

## **Idlewild Park: Under Attack by the PANYNJ?**

For the more than ten years, the Eastern Queens Alliance (EQA) has been working to save Idlewild Park Preserve. In 2003, we protested against the rezoning of 25.4 acres of the parkland that the city sold to International Air Cargo, Inc. to build an air cargo industrial park. It turned out this was a “done deal.” Now we are struggling to preserve over 700 trees on the western side of this valuable 325 acre preserve which forms the headwaters to Jamaica Bay. Is this a “done deal” too?

The Port Authority of New York/New Jersey (PANYNJ) has flagged 722 trees for removal. In fact, they have been in negotiation with the NYC Department of Parks and Recreation (NYCDPR) to remove the trees. Half of the trees they claim are current hazards to aviation. But one has to question: Why now? The trees didn't miraculously have a growth spurt within the last several months or year or two. What makes them suddenly a hazard? Is it possible this is just a pre-emptive strike in anticipation of the proposed extension of Runway 4L/22R which has not yet been approved? The other half they claim will need to be removed if the runway is extended. Most of these trees don't appear to be over 35 feet tall. Many are not taller than the two-story houses just a block away. There are those that are shorter. Is all of this then just a ploy to prepare for the Extension of Runway 4L/22R which, if completed, will result in aircraft flying much lower over our communities—perhaps 100+ feet lower? Is this a case of environmental injustice? Will Idlewild become just an extension of the JFK runways rather than the valuable ecological preserve that it is? In effect, this is what will happen if these trees are removed, clearing a huge swath of land through Idlewild Park Preserve between 228<sup>th</sup> Streets and Springfield Boulevard on the western side of the park!

The PANYNJ is moving swiftly ahead on the proposed plan to extend JFK Runway 4L/22R for which the final Environmental Assessment (EA) has not been approved. How is this possible? A final EA needs to be issued. Comments to the draft EA need to have been answered. This has not happened. EQA has called for a full Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) on the proposal which requires much more public involvement. The PANYNJ needs to follow NEPA guidelines and honor Environmental Justice Policies. It needs to give full consideration to the communities it is so negatively impacting.

The Eastern Queens Alliance has called for the restoration of much of the degraded wetlands in Idlewild and are eagerly awaiting the construction of the Idlewild Park Preserve Environmental Learning Center which Borough President Helen Marshall made possible through the allocation of \$5 million in the 2009 budget. Until then, we offer the forerunner of that center out of a small office trailer on the western edge of Idlewild. Idlewild Park Preserve is an integral part of that center. The park serves as a natural laboratory where learning about the importance of the environment, how to take care of it, and enjoy nature at its best happens.

Over the years we have planted trees, shrubs and wetland plants, built trails, took children on field trips through our environmental education program, and collaborated with NYCDPR on the building of an Idlewild canoe/kayak launch. Concerts, fitness classes and tours have also taken place here. Much of this has been possible through the acquisition of small grants. Now all of this is threatened by the “taking of parkland” by the PANYNJ for the airport.

Idlewild is a critical ecological area in Southeast Queens, in the Jamaica Bay watershed and in the New York/New Jersey Harbor Estuary. Why are we working to save the park and restore the wetlands? Wetlands perform very important functions. The EPA tells us that wetlands provide flood protection by serving as natural sponges that trap and slowly release surface-water, rain, snowmelt groundwater and floodwaters. The trees, root mats and other wetland vegetation slow the speed of floodwaters. The combined water storage and slowing action lowers floodwaters and reduces erosion. Where wetlands lie downstream of urban areas, they counteract the large volume of surface water runoff that you get from pavement and buildings. The wetlands in Idlewild Park are critical in flood protection of the low-lying

communities of Springfield Gardens and Rosedale areas. In fact, the destruction of wetlands over the years probably contributed to much of the flooding that our neighborhoods have experienced.

"It is important to note, the wetlands in the Idlewild Park Preserve also contain the largest expanse of high quality marsh along the shores of Jamaica Bay. The tidal creeks running through the park are the most extensive in, and provide the largest volume of freshwater to, the Bay." These wetlands help to protect our open waters from pollution by serving as natural filters, replenishing groundwater, and controlling shoreline erosion. There has been much talk within the last few years about saving Jamaica Bay. Saving Idlewild Park Preserve is a critical component in that process. The powers-that-be need to realize this.

Also, be aware that more than one-third of the threatened and endangered species in this country live only in wetlands. The EPA tells us that nearly half use the wetlands at some point in their lives, particularly for nesting, feeding and breeding.

Furthermore, wetlands provide wonderful parkland for recreation, the enjoyment and appreciation of nature, and are great resources for environmental education.

Finally, Idlewild Park lies just south of the Springfield Gardens and Rosedale communities and immediately north of JFK Airport, or Rockaway Boulevard. It serves as a natural buffer between the airport, airport-related businesses and the residential communities. We need to protect our communities against unbridled encroachment.

Idlewild Park has been designated as a *Forever Wild Preserve* by the Department of Parks and Recreation of NYC. In that title, they recognize that it needs to be protected, along with other such natural areas, against the constant threat of infringement and degradation in the name of development.

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