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Chelsea Residents Fight Over a Small Patch of Land

A small, undeveloped Chelsea plot has created tension between housing and park advocates

[By Hannah Rappleye](#)



A view of the parcel of land in question on

West 20th Street

Congressman Jerrold Nadler addressed his constituents last week at the Community Board 4 meeting in Chelsea, and he used the time to cover the most pressing issues facing New York State: health care and the budget.

When the board allowed for questions, however, the only constituent who stood up accused the Congressman of not doing enough to support putting a park in an empty lot in East Chelsea, Nadler's face went blank.

"How can you say you care about the elderly and disabled?" asked a man with a white beard and glasses. He pointed his finger at Nadler. "There are people in our neighborhood who are disabled, who cannot get to [Madison Square Park](#), who cannot get to [Union Square Park](#)."

He went on to complain that the Community Board did not pay attention to its constituents and, after the crowd packed into the Chelsea community center hooted, hollered and clapped, Nadler replied: "What is your question?"

"How do you feel about the park?" the man said.

The answer was diplomatic. "You have a competition here between two necessary public goods," Nadler said. "We need a park; we need low-income housing. We have to figure out how to do them both."

The battle to figure out how to do both in Chelsea has grown increasingly contentious since it began last September, when residents became aware of an empty, city-owned lot on 136 W. 20th St.

Some saw the 10,000-square-foot lot, formerly used by city sanitation workers, as the perfect opportunity to build a public park from scratch. Over the months, residents built a coalition, called [Friends of 20th Street Park](#). It grew to include over 1,000 members and garnered the support of numerous city organizations, including the Council of Chelsea Block Associations, Save Chelsea and NYC Park Advocates.

But Community Board 4 had been interested in using the lot for affordable housing since at least 2004, when the West Chelsea Rezoning Plan went through. The Board also passed a resolution in July 2009 that reaffirmed its commitment to affordable housing in anticipation of the [Western Rail Yards Rezoning](#). The rezoning plan called for 20 percent, or 1,000 units, of new residential development to be reserved for low-, middle- and moderate-income New Yorkers. On Jan. 5, the CB4 Board voted to reaffirm their position: with plans to develop the lot into permanent, affordable housing would go forward.

A back-and-forth between camps through letters ensued. Park advocates [drafted a letter](#) to the Board, reiterating their case for the park and calling the vote “a pro forma exercise that was compromised by distortions of facts and should be withdrawn.” Advocates argued that the vote should have been tabled until they had a chance to present before the Chelsea Preservation and Planning committee Jan. 11, but the suggestion to table the vote was shot down. Their scheduled appearance before the Preservation committee was taken off the agenda and moved to the Transportation Planning and Parks Subcommittee, which the group rejected, arguing the park was a “land-use issue.”

The board responded in a Jan. 18 letter, stating that, “The matter has been fully debated, voted on, and will not be reconsidered.” It suggested the group schedule an appearance before the Waterfront and Parks Committee, to discuss alternatives for green space.

On Jan. 19, the group shot back another [letter](#), arguing that the vote was not conclusive. While the board votes on this lot had initially been unanimous for housing, according to Matt Weiss, a member of the group’s steering committee, the pro-park campaign had managed to turn the tide: the Jan. 5 vote saw four votes against housing, two abstentions and 11 votes in favor of an amendment to erect a temporary park on the site.

“We made a big dent in what had previously been full consensus,” Weiss says. “Given more time, I think we could turn this around.” At issue now, he explains, is convincing the board to reconsider a vote. “One thing we’re asking for tonight is that nothing should be etched in stone,” Weiss says. “No construction is imminent.”

Friends of 20th Street Park is currently conducting a letter-writing campaign and lobbying leaders like City Council Speaker Christine Quinn, who had made an agreement with the Community Board to reserve the space for subsidized housing. When Quinn’s office was

contacted for comment, she still seemed hopeful that there would be an opportunity to create green space in the area.

