**Community Board 17**

**Parks & Beautification Committee Meeting**

**Tuesday, February 1, 2022**

**Present: Guests:**

Jorge Tait Sarah Balistreri,

Adele Bennett Trees New York

Audrey Henderson Nelson Villarrubia,

Ricky Da Costa Executive Director, Trees New York

Linda Turner Jean Remarque

Jacqueline Williams

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The **Parks & Beautification Committee Virtual** meeting was held on **Tuesday, February 1, 2022 at 7:30pm.**

**Mr. Jorge Tait** called the meeting to order at 7:53pm.

**Roll Call-** Jorge Tait, Linda Turner, Audrey Henderson, Adele Bennett, Ricky Da Costa

**Guests**-Nelson Villarrubia, Executive Director, Trees New York and Sarah Balistreri, Trees New York

**Mr. Nelson Villarrubia** said he appreciates them taking the time to learn what they do and partner with them to improve their urban environment in the community and their urban forest. Their goal is for the members to be familiar with the work they are doing throughout NYC and see if there is overlap and better answer constituent questions about trees and they have a lot of opportunities to bring their programs where they know there is community support. Everything they do is community based and if they are in their district, they are partnering with a school, the library, the Community Board, residents and local community members. All aspects of their programs are done on a community-based approach and they always partner with a local community member to do that.

Trees New York was founded over 45 years ago, in 1976 when NYC was a very different and there was not a lot of money geared towards parks, open spaces and street trees, a group of activists came together and formed their organization to better leverage the City’s limited budget in planting trees. Trees New York created an incentive program, which was the Citizen Pruner Course and if a block, residents or a community group came together and took the Citizen Pruner Course, the Parks Dept. prioritized that area for tree planting. It is a 12-hour course, 8 hours in the classroom, now via Zoom and 4 hours are in the field. Anyone signing up for the course will learn tree biology, street tree identification, common problems and solutions, to caring for their street trees, tree stewardship and pruning. They do 4 hours in the field where they get to practice pruning under the guidance of a Trees New York instructor, and they remove dead and damaged limbs. After they take the course, they get licensed to do this work and they can only prune street trees, if they are a licensed Citizen Pruner. One thing they try to do is mobilize citizen pruners in the area to connect them with other citizen pruners so they can team up and get the work done. If they have questions or a constituent that needs a tree pruned and it is in the scope of their work, they can email citizen pruners that live in the Community Board and see if they are able to help the tree. This is their only fee for service program, and it is $100.00. Every now and then, they have scholarships for the program that reduce the course fee to $15.00 and this program is done twice a year, in the Fall and Spring. They have different tools that they use for smaller trees and for larger trees, they refer them to the Parks Dept.

**Ms. Linda Turner** asked if they could trim the trees in the parks and around the perimeter of the park, within certain guidelines?

**Mr. Villarrubia** said once they take the course and get licensed, they can prune a street tree, but they have no jurisdiction over the trees in the parks. It helps to have a lot of citizen pruners in the area. This is one of the things they like to talk about with Community Boards because they might have ideas of hosting a class. As restrictions lift, they can do more classes and bring it to this district. In addition to pruning, newly planted trees need a lot of care, because it is really hard for them to survive in NYC. Trees deal with drought like conditions from lack of rain in the Summer, compacted soil, where the soil get so hard, it is like cement and the rainwater cannot penetrate the soil to get down to the roots. Litter and weeds can prevent water and nutrients from going down in the soil as well.

They mobilize volunteers, both youth and adults, to care for trees and they focus on younger trees. The majority of environmental benefits come from large mature trees and their goal is to make sure the young trees survive, so they are mobilizing volunteers to do this stewardship. Removing the litter and weeds, cultivating the soil and mulching and from the months of May through October, they receive a hydrant permit to water the newly planted trees with the NYC Parks Dept. and DEP. These are things they can do in partnership with the Community Boards. In the Fall, they planted 200 tulips and daffodil bulbs in the tree beds as well.

