



Mary Lou Russell

Improving Public Spaces and Services in New York City

The Fund's civic contribution to its hometown is its small but influential Improving Public Spaces and Services (IPSS) program, which addresses issues that New Yorkers care about passionately—the condition of their neighborhoods, the state of their parks, and the quality of their public spaces. Through IPSS, the Fund also helps to sustain the health of New York's nonprofit sector and the services it provides.

The horrific events of September 11, 2001, brought home quite clearly the value of public spaces, as New Yorkers by the thousands flocked to city parks and public squares to share their grief and seek solace. Nonprofit organizations across the five boroughs also felt the impact, as City Hall and private philanthropy shifted resources to deal with the terrorist attack. Two Fund grantees made especially important contributions to the city's recovery. The Nonprofit Coordinating Committee of New York, the advocate for the city's nonprofit sector, made its website the place to go for up-to-date information on disaster relief efforts within the nonprofit community. Meanwhile, the Non-Profit Facilities Fund, the banker of last resort for New York's small and mid-sized nonprofits, quickly established a program of emergency grants for organizations directly affected by the attack.

Enhancing New York's Public Spaces

Public space projects in the past year have been shaped in part by the city's unsettled environment, as institutions have sought to cope with the aftereffects of the September 11 attack and the downturn in the city's economy. One program priority, for example, has been to ensure that the planning process for rebuilding lower Manhattan includes a public interest component. The Fund has also continued to encourage the development of public-private partnerships to supplement the public dollars available for park maintenance and programs. Finally, the Fund continued to seek out projects that provide children in New York's low-income neighborhoods with much-needed recreational space and summer programs.

Anticipating the rebuilding process in lower Manhattan, the Fund assisted the Regional Plan Association in its timely efforts to form the Civic Alliance, a coalition of business, community, and environmental groups that first came together on October 1, 2001. The Civic Alliance helped develop the public interest guidelines that are informing the

work of the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, the state-mandated public planning commission created to oversee the reconstruction of lower Manhattan. In February 2002, the Fund supported the first citywide public meeting, hosted by New York University and the New School University, in what has become a wide-ranging discussion of the scope and nature of the rebuilding effort.

The effects of September 11, exacerbated by an economic recession, placed an enormous burden on the city's finances. City agencies across the board faced budget cuts—cuts that were felt acutely by the Department of Parks and Recreation, which over the past 15 years has experienced significant decreases in budget and staff. In 1995, the Fund provided assistance to the department to establish the Partnerships for Parks program, intended to mitigate cuts and encourage private support and volunteer involvement in the city's parks. Since then, Partnerships has worked to build the capacity of more than 4,000 community organizations that preserve and improve neighborhood parks. The program recently increased its technical support to help those groups become more efficient partners. This year, with Fund support, Partnerships for Parks tested an intensive workshop series that should be particularly useful to more established parks groups, many of which have attained full nonprofit status, developed a revenue base, and hired staff.

One particularly successful group, Friends of Morningside Park, received assistance this year to create educational programming for a diverse community that encompasses both the Columbia University campus and central Harlem. In central Queens, Fund support to the Forest Park Trust, a public-private partnership with the Department of Parks, helped launch a formal community stewardship program that was tested in

four locations within the sprawling 535-acre park. In Brooklyn, Fund support enabled the Brooklyn Botanic Garden's successful community horticultural program GreenBridge to continue despite severe city funding cutbacks. In the Bronx, the Fund provided similar support to the New York Botanical Garden's Bronx Green-Up program, which collaborates with public schools to enhance science education by creating gardens in unused nooks around school buildings. In Manhattan, a Fund grant helped the Central Park Conservancy experiment with programs that could increase its revenue base and help compensate for reductions in city support.

Public-private partnerships are not limited to the city's streets and outdoor spaces. Publicolor, established in 1996, has teamed up with the New York City Board of Education to brighten the interiors of several struggling public intermediate and high schools. The program has enlisted faculty, students, parents, and volunteers in communal efforts to enliven corridors and rooms with paint and brush. In the process, Publicolor has provided the first real work experience for many young people. Fund support enabled Publicolor to reach beyond schools to surrounding neighborhoods, where students join residents in sprucing up their community centers. Now, another Fund grant is helping police and teens join forces in six neighborhoods to transform aging classrooms and grim precinct walls.

Recreational space for public school children is at a premium in New York City, and identifying innovative programs that address the issue is an IPSS priority. In the past year, the Fund provided support to the Trust for Public Land (TPL), a national nonprofit land conservation organization that partners with public agencies and community-based sponsors to turn small parcels of land in underserved neighborhoods into

outdoor recreational space for youngsters. The Fund's grant to TPL underwrote the design and development of outdoor playgrounds for three public schools, located in the University Heights neighborhood of the Bronx, the Brownsville neighborhood of Brooklyn, and Washington Heights in northern Manhattan.

The Phipps Community Development Corporation's summer youth program provides day camps and sleep-away camps for more than 1,000 boys and girls in three low-income neighborhoods, West Farms and Crotona Park in the South Bronx and Bellevue South in Manhattan. These are among the city's poorest communities, with more than 50 percent of residents living in poverty. Phipps is New York City's oldest and largest nonprofit developer of affordable housing. Today, it owns and manages some 4,000 apartments, while also providing educational, vocational, and social services that build stronger families and neighborhoods. The Commonwealth Fund has supported the Phipps summer program since 1999.

Supporting a Strong Nonprofit Sector

The Fund's support for the Nonprofit Coordinating Committee of New York (NPCC) and the Non-Profit Facilities Fund (NFF) recognizes the crucial contributions of those organizations to the city's diverse nonprofit community. New York's regional nonprofit sector, made up of more than 6,000 organizations, is the largest and most vital in the country.

The Nonprofit Coordinating Committee, established in 1984 with partial support from the Fund, is a singular advocate for the nonprofit field, tackling legislative and regulatory issues and promoting efficiency through shared services and group purchasing arrangements. Following September 11, NPCC developed a special

page of its website to compile and disseminate reliable information on a wide array of relief projects—including charity funds, government support, and other efforts—and the types of help needed by direct and indirect victims of the attack. The Fund's 2001–02 grant helped ensure NPCC's continued functioning as the “chamber of commerce” of New York City's nonprofit sector.

The Non-Profit Facilities Fund provides infrastructure loans at below-market rates to small and medium-sized nonprofit organizations in the New York metropolitan area. An NFF loan is often part of a package that also includes commercial loans. In 1995, the Fund helped establish the loan fund with a five-year recoverable grant of \$350,000 at a 2 percent annual interest rate. NFF has since made more than \$27 million in infrastructure and facilities loans to 117 institutions. Recognizing the effectiveness of NFF's approach, the Fund approved a five-year extension of the recoverable grant in 2000.

The foundation's program of civic grants in New York City has been in operation since 1983 and has contributed substantially to the remarkable revitalization of the city's public spaces and services that has occurred over the last 19 years. The program's success, the need to focus resources on the foundation's vigorous Health Care in New York City program, and tightened budgets arising from uncertain financial markets have led to the decision to end the Improving Public Spaces and Services program in 2002–03. In departing this field, the Fund expresses its gratitude to the many partners and project directors who have helped make attention to the city's public space infrastructure an important concern of all New Yorkers, including public officials, private funders, and volunteers.