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Bryant Park Braces for a Tidal Wave of Traffic

By GLENN COLLINS



Bryant Park in Midtown may soon confront a fate that only [Yogi Berra](#) could have described: It will be so crowded, nobody will go there anymore.

Two vast neighboring office buildings (one with a spire that will make it second only to the height of the [Empire State Building](#)) will soon be adding an estimated 13,600 new workers to the streets around the park, already the city's most densely populated.

Those towers, with their 3.4 million square feet of office space across Avenue of the Americas from the park, which is between 40th and 42nd Streets at the backyard of the [New York Public Library](#), are in the process of being occupied. But another 40-story building rising in the neighborhood and a new hotel under construction are putting the park staff of 120 on notice: The invasions of recent summers will soon seem paltry.

Defenses are being put in place, and changes are coming to the park's appearance. Workers for the Bryant Park Corporation, the nonprofit manager of the six-acre park, are making plans to remove some ivy beds to accommodate more tables and chairs. Five hundred new green chairs and 100 more tables have been ordered, and there are plans to order several hundred more chairs.

In May the park spent \$10,000 to upgrade its WiFi system, which tended to be slow at peak times for more than 61,000 users last year. Managers say that the projected visitorship may also require the addition of five new sanitation workers to the 11 hired in the last five years. If the need arises, managers may also add another public restroom.

“Our chance of getting these new people is high, since they are so close to the park,” said Daniel A. Biederman, president of the Bryant Park Corporation.

Not everyone is pleased. Midtown Manhattan “doesn’t have a lot of green space, and the city keeps giving permits to build enormous buildings that are putting pressure on all of New York’s infrastructure, especially the parks,” said Maxine Teitler, chairwoman of the parks committee of Community Board 5.

In a city where public spaces have been made increasingly less hospitable in the service of maximizing traffic flow, Bryant Park’s philosophy has been contrarian. Managers have steadily increased visitors’ “dwell time” over the last decade thanks to movable seating, so that patrons can group their chairs, or move out of the sun in the summer or into the sun in the winter.

Recent studies have shown that the park’s 4.2 million yearly visitors spend anywhere from a few minutes to three hours in the park; the median stay is 35 minutes. Park amenities include a bathroom that was recently restored for \$200,000, concession kiosks and restaurant pavilions, a custom-built carousel and an alfresco library, as well as seasonal events like film-festival shows and ice skating.

Will it all be overrun when the hordes descend? “We don’t envision that we’ll be in a Yogi Berra situation,” Mr. Biederman said.

But it may already be happening. Even early in the peak season, “this is about as dense as it should be,” said Tony Barnes, a Manhattan lawyer who was meeting a client in the park on a recent afternoon. “I’ve never seen it this crowded.”

Although some city swimming pools and playgrounds may have greater numbers of people per square foot, “as far as parks, I can’t imagine one that is more heavily used,” said [Adrian Benepe](#), the city’s parks commissioner.

The park, he added, is “in some sense a victim of its own success, since decades ago nobody went to Bryant Park unless you were looking to buy drugs.” The park was once so shunned and overrun by undesirables that it was considered a symbol of the fall of the city.

Now, the total number of days when the park had more than 3,000 patrons at lunchtime has increased fivefold since 1998 to 78 days last summer, according to the park’s best estimates. There were more than 30 days with 4,000 visitors and a few with 5,000.

The park’s carrying capacity — its total number of visitors — can exceed 1,000 people an acre on nonevent days, “and we have knowledge of no other public park in the world that is as densely populated,” Mr. Biederman said. And so, in peak lunch hours, there are lines not only at the women’s restroom but also at the men’s room.

“Sometimes people are standing and waiting for chairs now,” Mr. Biederman said of the signature green chairs imported from Lyons, France, to enhance the park’s European

formality. There are 4,417 of them, along with an additional 292 green “lunch chairs” with writing surfaces.

Park statisticians estimate that within a two-block radius of Bryant Park there are 187,600 office workers, residential tenants, hotel guests, shoppers and visitors to cultural amenities like the New York Public Library. The completion of the new buildings is expected to bring hundreds more people to the park during lunchtime, Mr. Biederman said.

The most immediate new threat looms to the north: the \$1 billion Bank of America Tower at One Bryant Park, a beveled 54-story, 2.1 million-square-foot office building on the northwest corner of Avenue of the Americas and 42nd Street. Several hundred workers have moved in already, and full occupancy of more than 10,000 people is expected by next winter.

Directly to the south, 1095 Avenue of the Americas at Bryant Park, the 45-story tower between 41st and 42nd Streets, already accommodates 550 workers and will have more than 2,500 when fully occupied in December.

And 485 Fifth Avenue, at the northeast corner of 41st Street opposite the New York Public Library, is being converted into a Hyatt hotel.

Already completed and occupied are a brace of two-year-old skyscrapers: the CIT building at 505 Fifth Avenue (a 27-story office tower at the northeast corner of 42nd Street) and the 46-story Marriott Residence Inn, with a full guest occupancy of 1,000, at the southwest corner of 39th Street and Avenue of the Americas.

To the west is the 1.1 million-square-foot, 40-story 11 Times Square building, scheduled to open in the fall of 2009 at 42nd Street and Eighth Avenue.

“In Midtown, all the land is developed, and it isn’t clear what the long-term solution is,” Mr. Benepe said of creating more green space.

“If we improve our other parks, we can pick off some of the people in Bryant Park and reduce the density there,” he said, referring to other Manhattan oases like Madison Square Park and Union Square Park.

Instead of turning away visitors, Mr. Biederman said, Bryant Park will continue to put out the welcome mat, since “visitorship is our measure of success.”

And not everyone minds the crowds. “We come to chat, eat lunch and look at people,” said Anke Bivens, a software developer who was picking at her chopped salad on a recent afternoon in the park. “If you come to look at people, you like a lot of people to look at.”

In the end, though, Bryant Park may be protected by “a self-limiting factor,” Mr. Benepe said. “If it’s too crowded, people just won’t go in.”

As Yogi Berra has said.