

May 13, 2007

POSTING

Improving Gateway National Park by Design

By **C. J. HUGHES**

GATEWAY NATIONAL RECREATION AREA, a 26,607-acre national park along the Atlantic coast that strings together a dozen separate and diverse parcels from [New Jersey](#) to the [Nassau County](#) border, allows visitors a wide variety of activities, some atypical for a protected area.

People can fish from piers, ride motorcycles on former runways, tend vegetable gardens, fly remote-controlled planes, shoot arrows and explore the remains of Forts Wadsworth, Hancock and Tilden.

Or, as Walter Meyer does in his 20-foot sailboat, they can nose around the park's contours in the waters of Jamaica Bay. It was from this vantage point that Mr. Meyer, a landscape architect, found himself concerned about the wide latitude accorded to park visitors, and the future that portended for the land. Gateway was found to be in the worst condition of any national park, according to a study released last week by the National Parks Conservation Association, an advocacy group.

But it turned out there was something Mr. Meyer could do to try to improve matters. Along with more than 200 other architects, urban planners and students, he recently entered a design competition seeking ways to improve and protect the 1,358-acre chunk of Gateway known as Floyd Bennett Field.

In terms of the challenges it faces, Floyd Bennett, a former airfield, is a microcosm of Gateway, according to organizers, so designs entered in the competition could also offer long-term ideas for a national park at a crossroads.

The winner of the contest — called “Envisioning Gateway” by its sponsor, the Van Alen Institute, a design research organization — will be announced in June, said Jamie Hand, the institute's program director. In addition to taking home \$15,000, Ms. Hand explained, the honoree may well see his or her design plans for the field implemented by the [National Park Service](#) in coming years.

A recent tour of the grounds by the contestants offered some surprises.

“I love that there are Nike missiles just lying around out here,” said Mr. Meyer, gesturing at a cold war relic propped against a hangar by a canoe launch. (Park rangers say the weapon is harmless.)

Over a stand of Japanese white pines, the [Manhattan](#) skyline could be seen, shimmering like a mirage. Later, the group made its way into a clearing and found a family cooking chicken over a campfire.

“You arrive from Manhattan in a place that's so flat and open,” said Jonathan Silverman, another contestant. “It's a real relief.”

In 2009, the National Park Service is to draft a master plan for Gateway, the first since its creation in 1972.

The White House also pledged to raise Gateway's operating budget, which was \$22 million last year, by \$3.4 million, a historically large increase, said Brian Feeney, a National Park Service spokesman.

Over all, a revitalized Gateway could also raise awareness of the importance of parks in urban life, "the way Central Park did a century and half ago," said Adi Shamir, Van Alen's executive director.

At Floyd Bennett, park officials are already addressing one problem themselves. In the next few months, to make paved areas safer for pedestrians, motorized vehicles will be banned from Runway 6/24 North, although Runways 6/24 South and 15/33 and Taxiway 6 will still allow motorcycles and cars, said John Daskalakis, a district park ranger.

Workers will also add a second entrance to the field, he added.

For the future, there is also talk of easing out [New York City's](#) Police and Sanitation Departments, which lease large driver-training facilities within Floyd Bennett, though their leases will not expire for more than a decade, said Peter McCarthy, an assistant park superintendent.

Dealing with pressures from outside its borders should be Floyd Bennett's next priority, say environmentalists, who worry that waves from motorboats on Jamaica Bay are chipping away at fragile wetland edges.

Eroded buffer zones endanger [Brooklyn](#) and [Queens](#) in the event of direct hits from powerful storms, said Alexander Brash, a regional director for the National Parks Conservation Association. His group, which works to strengthen environmental protections for parks, is a co-sponsor of the Floyd Bennett competition.

"The more you absorb in salt marshes," Mr. Brash said, "the less of a chance that water will end up in a basement on Coney Island Avenue."

Still, he does not oppose the building boom in nearby East New York, where homes are rising from once-vacant lots. When people live near parkland, they tend to take better care of it, he said. "There's less abuse and fewer automobiles dumped," he said, pointing out that parks can increase property values.

Until now, however, Gateway's existence seems to have been a fairly well-kept secret. Of 1,193 people surveyed by Zogby International in a December poll commissioned for the National Parks Conservation Association, 47 percent didn't know the metropolitan area even had a national park.

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