January 14, 2011

Peter Boswell, Chair
New Bedford Park Board
Department of Recreation
1 Oneida St.
New Bedford, MA 02740

Dear Mr. Boswell:

On behalf of the National Association for Olmsted Parks (NAOP), I am writing to express NAOP’s concern over a proposed expansion of Buttonwood Park Zoo that would remove acreage from the historic park.

The Buttonwood Park Zoological Society’s plan to expand its footprint would result in the permanent loss of the central cultural landscape element of the Olmsted, Olmsted and Eliot original 1895 design for Buttonwood Park. Frederick Law Olmsted, the landscape architect of The Emerald Necklace and Central Park, and his sons’ firm Olmsted Brothers, are credited with the introduction of grand and beautiful green spaces in urban centers, places where city dwellers could escape the pressures of urban density and reconnect with nature.

This is exactly the premise underlying the design of Buttonwood Park.

In 1986, Governor Michael Dukakis authorized $15 million for the Olmsted Program, a statewide program designed to preserve and rehabilitate public open spaces designed by the Olmsted firm. The Olmsted Program was administered by the Department of Environmental Management (now Department of Conservation and Recreation) as a local grant and technical assistance initiative. DEM provided $1.55 million in funding for the planning and Phase 1 rehabilitation of Buttonwood Park. The City of New Bedford adopted the master plan for all future park related improvements, nominated the park to the National Register and formed a Friends Group, all requirements of the grant.

The Historic Landscape Preservation Grant Program was a successor program to the Olmsted Program. Authorized in 1996, this program provided up to $100K to municipalities per project per year. A cash match was required. Over two years, The City of New Bedford received an additional $130,000 for Buttonwood Park. According to Appendix B, Required Responsibilities of the Municipality, point 24. Contingency:

“The municipality shall maintain the property addressed by the project as a publicly-accessible open space. In the event that the Municipality shall sell, lease, or fundamentally alter the use of the property the municipality shall be required to reimburse DEM for the full amount of the grant award, and further funding through this program may be jeopardized.”

Aside from the financial consequences to the City, NAOP is concerned that implementation of the 2010 draft master plan developed by the Zoological Society would result in the destruction of the Olmsted-
designed Grand Concourse, the gardens and greenhouse. These features of the park are critical to the integrity of the Olmsted firm’s vision of open public access to a relaxing and beautiful park.

Plans to obscure the view of the Zoo from park visitors are also at odds with the original landscape design and erode the symbiotic relationship that has existed between the Zoo and Buttonwood Park since the Zoo’s redesign 12 years ago. At that time, in response to the request of the Zoo, the Friends of Buttonwood Park agreed that the Zoo could extend three acres farther into the park.

In accordance with their mission to protect the 1895 vision of the original Olmsted, Olmsted and Eliot plan, the Friends of Buttonwood Park has planted over 250 trees around the park. The good-faith efforts and investment of the organization would literally and figuratively be damaged by further expansion of the Zoo.

As the Draft Master Plan for the Zoo notes, in order to meet the attendance goals of the Zoo, more parking would be needed. The current parking lot accommodates 225 cars. A larger Zoo would require 75 more paved spaces plus an open field or road for overflow parking. Therefore, an expanded Zoo would remove even more acreage from Buttonwood Park.

Established in 1980, the National Association for Olmsted Parks advances Olmsted principles and the legacy of irreplaceable parks and landscapes that revitalize communities and enrich people's lives. It is the only national organization solely dedicated to preserving the Olmsted legacy by providing the advocacy, research and outreach needed to protect, restore and maintain these exemplary parks and landscapes, particularly in urban areas.

We strongly believe that the City of New Bedford should preserve the integrity of Buttonwood Park. The park is distinguished by its history, the stewardship of Friends of Buttonwood Park, the existing zoo that serves its local residents so well, and Buttonwood Park’s status on the National Register of Historic Places.

We ask that the City of New Bedford honor the legacy of the original 1895 vision for and the current relevance of this historic park, and abide by the state’s Grant Agreement by requesting that the Zoological Society reformulate their plan to remain within their existing footprint.

Sincerely,

Iris Gestram
Executive Director

cc: The Honorable Scott W. Lang, Mayor, City of New Bedford
    Members of the City Council
    Irene Schall, City Solicitor
    Jack Spillane, Standard-Times
    Friends of Buttonwood Park
    Friends of Fairsted