

February 21, 2002

Michael R. Bloomberg, Mayor  
City of New York  
City Hall  
New York, NY 10007  
via telecopier (212) 788-9711

Dear Mayor Bloomberg:

Through the course of your career you seem always to have had a strong interest in philanthropy. Your charitable works, at Johns Hopkins University and elsewhere, have been impressive, and you even endowed a chair in philanthropy at Harvard University.

Now you have become mayor of New York, which is a world capital of philanthropic giving and endeavor. From the legacies of Henry Ford and John D. Rockefeller to the outpouring of generosity that followed the tragedy of September 11, this city has embodied in exceptional degree the tradition of giving to meet individual and social needs.

Given this record, we were surprised and disappointed by the crass and cynical note in your proposal for corporate donations to help this city's parks. You did not speak to civic pride and the spirit of philanthropy, but rather to corporate tendencies to self-promotion and the craving for attention and reward.

According to *The New York Times*, your administration plans to help close a \$5 billion budget deficit by selling the naming rights to portions of the city's parks. City Parks Commissioner Adrian Benepe says that you even are considering whether to sell the naming rights of entire parks. There is nothing inherently wrong with corporate support; nor with recognition of a suitable kind. But to rename the parks for corporations would be literally to sell the city -- its heart and soul -- for money.

It also would violate the spirit and purpose of the parks, which is to provide a refuge from the commotion, stress and incessant huckstering that plague our lives. In their preliminary plan for Prospect Park, Frederick Law Olmsted and his colleague

Calvert Vaux wrote that the aim of urban parks was to provide "the feeling of relief experienced by those entering [the park], on escaping the cramped, confined and controlling circumstances of the streets of the town."

The parks provide an escape from the aggressive commercial culture in its many manifestations. To sell the names of the parks to corporations would subsume them to that very culture. It would erode the city's civic spirit, that special feeling of being a New Yorker that is hard to define and would be even harder to replace. That spirit is tied to places, to the magic of place names. Riverside Park, Flushing Meadows, Washington Square -- is there a New Yorker for whom such names do not rub the lamp of memory and intimate association?

Now try substituting Enron Central Park, or the Arthur Andersen Riverside, or the General Electric Greenbelt. Is that really the legacy you want to leave to this city? What will be next? Will Gracie Mansion become Disney Mansion and City Hall Citicorp Hall? Will you, as mayor, wear a corporate logo on the back of your suit jacket, like a Little League baseball player, if the price is right?

The parks belong to all New Yorkers, past and present. They are our sanctuaries, the landmarks and locations of our memories. We have walked and jogged in them, pushed strollers with our kids. We have picnicked, attended concerts, dozed, fallen in and out of love, all in the parks. We have supported the parks with our tax dollars and in some cases our volunteer efforts, through good years and bad. We deserve better than to have the names of these special places taken from us.

You have an opportunity to start to lead this city back to a genuine spirit of philanthropy. You can start to shift the focus to generosity and community, and away from corporate self-promotion and the craven seeking of reward for good deeds. Raise this banner. Hold it high. If you ask the best of New Yorkers, rich and poor alike, you just might find that they give it to you - many times over.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Blackmar, Professor of History, Columbia University; co-author, *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park*  
David Bollier, author, *Silent Theft: The Private Plunder of Our Common Wealth*  
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Mike Wallace, co-author, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898*; recipient of the Pulitzer Prize

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