



February 21, 2024

Mayor Torrance Harvey  
City Manager Todd Venning  
City of Newburgh  
Newburgh, NY

Sent via email:

Re: The Future of Downing Park

Dear Messrs. Harvey and Venning:

We are pleased we could meet with you after our recent visit to Downing Park. We look forward to holding our national conference in Newburgh and Poughkeepsie and exploring opportunities for neighborhood revitalization and park preservation.

Since our meeting, we have learned that the Council will review the current plans for the African American Burial Ground on February 22. In furtherance of that review, we wanted to provide some thoughts.

We wholeheartedly support the city's desire to honor the dead and showcase Newburgh's history in Downing Park. As we discussed, **informed and increased attention to historic Downing Park can contribute to a city-wide renaissance.** However, we believe the current proposed siting of the Memorial will do serious damage to the integrity of this great park. The addition of the memorial hardscape –and cemetery – will destroy vistas, eat up green space, and pose maintenance challenges.

As we discussed briefly, the original Olmsted/Vaux plans included an Observatory building – **on the highest spot** – to honor Andrew Jackson Downing and his brother, for whom the park is named. This structure was designed to honor the dead and we believe using this exact location offers a desirable spot for a new Memorial in keeping with the Olmsted design. Placing the remains at this location can provide a real incentive to recreate (or reimagine) this historic structure where interpretation could be easily provided.

Locating the Memorial at this site will leave park land open, with vistas to the Hudson unobstructed. It will also result in a structure that has a relationship to the original design. Downing Park is a small park and, to retain its beauty and restorative qualities, no new hardscape should be added.

Remains can be commemorated within the reimagined pavilion. Respectful DNA testing could in turn identify and connect the remains with possible descendants. This could help expand the story, remove the dead from the confines of the anonymous and bring more understanding to the distressing prejudice and oppression that allowed them to be forgotten.

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The Pergola could also offer an alternative location. While it is not original to the park, in better days it marked a beloved overlook to the Hudson. Placing the Memorial there could achieve two goals – the restoration of an unsightly structure and less intrusion in the landscape.

Investigating these options is urgent since **this is a park of national significance whose design integrity is important.** It is the last great park of Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, the famed designers of Central Park, Prospect Park and the Chicago Park System. While only 34 acres, it incorporates sculpted topography, landscaped greenery, stately trees, incredible vistas, expansive meadows and a large pond for recreation and reflection, much like Central Park which is the third most visited landmark in New York City.

Sad to say, Downing Park has already suffered from visual and physical intrusion. Construction of the South Street arterial caused a major loss of park space and a peace pole and private memorial are now prominently placed on the hill.

To minimize further loss of parkland and be respectful of Olmsted’s design, the future Memorial should employ existing footprints. We are confident that this approach would attract national support and funding – and we would assist in that endeavor. There is already great precedent. In Rochester, a city with rich Olmsted assets, the community committed to rebuilding Olmsted’s Children’s Pavilion at the highest point in Highland Park. Much like Newburgh’s Observatory, the Pavilion was razed in the 1960s because it had been allowed to decline. The state, the county and the private donor community have supported this preservation project, contributing millions of dollars. [The restored structure](#) is expected to open in 2025.

We seek to partner with you to achieve your inspiring goals. Despite the significance of this park and project, there has been little to no opportunity for public participation. We urge you to welcome promised public feedback before any decision is made. Indeed, we would be delighted to use our conference as a venue for broader community discussion and feedback. That dialogue can help to ensure that any future Memorial respects the dead as well as Newburgh’s historic Olmsted park.

Sincerely,



Anne Neal Petri  
President and CEO

Cc: Members of the City Council

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