

## THE NATION

# Public parks landing private owners

New York's Bryant Park runs on commercial support. Critics warn the concept could disenfranchise the poor.

By ROBERT LEE HOTZ  
Times Staff Writer

**NEW YORK** — On any sunny day, thousands flock to Manhattan's Bryant Park, lured by the shaded flower beds, the carousel, the free wireless Internet and the hundreds of comfortable café chairs all painted the same soothing shade of ivy green.

Not even the cold can keep them away. Since October, 148,000 people have visited the seven-acre city park to skate — for free — on what many judge New York's finest outdoor public ice rink.

To some, Bryant Park is a vibrant town square. Others argue it is merely a frame for product placements.

Supported entirely by commercial sponsors and fees, Bryant Park is an ambitious experiment in the private operation of public places, one that is being watched by urban planners and city managers worldwide.

The survival of urban parkland across the country depends heavily on private largesse. Parks in Atlanta, St. Louis and Boston are managed by nonprofit foundations. In San Diego, officials are considering a private conservancy to refurbish Balboa Park. Nonprofit groups may help manage aspects of the \$2-billion restoration of the Los Angeles River.

On Wednesday, President Bush announced plans to seek \$1 billion in private donations to spruce up the nation's 390 federal parks and monuments.

Most of the 1,400-acre Presidio in San Francisco already is managed by a nonprofit trust rather than directly by the National Park Service. The contract requires it to be self-supporting within five years.

But in New York, a city squeezed for open space, some activists worry that the public parks are becoming too private. They say wealthy donors may have influence over who gets access to park facilities, and efforts to make parks self-supporting can turn them into commercial developments. Civil libertarians worry that parks — New York's most democratic places — are becoming fiefdoms where political gatherings are discouraged.

Corporate donations, concession fees and funding schemes linked to commercial development are feeding New York's most expensive park-building boom in decades.

Central Park — which gets five times as many visitors as the Grand Canyon every year — is the prototype. It is tended by a private conservancy with a staff of 300, aided by 1,300 volunteers. Donors raised \$300 million to refurbish its 843 acres, and contribute \$23 million a year to pay for upkeep.

With all that renovation, park planners also built in a double standard, activists say.

To protect the park's new grass, officials denied permits to antiwar groups that wanted to use the 13-acre Great Lawn for protests during the 2004 Republican National Convention, prompting lawsuits and public hearings. The New York Philharmonic and Metropolitan Opera, however, use the same space for free summer concerts every year.

"If you walk south from Central Park, every public park you encounter is under some form of private management," said Christian DiPalermo, executive director of New Yorkers for Parks, an independent citizens watchdog group.

The trend began in the 1980s as a rescue effort, with neighborhoods and business-improvement districts banding together to save parks that were decaying from government neglect.

In few cities are people quite so passionate about public spaces.

"Unlike most cities, people in New York do not have back-



J. CONRAD WILLIAMS JR. *Newsday*

**GREEN SPACE:** Bryant Park in Manhattan is open to the public for relaxing, reading and — in winter — ice skating. But the park closes for Fashion Week, one element of its corporate sponsorship. Some say parks shouldn't have to be profitable.

yards," Parks Commissioner Adrian Benepe said. "People are absolutely dependent on parks."

All told, New York has more of its acreage in parkland than any other major city, almost a third more than Los Angeles, according to the Trust for Public Land. By Benepe's calculation, annual city spending on parks approaches \$1 billion.

Still, Benepe said, "It is precisely when parks are doing well that you want to rope people in and secure the friendship and support of private citizens."

"There is no such thing as too much money."

In that spirit, New York officials are promoting two major waterfront park projects on the condition that they pay for themselves, with space set aside on public land for stores, restaurants, luxury condominiums and, in one instance, even a ho-

tel.

The 550-acre Hudson River Park is the largest open-space development in the city since the completion of Central Park, while the 1.3-mile-long Brooklyn Bridge Park would be the first major park built in the borough since 1843. Critics worry that they will become commercial malls in all but name.

At the moment, officials with the Hudson River Park Trust are weighing whether to use space for a public high school and playing fields or an entertainment complex with restaurants, a nightclub, a movie theater, a 3,500-seat event center and a performance space for Cirque du Soleil.

But as New York outsources management of its public spaces, activists and city council members say, the result may be two park systems — one funded

by wealthy neighborhoods and business districts, and the other in less affluent areas short-changed by wavering public support.

"This is an insidious thing," said Judi Francis, president of the Brooklyn Bridge Park Defense Fund. She has sued over plans to build 1,000 high-rise apartments on the Brooklyn parkland in order to subsidize its upkeep. "As soon as you ask a park to pay for itself, you will not have parks in poor neighborhoods," Francis said.

Community leaders worry that residents most in need may lose their local parks to those who can pay for the privilege.

On Wednesday, city officials are expected to vote on a plan to give 20 of Manhattan's wealthiest private schools exclusive after-school access to dozens of public ball fields, rather than al-

low them to be used by nearby public schools in East Harlem and South Bronx. The private schools would pay more than \$2 million a year to use the 63 fields for 20 years.

But to Daniel A. Biederman, executive director of the Bryant Park Corp., it is public money that can't be trusted.

Alone among New York City's 1,800 parks, Bryant Park accepts none. Almost half of its \$6.1 million in annual revenue comes from companies that advertise by sponsoring events — including HBO, the New York Yankees, "Good Morning America," Google and CitiGroup (which pays for the park's popular skating rink).

The park today runs in the black, even though Biederman spends six times as much on maintenance as the parks department once did.

"Some people claim this is a bargain with the devil," Harvard University urban design expert Jerold Kayden said. "Some people say we need the devil."

And in Bryant Park, the devil does wear Prada.

Last month, the skaters were banished and the public rink dismantled for the season. The six-acre lawn was covered by private pavilions, then blocked off by barricades.

After weeks of preparations, Bryant Park was turned into the gated community of Fashion Week. Its Parisian-style promenades snarled by power cables, its tree-lined side streets blocked by growling power generators and double-parked limos, Bryant Park last week was an invitation-only eyesore where commercial logos bloomed instead of flowers.

Park managers would like to evict Fashion Week and keep the park open to the public, but city officials overrule them every year.

"They pay us a million dollars. It's a million dollars I would happily do without," Biederman said.