Tonight, they want to build social cohesion and community engagement while also caring for the trees. If they see a young tree that needs help, they can reach out to the Trees New York office and they can see if there is a citizen pruner that lives nearby that can do it.

The tree bed stewardship is an easy way to make sure the newly planted trees in their Community Board survive. They can organize events and they try to do things with a community-based approach and sometimes, there are corporate groups that are interested in volunteering. If they have areas in the Community Board that need tending to, they can let them know and when they get volunteers that are interested, they can bring them to their neighborhood.

**Mr. Ricky Da Costa** asked do they have any particular streets or neighborhoods that they are assigned to in the next couple of months that they could be aware of?

**Mr. Villarrubio** said no, they don’t, and that is the reason they are talking to Community Boards. They are expanding their geographic areas for other projects and they may get a grant that says they have to do trees in Northern Brooklyn or Harlem. They projects they are working on right now don’t have geographic boundaries, so they want to work in areas where they are supported the community and work in areas that need it and they are looking for sites that are little site specific, where there is a lot of new trees clustered together or areas that have a lot of empty tree beds for tree plantings. They are looking for areas and are open to suggestions and then they would send their Arborist out to look at the area to see if it is a match for the project they are doing.

**Mr. Da Costa** asked what kind of trees are those that have the acorns on them and when they drop and are stepped, they stink?

**Mr. Villarrubio** said he thinks those are Gingko trees. They usually just plant the male trees and it is the female trees that produces the fruit. With the nursery stock, one can slip through and get planted.

**Mr. Tait** said there are a lot of those trees in East Flatbush

**Ms. Sarah Balistreri** said the reason the Parks Dept. keeps planting them is they are great street trees for a number of other reasons. They are very resistant to issues in the City like drought and pollution. They are very hearty and have been around for a long time.

**Mr. Da Costa** said 3 years ago new trees were planted on his block, he asked can they advocate to get better looking trees or once they are planted, they are not going to plant anything else?

**Mr. Villarrubio** said they can make suggestions to the Parks Dept. Once a tree is planted, there are things that can be done through pruning and stewardships. There are trees called suckers, with straggly branches and sometimes pruning those can improve their appearance. He suggested emailing him and he will look at the block and see if things can be improved in the maintenance that would give them a better astatic.

In addition to the stewardship and the pruning, they have a tree planting programs they are working on right now. They have the Community Tree Planting where they cut trees with volunteers, usually with a school or a community garden where they plant smaller trees. If they pass by a school and there are a few feet of greenspace in the front and a lot of times, they can plant small ornamental trees. A lot trees have courtyards or community gardens in the back. They also do on private property, public facing spaces and there may be a Church with a nice courtyard that faces the street that may want to plant a tree, they will work with those institutions as well, as long as the space is public facing, where the greater community can benefit from the tree.

They also do street tree plantings and it has its challenges. They have a large tree planting program in the Bronx. They get funded through grants to plant street trees. They are looking for spaces that have large rectangular pits or are in front of a school or playground. If they know of spaces like that, reach out to him and he will take a look at it to see if there is a fit. They also plant trees on NYCHA properties.

**Ms. Turner** said on East 48th & 49th Streets, there are 2 vacant tree bids on the perimeter of Tilden Park. Would they be able to plant trees there and would they have the option of picking the type of tree they would like to see planted there?

**Mr. Villabburio** said they can make the suggestions on where there are good opportunities for trees around playgrounds and parks, and that is definitely what they are looking to do. There may be a reason why they cannot plant a tree there because of a construction plan there or problems with the tree pit or various reasons, but if everything lines up and the opportunity is there, they could plant a tree and file a permit with the Parks Dept. and it is approved, they would give them a list of trees that are approved for the site. Sometimes, they are only given one suggestion, sometimes they get two or three, and they pick based on what they think would work best. That is something they can talk to them about, what kind of tree the community would like to see there and there are limitations, they cannot just pick any species they want and they need to work within the framework of the Parks Dept.

**Mr. Tait** asked for tree plantings, does it require that the tree bed be there already?

**Mr. Villaburrio** said their priority is to fill empty tree beds rather than open new tree beds. Tree beds can be considered a blighted when they are empty, so that is their priority to plant them there.

