

Bronx field now city's \$14M blunder land

By RICH CALDER, *Posted: 2:31 AM, January 19, 2010*

A city plan to rebuild one of The Bronx's biggest sports fields has morphed into a money pit for taxpayers.

Workers renovating Harris Field in Bedford Park recently uncovered contaminated soil under the playing surfaces, helping push the anticipated cost to nearly \$14 million, city officials told The Post.

The price tag for the renovation had already gone from the \$6.6 million announced in 2007 to \$8.7 million, records show.

Now the Parks Department is confirming that it has to add another \$5.2 million for cleanup because of the high levels of lead unearthed while workers were preparing to install drainage-system tanks needed to restore the popular park's six playing fields.

Harris Field used to be part of a reservoir before the city acquired the 15-acre site in 1917.

Department spokeswoman Vickie Karp said it is believed that the park was created with "the use of incinerator ash as fill, which would explain the presence of lead."

The original playing fields at the park were grass, but the city plans to cover two with synthetic turf.

A Parks Department official wishing to remain anonymous said that contamination wouldn't be an issue if all the fields were going to be grass but that replacing two with turf requires digging deeper to install the drainage tanks. Karp says this is untrue.

A fiscal 2008 mayoral report showed the Parks Department topped city agencies in cost overruns with projects costing an average of 50 percent more than the original contract price. The city average was 17 percent.

Harris Field is in line to rise by more than 110 percent.

"The project shows just how poorly the city does its due diligence on parks projects," said Geoffrey Croft, of the nonprofit group New York City Park Advocates, when told of the costs.

The project's long delays are crippling a popular Little League that plays there.

"The Parks Department only cares about construction, not children," said Don Bluestone, executive director of the Mosholu Montefiore Community Center.

Bluestone said the nonprofit group's youth baseball league has gone from 1,000 players to 500 since construction began. He ripped the department for closing the entire park and relocating the league miles away to parks filled with drug dealers and plagued by flooding.

The city's Web site says construction will be complete by the spring, but Bluestone was preparing to have his league play elsewhere this season.

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