Commissioner, Department of Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs  
City of Atlanta

Dear Commissioner:

We at the Olmsted Linear Park Alliance (OLPA) are extremely grateful for your invitation to provide feedback on the non-recreational use of the park. As you know, Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. designed the park well over 100 years ago to consist of six segments stretching from Moreland Avenue west toward Decatur along Ponce de Leon. Over the past year, two high intensity events have occurred in the park. The OLPA board, as well as the wider Druid Hills community, is excited about the recognition of the park as a prime space. The OLPA board is also proud of the recent prestigious recognition by the Georgia Trust that presented OLPA with its highest statewide award and the first ever given in Georgia for park restoration.

Olmsted's vision for urban parks included the creation of hardscape spaces (e.g., the Mall in Central Park in New York City), surrounded by pastoral lands. However, he also envisioned urban parks for recreational use in neighborhoods. The residential suburb of Druid Hills and the linear park along Ponce de Leon Avenue is an example of the latter. The park does not include designated spaces for high intensity use such as that required at fairs and festivals.

The members of the OLPA board increasingly are concerned that the park segments are being valued for qualities beyond their original purposes such as their park vistas, horticultural education, and recreational use. It seems that opportunists may be leaping to the forefront to capitalize on all that work and community investment. Whereas our supporters are excited about the opportunity to share and promote the linear park, they also are concerned. Please be reminded that OLPA does not claim exclusive use of the park, but rather is pleading for its responsible use.

OLPA has reached out to similar urban treasures in the Atlanta area. The use of these venues has been limited. For example, only one event per year is allowed on the Great Lawn at the Atlanta Botanical Garden or on the grounds of the Swan House for its annual Swan Ball. Urban parks face the challenge of becoming an opportunity to raise funds by those whose mission does not endorse the treasure of urban parks. There is a strong possibility that the park may be destroyed by those who do not contribute to its continued rehabilitation and maintenance.

Whereas OLPA wants to share the park with as many people as possible, we also must recognize the limitations of this park's unique design. The turf areas are not appropriate for concentrated use. The OLPA master plan encourages the use by a wide group of visitors, including those interested in horticulture, physical exercise, or a safe place for children to play. However, the vision does not include income generation by external parties.

As we near the completion of the rehabilitation of the park segments at a cost of over $10 million, OLPA is shifting its focus to maintenance. Most of the resources for this initiative come from fundraising through individual gifts and an annual membership campaign. Not only have such resources allowed OLPA to continue restoring the park, these have been used for the preparation of high intensity events and subsequent clean up and recovery. Just to give you a sense, OLPA invested $2000 in preparation for the recent arts festival along with countless volunteer hours and I estimate that we will spend another $1000 covering the cumulative damage done to the park. While this damage was not immediately
apparent upon review one day following the festival, the size of the crowd and placement of the tents resulted in thousands of persons spilling off the narrow asphalt paths onto the grass. We are now left with extensive areas along the paths in Springdale and Vigilée that are compacted and brown as we enter another drought. The cumulative effect of multiple, large events will surely incur considerable damage that will require re-sodding at great expense, not to mention the lessening of the visual appeal during the period of recovery. We have also been forewarned that a third park segment is being eyed to expand the festival.

I understand that the Office of Special Events has developed clear guidelines for major affairs. At a minimum, I would like to suggest guidelines that restrict the installation of tents to hard surfaces. The Piedmont Park Conservancy, as a means to limit damage, applies similar standards. The park managed by OLPA is of a much smaller scale and its focus is much more residential. Consequently, its use is inadequate for multiple, major events. In addition, having such events requires substantial financial and human capital investments for the preparation and to rehabilitation due to damage caused by major public events. As you know, OLPA does not burden the City of Atlanta with expenses related to the upkeep of the park, but rather partners with the City in maintaining this beautiful space.

More specifically, the OLPA board proposes the following:

(1) Develop guidelines for use of the Olmsted Linear Park recognizing that it is unique in its design and its ability to accommodate large events and set utilization standards (e.g., one major event per year)
(2) Establish procedures for prioritizing requests (e.g., a lottery or a review that considers potential damage to the park)
(3) Require that those who are allowed to hold events in the park must reinvest (e.g., through substantial donation)
(4) Implement standard procedures for recovery of damage (e.g., pre and post-event efforts).
(5) Evaluate the availability of parking much as is done when the permit for a new restaurant is considered.

The festival organizers have been very accommodating, but have now requested to hold an event in the spring and in the fall. The damage the two park segments have suffered will only be exasperated with the addition of a fall event on the heels of what is predicted to be another dry summer. We fear that requests from other organizers will proliferate much as they have in neighboring parks in the Candler and Inman areas. As President of OLPA, I look forward to further conversation with you and the Mayor’s Office of Special Events about the issues raised. OLPA and its members are extremely appreciative of the City’s contributions and support of our mission.

Sincerely,

Kirk W. Elifson

President, Olmsted Linear Park Alliance