“The creation of new permanent affordable housing and increased park space on the west side of Manhattan are both important and laudable goals,” Quinn says. “The city has previously identified this particular site as a future home for permanent affordable housing. I met with and heard the concerns of neighborhood residents. We will work together to explore options to keep our district both diverse and livable.”

The tension at the Feb. 2 meeting, however, was palpable and far from resolved. Mothers hugged babies to their hips, and small children, including some still in strollers, carried poster board signs with “We want a park” scrawled in marker. Lines of park supporters stood to speak at the podium and chanted, “We need a park! We need a park!” Strangely enough, a [documentary film crew](#) was also there, filming the process.

As the supporters spoke for their allotted two minutes, many board members, who sat at plastic tables around the room, fidgeted in their chairs or scrolled on their BlackBerries. Others rolled their eyes, or crossed their arms and sighed. As one elderly woman spoke, a board member looked up to the ceiling, scoffed and whispered, “What is she talking about?” to another board member. Most of the park supporters reiterated the group’s talking points.

Before the meeting, Weiss said he regretted that the fight had turned into a “people-versus-parks” issue. At the podium, he and other park supporters said that they fully support affordable housing, but adequate green space is necessary for the health of a community. Supporters cited a [2009 report by NYU’s Furman Center](#), and the Department of City Planning, that District 4 ranks last out of Manhattan’s 12 districts for parks within a quarter mile of residents.

Supporters also argued that the housing slated for the space is not “affordable”: the average income for the 70 units is about \$120,000.

In a follow-up interview after the contentious meeting, John Weis, chair of CB4, says that for a married couple, \$120,000 is not a large sum. “For a family of four with two working parents, \$120,000 is not unreasonable when you have a schoolteacher and a fireman,” he says. “It’s really for working-class folk.”

Weis explains that, while the Board is committed to incorporating more green space into the district, housing is one of the most pressing needs facing the community. “There has been quite a boom in development in Chelsea, and it’s all been very high end,” Weis says. “It’s driving a lot of people out of the neighborhood. CB4 feels strongly that in order to help preserve the character of the neighborhood, we have to make sure middle-income people can stay here.”

The Board had previously suggested to Friends of 20th Street Park that it would consider other options, such as green roofs or blocking streets for children to play safely in during the day. Many supporters mentioned these ideas at the podium, arguing that elderly and disabled residents could not access green roofs, and that Chelsea children already had enough concrete on which to play.

Ronnie Tuft, 82, a former painter and writer and longtime resident of Chelsea, said that the board should keep its legacy in mind. “Thirty to 40 years from now, the legacy you leave by this decision, will it be another building of stone and concrete and wood and windows and glass?” she asked. “Or will it be a little green space, one that’s very much needed, that will dot this little area of concrete and glass and stone?”

A handful of housing supporters also spoke, drawing applause from some audience and board members. At times, the issue seemed to swerve from the need for affordable housing in Chelsea, to general frustration with rising costs and lack of affordable housing across New York City.

“August of this year I will be 70 years old,” Lamar Stubblefield, a former fashion designer, said. “I receive retirement, Social Security. Even if I did receive pension, I would not be getting more than two or 3,000 a month, and that’s just rent alone. If you need to fight for something you need to fight for some affordable housing.” Board members nodded their heads and clapped. Stubblefield continued: “I pay my taxes. I pay my Social Security. And I want to live in New York City.”

After at least two hours of speeches and shouting, most of the crowd had drained out of the room. Before the board turned to other business, Weis announced that many constituents complained that the board acted rude and uninterested during the public session, and that they would be writing letters to complain.

The board may have seemed frustrated at the meeting, Weis explained later, because the park issue wasn’t on the agenda. “It was the third or fourth time the park advocates came out,” he says. “Of course, public session allows anyone to speak about anything they want. The park people can all come out next month as well. But as far as we are concerned, the issue is resolved for CB4.”