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The lonely end of the city

by amy zimmer / metro new york

MAR 8, 2007

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GATEWAY NATIONAL RECREATION AREA. Despite yesterday's snow, prickly pear cacti peeked out of the ground at the wildlife refuge along Jamaica Bay. Flocks of Brent geese and some cardinals were there, too, flying past derelict buildings near Fort Tilden and Floyd Bennett Field. A Bensonhurst duo in a Mercedes practiced "drifting," speeding down the old runways.

"The reality is people don't know about Gateway," said Alexander Brash, Northeast regional director of the National Parks Conservation Association. "The parks service hasn't advertised it. As one can see from the abandoned buildings and lack of investment, it's not an attractive place, though it could and should be."

His advocacy group teamed up with the Van Alen Institute, an architecture think tank, and Columbia University to host an international public design competition to create a new vision for the park.

When Congress established Gateway — which is comprised of 26,000 acres stretching from the outer reaches of Queens and Brooklyn to part of Staten Island and Sandy Hook, N.J. — in 1972, it authorized \$92 million to rebuild the park. "But that money was never appropriated," Brash said. "The initial vision was never carried forth."

Brash hopes with the service's centennial on the horizon in 2016, more attention will be paid to Gateway.

"It has not captured political will and was never integrated with other national parks or with the city's transportation network," Brash said.

The competition aims to create a master plan to unify Jamaica Bay, Sandy Hook and Staten Island and a new park for Floyd Bennett Field. At 1,358 acres, Floyd Bennett Field dwarfs Central Park's 843 acres.

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The lonely end of the city

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“How cool would it be for New York City families to camp out a few days by the sea?” Brash said. “How many Americans travel around in a Winnebago? How about some of them coming here and then they get to visit the bright lights of Broadway?”

The competition, which is funded by a \$500,000 grant from the Tiffany & Co. Foundation, is expected to select winners by June. Then comes public discussion about a site plan and finding funding to develop the park.



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