Their priority is to plant large shade trees, but they do plant ornamental flowering trees and evergreens. If they work with a community garden, they can plant fruit trees, in schools as well and most want apple trees to incorporate into their curriculum. They have done a lot of mini apple orchids throughout the City and they provide lessons with the community on long-and short-term care.

There is a space on their site for schools if they are interested in doing tree planting and to request a street tree and is called the Carol Kelley Tree Fund and they can send them more information on that. They do work with in-school and out of school groups.

**Ms. Balistreri** said there are a lot of different ways that programming can be designed to complement whatever that school and the school community prefers, but she has done programs during the winter time, when it is not so easy to work in tree beds. She or another educator from Trees New York can do an in-class session that focuses on the benefits of street trees in the urban forest and how they combat the urban heat island effect, mitigate the storm water runoff and potential flooding with the larger storms they are having these days and just bringing students into that understanding and bridging from that into why it is so important that they get involved in maintaining the health of their urban forests and that can bridge into a more hands-on activity like planting flowers and bulbs. They can also do some tree identification. There are lots of possibilities and it can be catered to the different age groups of students.

**Mr. Villarrubio** said they are recruiting schools to work for the Spring season now and if they know of any schools in the Community Board that are interested in participating, send him an email and they can start that conversation to see if it is a fit with their program.

They are looking for empty tree beds in the Community Boards that are rectangle and more than one. As they are walking around or know of a site like this and these are areas where they can implement a project. Sometimes they get tree donations from corporate groups and the hardest part is finding empty tree beds or an area to do this. If they see empty tree beds, let them know and as they get donations or grant contracts, they can work on filling them.

Another core program they have is the Young Urban Forester Internship and every year, depending on how much money they receive, and during the summer, they give 8 to 30 high school students their first summer job in urban forestry with a paid stipend of $165.00 a week. The internship is for 7 weeks and they work 25 hours per week. 90 of the 175 hours is doing tree stewardship work, where they are actively caring for trees in the neighborhood, watering, mulching, removing litter and weeds and the rest of the time, they are learning about what is urban forestry as a career path or a field of study, meeting working professionals and exploring New York’s unique open spaces and going to the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, Governor’s Island and while they are doing these field trips, they are learning about composting, storm water management and green roof designs. This is one of his favorite programs, because the students grow so much over the 7-week period. They recruit great students and it is very much in demand and they always get more applicants than they can fill. When the program starts, a flyer is sent to the Community Boards to circulate for students to apply. They would like to work with students from Brooklyn and recruitment starts in June.

If they want to see a program like this in their community, that is a possibility, but basically, what they look for is classroom space, a space to hunker down, because even though they spend the majority of time outdoors, the students need to go into a classroom space to take attendance in the beginning of the day. One of the challenges for them is locking down space to do these projects. If they know of something that is perfect for this, let them know and they can bring it to their neighborhood and hire young adults from the neighborhood.

**Mr. Tait** asked is there an age limitation to participate?

**Mr. Villarrubio** said they need to be a rising senior, completing their junior year, and they hire students between 16 and 17 years old.

There is a new coalition that started with over 50 non-profits and Trees New York is a member and is called the Forest for All NYC Coalition. There are a lot of great things happening because they are collaborating and working together and their goal is to build a road map to protect, maintain, expand and promote NYC’s urban forest. They are also talking about tree equity to make sure trees are planted in all neighborhoods, not just in neighborhoods that the Parks Dept. is used to working in. Even though NYC has done really well with tree equity, but it is a mission for them as well. They are looking to replicate their programs and build a coalition of people that are interested. They are also looking to rally their elected officials to create strong policies to protect the trees and plant more trees and write that into the budget and protect their open spaces.

If they are on social media, follow Trees New York and Forest for All to learn about it and see where there is overlap in opportunity for this Community Board as well.

He thanked them for taking the time to learn about the work they do, and they would like to be a partner in their community working along side them and answering any tree related questions and concerns their constituents may have.

