Introduction

I know that every good and excellent thing in the world stands moment by moment on the razor’s edge of danger and must be fought for.

Thornton Wilder

The 4-mile-long, 550-acre Hudson River Park is nearing completion and is the largest park built in Manhattan since Central Park was established more than a century and a half earlier. It has transformed a derelict and dangerous waterfront, protected the Hudson River estuary, created new recreational opportunities for millions of New Yorkers, enhanced tourism and the image of the city, preserved maritime commerce, stimulated redevelopment in adjacent neighborhoods, and set a precedent for waterfront redevelopment. The park attracts seventeen million visitors a year.

This story is a first-person account of how the park came to be. Community groups, civic and environmental organizations, labor unions, the business community, government agencies, and elected officials worked together and won a historic victory for environmental preservation, the use and
enjoyment of the Hudson River, and urban redevelopment. However, the park is also the embodiment of a troubling trend toward the commercialization of America’s public parks.

Major public works that reshape world-class cities are traditionally crafted by planners, architects, engineers, and elected officials. The effort to reimagine the West Side of Manhattan began in 1974 with a proposal for a massive undertaking known as Westway. Westway was planned as a 4.2-mile limited-access interstate highway burrowing through 234 acres of new landfill and platforms at a cost of over $2 billion. The plan was supported by city, state, and federal officials, the real estate industry, the building and construction trades, the business community, and the media.

Those of us who opposed Westway celebrated in 1985 when the project was defeated after a bitter decade-long legal battle that ended with one of the earliest victories of the urban environmental movement.

Between 1986 and 1998, a new vision for the future of the West Side waterfront was forged through a unique participatory planning process involving all the competing stakeholders. Working together over ten years, city, state, and federal agencies, environmental, civic, and community organizations, elected officials, construction unions, and the business community captured a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to revitalize Manhattan’s West Side waterfront. The highway became a tree-lined urban boulevard, landfills and platforms were prohibited, and a world-class maritime park was planned on the waterfront.

My Brooklyn roots, warrior spirit, and love of nature and urban life came together in a lifelong passion for public open space. In addition to playing a bit part at the end of the Westway saga, I was an early leader in the community gardening movement and the fight for Brooklyn Bridge Park. I initiated the plan for a forty-mile Greenway through Brooklyn and Queens and led a citywide coalition of 120 park, community, environmental, sports, and civic organizations committed to research, planning, and advocacy to expand and enhance the city’s open spaces.

In 1986, Governor Mario Cuomo appointed me to the West Side Task Force, a twenty-two-member group charged with recommending alternatives for Westway. We recommended a surface roadway and waterfront esplanade, but determining the fate of the miles of underwater property proved so contentious an issue, it was left to a future planning entity. In 1988, I was appointed to the West Side Waterfront Panel, which ruled out landfill and platforms, and in 1990, we recommended that the roadway become a tree-lined urban boulevard and the entire waterfront a world-class maritime park.
To finance the construction and maintenance of the project, we recommended using a variety of funding sources, including city, state, and federal funding, and designating three locations within the park—locations that offered structures with more than four million square feet of space atop existing piers—for park-related commercial development, and retaining that revenue. We also suggested the use of a creative financing mechanism to capture a portion of the value created by the appreciation of adjacent real estate that we agreed would result from the park’s construction.

In 1992, the city and state each committed $100 million toward the construction of the park and established the Hudson River Park Conservancy to oversee its design, construction, and operation. I was appointed the conservancy’s first president, and by 1995, we had completed the Concept and Financial Plan for the park. I resigned shortly afterward as Mayor Giuliani began to remove certain properties from the park and Governor Pataki sought greater control of the project.

In 1997, I joined the Hudson River Park Alliance, a coalition that grew to over thirty environmental, civic, and community organizations that helped negotiate and advocate for the passage of the 1998 Hudson River Park Act. That legislation designated the 550 acres of upland property, underwater property, and the piers as a public park. It established the Hudson River Park Trust to design, build, and operate the park and set aside all the underwater property as an estuarine sanctuary to support research, restoration, and preservation of this unique habitat. After the passage of the act, I joined a group of community, business, environmental, and maritime advocates to form an organization called “Friends of Hudson River Park” to support the park.

As expected, the Hudson River Park and the new urban boulevard that ran alongside it were significant catalysts in the revitalization of Manhattan’s far West Side south of 59th Street. They made it easier for people and vehicles to move along that part of the island, opened the waterfront so it could be used and enjoyed by the public, protected the estuary, improved the image of the city, and made the adjacent neighborhood a more desirable place to live, work, and visit. They increased tourism, the value of adjacent real estate, and the city’s tax base. All in all, the project seemed poised to be a win-win undertaking.

In fact, the planning and construction of both projects proceeded smoothly at first. The roadway was completed in 2001, and the first section of the park, in Greenwich Village, opened in 2003 to rave reviews. In 2002, however, Michael Bloomberg was elected mayor, and his agenda was pro-development. Under Bloomberg, the entire West Side of Manhattan adjacent to the
Creating the Hudson River Park waterfront was rezoned to allow for increased development, but no mechanism was instituted to earmark any new revenue generated for supporting the Hudson River Park.

