



BE OUR GUEST: DAVID BENKE & MARIANO CISCO, Pastors

Adopting park could end feud, save it for all

One of the best innovations of recent decades has been the adoption of New York City's parks by wealthy and civic-minded individuals. Central Park, Prospect Park, and other public spaces have benefited from the commitment and resources demonstrated by Richard Gilder and others.

Unfortunately, several important parks in the outer boroughs remain orphans. Highland Park is one of them. This vast open space, spilling over the ridge that straddles the Jackie Robinson Parkway, was once the escape route for the Continental Army as it fled a disastrous battle in central Queens and headed for Brooklyn Heights to fight another day. The late literary critic Alfred Kazin wrote beautifully about the view of Manhattan from the ridge - a delight for a poor boy from Brownsville dreaming of things.

Today, while the park is still heavily used, it is underfunded, poorly maintained, and now mired in a needless controversy pitting those of us who minister and live in the surrounding communities against outside environmentalists such as Robert F. Kennedy Jr., who have the right intentions but the wrong facts. Our interest is in improving the park for recreational uses by hardworking residents. The environmen-

talists wish to preserve the reservoir area as a natural refuge for wildlife.

We believe that this controversy is unnecessary, and that the interests of local residents, who need the park every bit as much as the Continental Army and Alfred Kazin did, and the interests of genuine environmentalists can be resolved.

First and foremost, the park desperately needs upgrading. As pastors in neighborhoods adjacent to the park, and leaders in **East Brooklyn Congregations**, we know how important this park is to people in our working-class communities. Our parishioners and others crowd into the park's fields, courts, picnic facilities and other areas, largely because there is so little open space in this part of Brooklyn. In addition to improving existing facilities and grounds, new fields and picnic space should be added. A plan put forward by the New York City Parks Department addresses

these issues. The only problem with it is that, in this time of budget contraction, it will take many years to implement. And we worry that the rate of deterioration in the park will be faster than the pace of improvement. If this occurs, everyone - people, children, birds, and other wildlife - will lose.

Most importantly, some of New York's

financial leaders should step up and do for Highland Park what Gilder did for Central Park - create a fund to underwrite its improvement and long-term maintenance. We are eager to work with public officials and environmentally-minded citizens toward the creation of such a fund. This effort would balance the need for repairs, plan a responsible expansion of facilities and fields, and preserve the environment in and around the reservoir. :

If community leaders, constructive private citizens, the Parks Department and other public officials come together now, we believe that Highland Park can take its rightful place among the crown jewels of New York's park system. The children of our community can play soccer and run across its hills. Devoted birdwatchers can enjoy the peace of the reservoir. Tired parents could stretch out on a picnic blanket and nap in the afternoon. And the next generation of young dreamers can find a spot along the ridge and watch the lights of Manhattan beckon.

Bishop David Benke is the pastor of St. Peter's Lutheran Church in East New York, and the Bishop of the Atlantic District Missouri Synod Lutheran Church. The Rev. Mariano Cisco is the pastor of St. Joseph Patron Roman Catholic Church in Bushwick. Both are leaders in East Brooklyn Congregations.

'Financial leaders must step up for' — Highland Park.'