

Archives

Neighbors' Attitudes Shift as Park Declines

By JOHN KIFNER

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The ramshackle encampment of the homeless in Tompkins Square Park is drawing mounting criticism from residents of the Lower East Side, a community where rioting broke out last year when the police tried to sweep the homeless from the park.

Park and police officials are making plans to remove the tents and makeshift shelters that have given the park the look of a nomad encampment, probably next week. Under a plan worked out with neighborhood officials, a social service office has been opened in the park with city, state and voluntary agencies trying to move some of the homeless people into shelters or detoxification programs.

"We were very surprised by the response," said Miriam Friedlander, the City Council member from the Lower East Side, who helped set up the new center. "We've had about 60 direct referrals. It's been very helpful."

"The results so far have been extraordinarily positive," agreed Jack T. Linn, an assistant parks commissioner who is supervising the Tompkins Square operation. "This is the humane way of addressing the problem." Residents' Increasing Complaints

The park now is a remarkable sight. Ragtag huts and tents, many of them surrounded by garbage or piles of broken grocery carts or other odd possessions, now dot the 10.5-acre park. Smoke drifts from fires set in trash barrels. Clumps of raggedly dressed people mill about. The other day a man who had built a lean-to around the park bench he slept on was grilling and selling kebabs from his perch.

There have been mounting complaints from residents of the blocks surrounding the park that it has become a center of drug abuse, prostitution and crime, and that it has become unusable for the neighborhood. Although the area has a long leftist tradition, almost reflexively anti-authoritarian, it appears that any police action would take place in an atmosphere different from August 1988, when rioting was sparked by a police sweep to roust the homeless from the park.

"The initial sympathy many had for the plight of the homeless was sorely tested by the reality of an occupied park," Parks Commissioner Henry J. Stern said. "We have been getting mail from people, including very liberal, very humane people who help the homeless.

"As the occupiers became emboldened, they began to view themselves as the rightful occupants, and members of the public became intruders," Mr. Stern said.

"The situation was deteriorating, the occupation had been increasing, the shelters were becoming more permanent, park underbrush and shrubbery were being used as firewood. Increasingly, neighborhood people felt intimidated when they tried to use the park." A Desire for Balance

Ms. Friedlander said public opinion "ranges all the way from those who want the park immediately swept clean to those who want the park untouched."

"A lot of people want the park back in balance," she said. "It was getting out of whack. Day-care centers could not go into the park because of the increase in drug trade, drugs were moving in under cover of the homeless. We want to make the park a full community park."

Both Mr. Stern and Ms. Friedlander emphasized that, in deference to community sentiment, even after the planned sweep, Tompkins Square would continue to be the only park in the city without a curfew.

"This community voted not to have a curfew," Ms. Friedlander said. "The homeless will still come and sleep in the park. But they will not be taking over the entire park."

"There will be no curfew, but no structures," Mr. Stern said. "We'll see how that works. If the structures reappear, and it's a constant struggle, we'll have to see."

One indication of the changing attitude on the Lower East Side is the formation of an organization called the Tompkins Square Neighborhood Coalition to press for the removal of the tents and to fight what it sees as intimidation by a group of self-styled anarchists who support the tent city. 'Park Has Become Hostage'

One of the leaders of the new group, Sam Turvey, said there was "increasing concern that the park be put on some kind of even footing, as a place that is usable to people.

"Before the August '88 riot, there were approximately 20 to 30 homeless people living in the park," Mr. Turvey said. "While nobody likes that, it's a citywide problem, and nobody was too upset. But since the riot, the park has become hostage to a purported activist homeless group. The entire park has been taken over. Sanitary conditions are deplorable; in some areas there's obvious drug use. It's a quantum leap. People in the neighborhood think this is too much."

Mr. Turvey and a number of other neighborhood residents said the anarchist group had disrupted public meetings by throwing cat feces and other objects, smoking marijuana, shouting abuse and, among other things, appearing with tires emblazoned with the names of local officials whom they said should be "necklaced," like those accused of Government collaboration in South Africa. The last Community Board meeting was held under tight police guard.

The pastors of four churches bordering the park who minister to the homeless, however, have objected to the city's plan to remove the tents. They have urged that the shelters not be removed until the city opens at least 10 abandoned city-owned buildings in the neighborhood and helps rehabilitate them for the homeless.

Clannish Groups of People

"They are there because of the crisis in housing," said the Rev. George Kuhn of St. Bridget's Roman Catholic Church. "There is a certain amount of truth that the park is not a park for all the people. There is a problem in that it's not a pretty scene. But it's connected with the crisis the city is in, the crisis of housing, of drugs. Because we have no housing, there is a park that is not pretty."

In the park the other day, the macadam paths were spotted with frozen puddles. The homeless people were huddled in clannish groups in little clumps in various parts of the park, one group of about 15 lay wrapped in blankets near the bandshell at the southern end of the park.

A man who gave his name as Tony and seemed to be a leader of the group said they all hated the city-run shelters because "its like living in a rat hole, a dog den."

"We may be homeless, but we are not helpless," he said. "We cannot live in filth."

The population of the park has fallen in recent days, in part because of the cold and the threat of eviction. Some longtime residents have departed because they do not get along with the newcomers. The police recently cleared the southeastern corner because it became a center of drug dealing and use. Mr. Linn, the parks official, said the census taken early each morning showed 136 people living there on Nov. 20, the day the outreach center opened, and 80 last Friday.

But Robert M. Hayes of the Coalition for the Homeless warned that "outreach is little help when there is nowhere to bring people after you've reached out."

"The need is for alternative housing," he said. "This is not a solution. All it does is move the battleground from this park to that subway station to that public plaza."

Some Demographics and Religions

According to 2000 census figures provided by the New York City Department of City Planning, which includes the Lower East Side in its calculation, the neighborhood was 35% Asian, 28% non-Hispanic white, 27% Hispanic and 7% black.

On October 9, 1966, A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, founder of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, held the first recorded outdoor chanting session of the Hare Krishna mantra outside of the Indian subcontinent at

Tompkins Square Park. This is considered the founding of the Hare Krishna religion in the United States, and the large tree close to the center of the Park is demarcated as a special religious site for Krishna adherents. The late poet Allen Ginsberg, who lived and died in the East Village, attended the ceremony.

There are several Roman Catholic churches in the East Village which have fallen victim to financial hardship particularly in the past decade. Unable to maintain their properties, the Roman Catholic Church has shuttered many of them - including St. Mary's Help of Christians on East 12th Street, as well as St. Ann's. There has recently been much controversy over St. Brigid's, the historical parish on Tompkins Square Park.

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