**Mr. Tait** asked if they would attend the General Board meeting to make a presentation?

**Mr. Villarrubio** said I he can find out about it and how it works, they can email him and if they have the availability, they can do it.

**Mr. Tait** said he will present it at the Executive meeting and get back to him to see if they are available.

He thanked them for their presentation, it was very educational.

The minutes will be tabled because they do not have a quorum.

**Chairperson’s Report**

**Mr. Tait** said they did a walk-thru at Tilden Playground and they identified a couple of things that they will be repairing. It will not be a renovation, because they cannot do that. They will be repairing the basketball court that has some cracks in the area that they will be filling up them up temporarily and then they can get help from the elected officials to renovate the area.

There were also some renovations done at Paerdegat Park. There were some broken benches and tables that were repaired. If anyone knows of other situations in other parks that need repairs, let him know or report it to the Community Board, so they can request the repairs.

Some of the Council members donated $6,500.00 to Community Board 17 to be used for projects within the Community Board. He put in a request for $1,200.00 because they planned to do some clean ups and hopefully, some tree plantings around the parks. It might be used for tee shirts.

He was wondering, if possible, to use it to subsidize for anyone who wanted to participate in this class, and they can use part of it towards the $100.00 fee payment, but he will have to find out. If they agree that if they could use it for this purpose, it would be helpful for them going to these classes. Is it okay to bring this up to the Executive committee to use part of the money for the training?

The members agreed with this request.

He received an email from Jim Morris from the Parks Dept. with the estimate for the renovations of Tilden Park. There were 3 different places and one was the basketball court, which they are going to have to come together with the elected officials to see if they could get a grant from them to make the repairs. Mr. Da Costa mentioned that he has connections with the Brooklyn Nets, and they would be willing to help and he will speak to him about that. If they are willing to help with the basketball court, that would be a great help.

**Ms. Turner** said she spoke to someone that said, they would come into an area like this to do the whole basketball court at their own expense.

**Mr. Tait** said if she knows someone, that would be great too.

**Ms. Turner** said she thought that when they did the walk-thru, they specified that since the Parks Dept. does not have the money, they were going to limit their initial endeavors to the basketball court, getting lighting in the park, because it is dark at night and get the asphalt area redone, not just patched. They need to reach out to the Borough President and their Council member, and she would be willing to help with her capital funding and the Borough President could use his funding to fix the asphalt. There are other things that need to be fixed like the water fountain. If they specify 3 things that are important, they can expand later on and go back for the other things.

**Ms. Jacqueline Williams** said when they did the walk thru of the park, they also looked at the swings, the sliding boards and there is a lot of peeling paint, and the mat in that area needs to be repaired and that is from a safety standpoint also and this should be considered.

**Mr. Tait** said the email from Jim Morris does not limit them to these things, it is just a ballpark figure of what it would cost to do these things.

**Ms. Turner** said he lumped everything together and he needs to give them separate estimates and when they go to the Council member to say they need lighting in the park, she would know how much of her capital funding she would have to give to help them out and the same thing with the Borough President, they could ask him for funding to replace the asphalt under the playground area.

**Mr. Tait** said if they could ask each elected officials for something to cover the costs, and what they cannot cover, he will put in a request through Community Board 17’s capital budget and they can request for capital expenses to repair Tilden Park.

He will send Mr. Morris a request to send an estimate for the lighting, asphalt, the equipment and the new water fountains.

**Ms. Turner** said he mentioned everything that was brought up at the meeting and it is all important, but, they have to prioritize and take small bits at a time because they will not be the only ones going to the elected officials asking for money. If they can get the Borough President to give them the money for the asphalt area and the safety mat in the playground area, that would take care of that and reach out to Councilmember Louis for the security lighting. These are safety issues and they can get the water fountains replaced later.

**Mr. Tait** said the next meeting will be March 1, 2022. He asked for a motion to adjourn the meeting.

**Ms. Bennett** made a motion to adjourn the meeting.

**Ms. Turner** seconded the motion.