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Owen Dolen reconstruction bids out

by Patrick Rocchio

Plans for the reconstruction of Owen Dolen Park are closer to being realized.

Bids have now been put out for the project, which is a major part of Westchester Square reconstruction and will add a plaza, paths, amphitheater seating, and other enhancements to the park.

The Parks Department has confirmed that a Request for Proposals for the construction job, which may be underway as early as November, was put out for competitive bidding on Tuesday, September 7. The proposals are due from eligible contractors by Thursday, October 7. As part of the project, the park's landscape will be reconstructed to accommodate outdoor organized events and programming by the community.

John Bonizio, of Metro Optics, one of the leaders of an effort to establish a Business Improvement District in the Square, said he was happy to see that work may soon begin on the park. Bonizio originally felt that progress on plans for the park had been dragging, but he now expects construction to begin before winter, or at the latest in the early spring.

He also said that Owen Dolen Park is a major component in a holistic effort to improve the business, residential, and cultural climate in the Square.

"The design commission has approved all of the plans," Bonizio said. "Owen Dolen's revitalization will allow us to have more cultural events." He said that it would be especially useful when Bronx Council on The Arts, which already provides programming in the Square, relocates its headquarters.

The complete renovation and reconstruction of the park was made possible through a \$5 million grant from Councilman Jimmy Vacca that has been allocated over a two year period. Borough President Ruben Diaz Jr.'s office allocated some additional funding.

Community Board 10 district manager Kenneth Kearns said that a triangle-shaped structure presently in the rear of the Owen Dolen Recreation Center, which obscures part of the roof, will be taken down, improving safety in the park.

"We are very happy with the Parks Department's decision to have that triangular piece of concrete removed to accommodate the construction of artist performance space," Kearns said. "We believe that the reconstruction is pivotal to bringing the park back to the community and turning it into a viable community resource."

Sandi Lusk, of the Westchester Square Zerega Improvement Organization, said she was glad that a coalition of city officials, merchants, and civic-minded individuals were all able to contribute to the Parks Department's design. She praised the designers for listening to the community's input.

"They were very patient with us, and this really was a very nice group effort," Lusk said. "There will be a plaza out in front of the park for street fairs, concerts, and performances where the walkway behind the train station is located. It really is a forward-looking, cutting-edge design. In addition, it will be locked at night, which is a good thing."

When the Request For Proposal is awarded, the winning bidder has approximately 18 months to complete the project, Parks spokeswoman Jesslyn Tiao-Moser said. ■