

## **Trip to the mall proves anything but pedestrian**

By Daniel Wallace

Tempers flared Thursday on the Allen Street Mall between Delancey and Broome Streets at a Parks Department scoping meeting to gather community suggestions for the development of the mall.

Parks Department representative Bob Redmond stood within a circle of 15 community leaders and activists on the mall's crumbling concrete, between dilapidated benches and the steady roar of afternoon traffic, and initiated the meeting.

Things quickly turned hostile.

"Let's go around the circle and hear everyone's input," Redmond shouted over the rumble of a passing bus.

Joseph Cunin, executive director of the Lower East Side Business Improvement District, stepped forward.

"There is a design already in place for this mall," Cunin said.

He held up a large poster showing the wasteland of the current mall transformed into photos of a leafy walkway with a brick path between bushes and trees, Asian sculptures and a circular plot at the end of the mall with benches and a rest area.

"This design has been worked on for seven years," Cunin said. "It involves a lot of community input."

Cunin said his organization has secured \$380,000 for the project and he couldn't understand why Parks wanted to start from scratch. The circle erupted into applause.

Next Robert Weber, director of policy for Asian Americans for Equality, stepped forward.

"L.M.D.C. [Lower Manhattan Development Corporation] allocated \$20 million for the development of parks in Lower Manhattan, and we want to know where that money has gone," he said. "There is broad community support for development of all of Allen St. and Pike St. —"

Redmond cut him off. "We want to limit the discussion to this particular mall," he said. "That's why we're here."

"That's the problem," said Weber. "Where has the money gone? It's not acceptable that we've seen none of it."

Out of the trickle of applause that followed Weber's declaration stepped a short mustachioed man in a navy blue sweater, who introduced himself as Victor Papa, director of the Two Bridges Neighborhood Council, and who pointed his finger accusingly at Redmond.

"There was a process engaged on the subject of this mall," Papa said.

Redmond nodded, and said: "I understand — "

"No, no. You listen to us," Papa said, his finger jabbing the air in front of Redmond. "Why did the Parks Department engage this community, get our input, if you were going to disregard it?"

"The decision was made to start the project over," Redmond said. "I did not make the decision. I work for someone else."

Cunin said that it would be useful for everyone present to hear from Parks why they scrapped the project when it was already bid out, the money was in hand, the work was ready to go and materials were ordered.

"In your very own words," Cunin said.

"I'll try to find out," Redmond deflected.

Cunin shook his head. "All of us have taken time out of our day to be here," he said. "We want an answer."

A Parks Department landscape architect in a jean jacket, who did not introduce himself, offered an explanation.

"My understanding is that we don't have a lot of space here," the man said. "And the design was too complex, too intense, as well as the level of maintenance."

But this was too much for Justen Ladda, the artist who together with a Parks Department architect worked for seven years to come up with the current design. Standing across the circle, he shook his head vigorously and then spoke out.

"The architect at the Parks Department and I worked for seven years," he said. "We talked to the community, we found out what people wanted. We made 37 distinct designs. And this design fits perfectly. It's bulletproof. To me, it seems completely insane to start this all over again. The project is in the can, it's ready to go; we could start tomorrow. This is another waste of time."

After the meeting Ladda explained that the Art Commission loved the design and gave it the go-ahead. But when it was submitted for final approval earlier this year a newly composed commission didn't like it.

“It’s a really depressing project,” Ladda said.

Papa walked into the center of the circle and, taking the poster from Cunin, held it in Redmond’s face.

“The decision was made to start the project over — ”

Weber interrupted. “There’s no way this is going to happen; we will protest.”

“That’s right,” Cunin said. “We are not going to provide additional input; we are not going to have additional meetings. If there are adaptations that need to be made to this design, that’s reasonable and we’ll talk about it. But you’re not going to get the community on board to redesign this thing. I hate the expression, but it will be over our dead bodies. There will be protests. We’re so fed up.”

Carli Smith, a Parks Department spokesperson, released the following statement: “Parks remains committed to the revitalization of all of the Allen and Pike Street Malls. We received federal transportation funds several years ago to partner with the Department of Transportation, Lower East Side BID and other community groups to establish a demonstration project on one of the malls between Broome and Delancey Streets. After several years of planning and community meetings, it was decided during the public review process that the design principles we attempted to incorporate for each corridor were a bit ambitious, and that spreading these elements out throughout several corridors, while still maintaining the design intent, would be more appropriate for this space.”