

Source Lunch: Public park, meet private partnership

BID guru Dan Biederman looks for more improvements.

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Bryant Park Corp. President Dan Biederman was just 26 and a recent Harvard Business School graduate when he started his career in 1980. Over the past 33 years, he has expanded his empire of business improvement districts—public-private partnerships that fund upgrades in neighborhood retail strips—to most of midtown Manhattan: the 34th Street Partnership, Chelsea Improvement Co. and the Grand Central Partnership. His latest idea is a plan to create Boulevard 41, a privately funded effort to transform the block of West 41st Street between Broadway and Bryant Park into a leafy green space with bistro tables and chairs.

WHERE THEY DINED

BRYANT PARK GRILL

25 W. 40th St.

On the west side of Bryant Park, next to the New York Public Library headquarters

(212) 840-6500

arkrestaurants.com/bryant_park.html

AMBIENCE: The best seats offer a view of the park and office towers behind it. The crowd is a mix of tourists and businesspeople.

WHAT THEY ATE:

Bryant Park chicken Cobb salad

Pan-roasted salmon filet

TAB: \$52.26, plus tip

Q

In your opinion, what's the advantage of private management of public space?

A

I like to do things without any public money. Our sanitation workers never leave voluntarily, and we know this is the best-paying job they can get. They start a little above the minimum wage, and they go up very quickly. We have guys in Bryant Park who are making close to \$20 an hour, plus benefits and overtime. We don't cap the salaries. That's still lower than what the city would have to pay for equivalent jobs because the [city] pension plans are so expensive. That's the genius of privatization.

Q

Could another borough sustain a privately managed park like Bryant Park?

A

First, you have to be in an area where there's some concentration of real estate and where the commercial [interests] care about the neighborhood. Bryant Park could still be done in another borough, but it would be harder. Here, the Durst Organization [which runs 1 Bryant Park] is the single biggest contributor in terms of money it gives to the park. The Grace Building on Sixth Avenue is the second-biggest contributor. The second thing is you have to have someone doing the day-to-day work that really wants to be private. Governments spend in a way that the private sector wouldn't.

Q

Do you have a favorite Business Improvement District, like a favorite child?

A

My favorite is the 34th Street Partnership.

Q

Has the loss of Fashion Week hurt Bryant Park?

A

It's been great, actually. We insisted they move. We had them for 15 years, but we couldn't run the park the way we wanted to, including the long winter ice season. They also came back in August, and it didn't work with our summer season. We gave up \$3 million in revenue a year when they left, but we made it up from other sources, so it's been good.

Q

What are you doing there instead?

A

We're talking with the French about an event called the Taste of France. It's looking very likely that the event will locate in Bryant Park this year. Last year, we had square dancing for three nights, and it was hugely successful. That will be expanded to seven nights this year. We have 65 programs here a year. That's a lot of programming for a public park.

Q

Do you feel competitive with other parks?

A

Yes. Worldwide, we want to be thought of as better than Luxembourg [in Paris] and the Queen's Park and Hyde Park in London.

Q

Are you concerned about who will be the next mayor?

A

Mayor Bloomberg had very strong commissioners. We're quite worried because all the decisions could be made out of City Hall, and that's not the case now. Reversing the work [city Department of Transportation Commissioner] Janette Sadik-Khan and [former Department of Parks Commissioner] Adrian Benepe did would be very bad. There are people out there still ranting about bike lanes and plazas, and those have been immensely good for the city. I can't see them taking the plazas out, but I'm a little worried it will go back in the other direction.