The lack of adequate public funding seriously impeded the effort to build and maintain the park. By 2008, Friends of Hudson River Park had secured approximately $100 million for the park through public advocacy, private fundraising, and legal action against city agencies that failed to relocate inappropriate and now-illegal facilities from the waterfront. We conducted a multiyear study that showed that the initial $75 million public investment in the strip of parkland in Greenwich Village, the first segment of the park, had increased the value of real estate within three blocks of the park by $200 million.

This success validated the study and financing recommendation of the West Side Waterfront Panel and confirmed the benefit of building the park. But by this point, the Hudson River Park Trust was under new development-oriented leadership, and the classic conflicts between public and private uses resurfaced. In 2011, they forced Friends to reorganize as a fundraising organization. The community leaders, environmentalists, and civic leaders who worked with the government to plan the park and begin construction were replaced by real estate developers, attorneys, investment bankers, and consultants. The city and state effectively put a For Sale sign on the park, and the trust became a real estate broker.

The new leadership of the trust and a reconstituted Hudson River Park Friends then lobbied for multiple changes in the legislation governing the park. One of these changes was selling development rights from the piers to properties along the park, which were recently rezoned to permit residential and commercial office space and now could be developed even more densely. Others were extending the term for commercial leases to ninety-nine years, allowing office development in the park and retaining and possibly expanding a heliport.

Trust leadership allowed Citigroup to build and install a private water taxi dock for their employees without public review and worked secretly with a donor to design a 260-million-dollar theater complex on a new “island” built in the sanctuary. That proposal led to a bitter legal battle that did not end until 2017, when the island was allowed to be built under the condition that the government provide the money to complete the park and restore the estuarine sanctuary.

Within two years, more than $146 million in new public funding for the park was approved. In 2019, I was elected to the Hudson River Advisory
Council, a fifty-member body composed of community, environmental, and civic organizations and all the West Side elected officials, a precedent that was established by the West Side Task Force. After several years of quiescence, the council has begun to play a more active role in planning and policy for the park.

Protecting public parks and keeping them free of commercialization has always been an enormous challenge. Over the past century and a half, for example, there have been many plans for commercial development in Central Park, but none have been implemented. Why should our new generation of urban parks be any different?

As we are increasingly coming to realize, parks perform a wide array of functions necessary to support and enhance life in the city. They contribute to physical and mental health, reduce air and noise pollution, conserve energy, absorb storm water, support wildlife, enhance the image of a city, and make it a more desirable place to live, work, and visit. For these reasons, public officials should not be allowed to sell pieces of our parks to the highest bidder to wring more revenue from these valuable public assets. Parks already increase real estate, payroll, and sales tax revenues, and their contributions to the city and urban living far exceed revenues received from exploiting this asset and undermining public use.

Twenty-five years after state legislation created the Hudson River Park, the city, state, trust, and the reconstituted Friends have new leadership. Residential and corporate investment in adjacent neighborhoods has matured, and soon no more commercial development will be allowed in the park. People who live on the West Side need the park to maintain both their quality of life and the value of their property—so do corporations ranging from Google and Citigroup, to Disney, RXR Realty, and Related Companies, to name just a few that have invested heavily on the far West Side.

It is clearly in everyone’s interest to secure stable, long-term public funding if the park is to succeed. To this end, the new neighbors should work with elected officials to craft a financing mechanism that finally meets the park’s needs for long-term maintenance, operation, and capital replacement. Without such a mechanism, the park and adjacent communities will suffer; we saw this happen in the 1980s when we failed to maintain public spaces like Bryant Park, Union Square, Washington Square, Prospect Park, and even Central Park.

The struggle to ensure that the Hudson River Park becomes the world-class waterfront park originally envisioned by its creators is far from over. Commercial interests have recently played a greater role in the park and the
Hudson River Park Trust’s efforts to limit the involvement of the community and other stakeholders in planning and decision-making have led to public mistrust and frustration.

City and state officials and the new trust leadership must embrace the public involvement that created the park to ensure its completion and long-term care. Without an informed and engaged citizenry working in partnership with government agencies, elected officials, philanthropists, and enlightened business interests the Hudson River Park, along with many others across the country, can never realize their full potential.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers 2022 resiliency plan includes building a twelve-foot-high concrete flood wall along three miles of the park. The wall would diminish public use and enjoyment of the park, impede public access to the river, undermine the quality of life in adjacent neighborhoods, and erode the value of adjacent real estate and the city’s tax base. I am hopeful that the governor and the mayor answer the growing public appeal to establish a task force to oversee a more coordinated approach to ensure that investments in new waterfront infrastructure complete the transformation of Manhattan’s lower West Side waterfront spurred by the creation of the park.

This story was written to accurately document the history of the Hudson River Park, to recognize both those who made it happen and those who made it difficult, and to offer lessons that may help citizens, planning and park professionals, public servants, and elected officials expand and protect the public parks and natural systems that are so critical to the well-being and even the survival of urban society.