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East Chelsea Residents Push for Park on 20th St., Not Affordable Housing

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A campaign to put a pocket park on West 20th Street goes against another plan to build affordable housing in the spot.



This 10,000 square foot lot could give East Chelsea its first park — or, a pocket of affordable housing in an increasingly high rent district. (DNAINFO/Tara Kyle)

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CHELSEA — A coalition of neighbors thinks they've found a solution to a lack of green space in Chelsea, in a 10,000 square foot parking lot soon to be vacated by the Department of Sanitation. But Community Board 4 already has designs on that space for another critical neighborhood priority — affordable housing.

For all the excitement over construction on the High Line, Manhattan Community District 4 still ranks dead last among the borough's neighborhoods for access to parks, according to reports by the [Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy](#) and the [Department of City Planning](#). The situation in East Chelsea, bounded by Sixth and Eighth avenues and 14th to 26th Streets, is particularly dire — the only green space here is a [cemetery](#).

"The situation is going to be untenable from a quality of life perspective," said resident Matthew Weiss, 32, who cited the rising population of young families, like his own, moving into the area.

Putting reasonably-priced housing on the lot at 136 W. 20th Street has been an interest for CB4 since the West Chelsea Rezoning in 2004, according to district manager Bob Benfatto. The Board most recently expressed its position on the lot in a July 2009 resolution passed in the lead-up to the Western Rail Yards Rezoning, which secured 1,000 units of affordable housing for the neighborhood.

Park proponents, who created their [20th Street Park](#) organization in September, will get a chance to plead a CB4 committee for a change in position later this month or in January, Benfatto said.

After knee cartilage injuries and hip replacements, retired architect Frank Misiurski, 72, and his wife Caroly Wilcox, are finding it a bit harder to get around the neighborhood lately.

And because they live in East Chelsea, the nearest patch of grass is a long way away.

"In years past, it wasn't an issue — when we were young and vital," Misiurski said. "But now I'm more aware there is no quiet place to go and sit outside."

About half of the group's supporters are, like Misiurski, aging, long-time residents frustrated by long walks to Union and Madison Square Parks and limited elevator access to the High Line. Within an 8-10 block radius, Misiurski said he's found only one place to sit outdoors — a bench in front of a bus stop at Seventh Avenue and 20th Street.

"It's not a pleasant place to sit, with truck fumes in your face," he said.

But many others are parents of young children and teens, said Weiss, who is a member of the group's steering committee. They've received approximately 200 letters of support and endorsements from groups including the Flatiron Alliance, Save Chelsea Now and New Yorkers For Parks.

Weiss said he's personally motivated by a desire to maximize playtime for his 16-month-old son. By the time he walks over to the Hudson River (five avenues away) or crowded Madison or Union Square Parks (15 minutes), it's nearly time to turn around.

"It's hard to believe, when you think about it, that Chelsea has a lack of open space, because all you read about is the wonderful High Line and the revitalization of the West Side highway," Weiss said. "Try taking a two-year-old up to the High Line and finding a place to play — it's not a playground."