the *Gazette*, but favored food processing for many years prior). He supports the skate park's location in Mount Prospect Park. During the pandemic, Cranston taught his now 10-year-old daughter, Hazel, to skate as a way to be active and spend time outdoors. The father and daughter duo quickly learned that skate parks are "the leftover places where there is nothing else people want to build there." Under the BQE, next to a sewage treatment plant and the Belt Parkway, beneath the F and G train overpass near Carroll Street, the city's present skate parks are marred by grime and exhaust, Cranston said. The verdant new location is central to the project's mission: to locate skate parks in actual parks. "Hazel has asthma, the point [of the "Brooklyn Skate Garden" in Mount Prospect Park] is intentionally putting it in a nice park with access to green space that legitimizes the sport as more than a place they stick in the worst space in the city," he said. There is no skate park in Brooklyn Bridge Park, but there are roller hockey rinks, sand volleyball courts, and soccer fields, he observed. "Skaters are tired of being shunted to the last place."

In 2020, Cranston and his daughter became involved in the participatory budget approval process, which allows New York City residents as young as twelve years old to vote on community initiatives like repairing school bathrooms or updating playgrounds. When the "Skate Garden" project was awarded, they attended the ceremony together. "Over 3,000 people voted for a slice of our pool of city council money to fund this idea, it was enough to show the city this was an idea the community was behind," Cranston said.

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Cranston cites the potential for a redesigned park to improve the park's drainage. Its undecided design retains potential to build a sustainable park, while offering a green space for skaters to go, as well as their fans. "Hazel's mom doesn't like to go to skate parks because there's nowhere to sit," Cranston said (a skate park within a park would offer seating). He said he shares many of the opponents' goals to make the skate park a more sustainable place.

"We all want the same thing: green space. I know there's a lot of concern from people about how loud it will be, but there will still be a playground and a space for dogs. I hope people will be open to imagining a different use of the park," Cranston said.

Susannah Jacob is a native Texan and PhD student of US history. She takes pride in her proficient operation of the slotted, plastic bag-taper machine in the Coop's bulk department.

Correction: An earlier version of this article misstated the number of people who chose the skate park's location. It is 3,000, not 300,000.

WHAT'S GOING ON NEXT DOOR?

June 11, 2024

By Dan Bergsagel

On your way to the Coop recently, have you noticed the building site next door? Ever wondered what's going on behind that construction fence? Well, I've been digging into the history—and the future—of our neighboring lot.

The short stretch of Union Street from the Coop to the corner of 7th Avenue has been remarkably stable over the last half century, even as the surrounding neighborhood

has experienced significant change.

A visitor in the late 1970s would have seen the Park Slope Food Coop, Fire Department Squad Company 1 and Dixon's Bike Shop, with the latter's charming yellow mural painted on the wall directly adjacent to the Coop. Today, everything is largely the same, except that the beloved Dixon's bicycle mural was suddenly whitewashed in summer 2017 to much community furor.

Eagle-eyed members still mourning the loss of the mural may have noticed that the formerly muraled wall itself mysteriously disappeared this spring and was replaced by a construction fence. So what exactly is going on next door?

CHRIS DIXON, CO-OWNER OF DIXON'S BIKE SHOP, REMEMBERS THE SCHOOL FONDLY—ALL FIVE DIXON SIBLINGS ATTENDED ST. FRANCIS XAVIER.

The lot behind the former mural—between the Coop and 774 Union Street—is part of a larger property owned by the Diocese of Brooklyn that connects through the block to 763 President Street. The Diocese's property forms a large L-shape that wraps around the Coop to the south. Starting in 1914, the site housed the St. Francis Xavier School, teaching local children from kindergarten through eighth grade—until St. Francis Xavier closed its doors in 2018 to merge with the Queen of All Saints Catholic Academy in Clinton Hill.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL BERMAN

A look behind the construction fencing.

Chris Dixon, co-owner of Dixon's Bike Shop, remembers the school fondly—all five Dixon siblings attended St. Francis Xavier. Chris remembers that his first-grade teacher, Sister Kathleen Sullivan, who had become the school principal by the mid-1970s, readily agreed to the Dixons painting and maintaining the mural on the school's wall to overcome issues with unsightly graffiti.

The wall holds particular significance for Chris Dixon, as behind it lay St. Francis Xavier's school yard, located on the lot adjacent to the Coop. After the school premises closed each evening, Chris and his friends would climb back over the wall into the yard to play games like stickball. Some of the newer neighbors objected and would occasionally call the police to clear them out.

COOP STAFF AND MEMBERS HAD EXPECTED A NEW SCHOOL TO OPEN ON THE

SITE IMMINENTLY. HOWEVER, THE START OF THE SCHOOL YEAR PASSED BY LAST MONTH WITHOUT THE ARRIVAL OF NEW STUDENTS.

“We weren’t allowed in the yard after school,” Dixon recalls, “but the cops didn’t want us playing stickball in the street either. So, they would tell us to clear out of the yard just until they had gone, when we would simply climb straight back over again and carry on playing.”

Childhood exuberance in that yard was responsible for the scar Chris still bears on his forehead. At that time, there was not only a school, but also a hospital within a few blocks. Dixon’s misadventures were ably repaired at the conveniently located former Samaritan Hospital in the Skene Sanitorium buildings at 759 President Street (converted to a housing co-op in the 1980s).

PHOTO BY MICHAEL BERMAN

A bird’s eye view of the construction lot.

General Coordinator Elinoar Astrinsky explains that, since the school's closing, the Diocese of Brooklyn has undertaken a large internal renovation of the school building. As part of this renovation, it completed work on the [redacted]eparating the rear yard of the Coop from the former main school building. This work required the Coop to temporarily relocate our composting and recycling storage area into the adjacent former school yard.

The Diocese completed their renovation work and in March 2022 it leased the building to the New York City Department of Education. Coop staff and members had expected a new school to open on the site imminently. However, the start of the school year passed by last month without the arrival of new students, and if members peek through the construction fencing, they will still see an active construction site.

> ONCE THE MECHANICAL INSTALLATION WORK IS COMPLETE, THE YARD WILL BE REPAVED AND, CRUCIALLY, THE MASONRY WALL WILL BE REBUILT NEXT TO THE COOP ON UNION STREET.

Surprised by the delay, I reached out to Tamar Smith, a manager in the External Affairs department at the New York City School Construction Authority (SCA), to find out what is holding things up.

Smith confirmed that the school is scheduled to open its doors in 2024. It will serve approximately 450 students from pre-K through fifth grade. The school couldn't open this year because the SCA is completing its own renovations after the Diocese's building work.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL BERMAN

Another angle of the lot.

The SCA is renovating interior spaces—installing new flooring, lighting, updated wiring and electrical systems, updated fire alarm systems and additional bathrooms. The SCA hasn't needed to make any major structural renovations to the building.

The construction work in the former school yard lot isn't a major structural renovation, but rather a trench dug directly next to the Coop boundary wall. The SCA began digging this trench in June this year to install underground piping and conduits for a chiller unit that will be placed in the yard to serve the new school.

Once the mechanical installation work is complete, the yard will be repaved and, crucially, the masonry wall will—the SCA assures—be rebuilt next to the Coop on Union Street. As the school opens its doors next year, members can look forward to the Coop's largest neighbor returning to the important role it played in the community back in the 1970s. Would it be too much to also hope that the Department of Education could bring back the Dixon's Bike Shop mural? Fingers crossed.

Dan Bergsagel is a structural engineer from London. He likes to talk about the unexpected things hiding in plain sight.