

# DAILY NEWS

## N.Y. parks can save themselves

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**BY DAN BIEDERMAN**

**W**hen states run out of ideas to close large budget gaps, their parks become targets for painful cuts. New York State has identified 41 state parks that it plans to close, along with 14 historic sites. While a final budget may not include such drastic measures, this is clearly a bad fiscal year for the parks.

Whether it is simply an attempt to convince state residents and businesses to cough up higher taxes or a sincere effort to avoid bankruptcy, this perennial drama does not need to be.

New York State has the tools right now — within its borders — to avoid this budget cliffhanger. The model for this solution is right here in the city, where many of our green spaces also generate long green that helps support their own operations.

In other words, if we do this right many of our parks — from Orient Beach and Cold Spring Harbor State Park, which are on the closure list, to Riverbank State Park in Manhattan, which is on the cutback list — can become self-sustaining, or at the very least can depend far less on the whims of a tightening state budget.

In the 2009 fiscal year, the city collected almost \$50 million — 17% of its parks budget — in what would be called “earned income” in the cultural world. How? By smartly auctioning off food service oppor-

tunities and charging fees for an occasional commercial event (with public performance benefits) held within our parks’ borders.

Four great parks within the city have gone further — full disclosure, I run three of them — by going over to full or nearly full private financing. At Bryant Park, an \$8 million annual operating and construction budget is entirely drawn from the rent paid by Bryant Park Grill and Café and the ‘wichcraft kiosks (when you buy a drink at the café, 16.5% of the bill goes to park lawns and flowers), from sponsorships by large national companies, from event revenues and from a business improvement district that includes all the park’s abutting buildings.

Central Park has been equally resourceful. Its \$25 million annual operating budget comes principally from private fundraising from neighboring residents and public-spirited corporations and foundations, with the city kicking in only \$5 million each year. And our Herald and Greeley Square parks, on 34th St., run on almost \$1 million of revenues from events, concessions and attractive ad panels placed on the street-side of immaculate public toilets. New York State parks are a vast empire:

325,000 acres, 178 parks and 35 historic sites — with many opportunities to earn revenues steady enough to prevent parks from becoming hostage to future fiscal crises, and also to stave off hiking entrance fees in a way that hurts low-income users. And the visual impact will be minimal. Contrary to the cartoonish portrayal by many who are fearful of “commercialization,” the sponsors of park programs and park events ask little in the way of visible credit.

In Bryant Park, free Wi-Fi Web access was provided to all from 2002 through 2005 by Intel and Google, in return for mention of the sponsors on the Wi-Fi “splash page” and the placement of small porcelain signs in six of the 24 park ivy beds, as well as an Intel ad about the service that ran (to our delight) during the 2003 World Series. For a mid-six figure fee, Microsoft asked only that the Bryant Park Corp. host a free 45-minute concert by Sting in late 2001, with the backdrop of a banner promoting Windows XP.

Both Bryant and Central parks have staged concerts for “Good Morning America,” in return for serious fees that back park operations and free entertainment for fans willing to attend at 8 a.m. And Southwest

Airlines has provided a free lounge in Bryant, open to all, without purchase of food or drink from the nearby kiosk.

Some would argue that Central and Bryant Parks are ideally situated for private financial backing, which might not work in the more rustic state system.

But a look at a map of state parks shows that many are located right near major population centers, jammed on weekends and holidays with the same people that consumer-product companies are trying to reach by other means, but in ways that don’t contribute to the public weal.

Clearly, the New York State park system cannot be asked to close this year’s stated expense gap in this way.

But great earned income programs start small, as did Bryant Park’s in 1993 with a small fee for an event with balloons celebrating the public offering of a German corporation. The state should start small, too, but start right away.

*Biederman, president of the Bryant Park Corp., 34th Street Partnership and Chelsea Improvement Co., also consults to downtown managers, real estate owners and parks departments on park creating and turnarounds.*

**Opportunities  
to generate  
revenue abound —  
if we get creative**