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## Features

### Lack of Benches on South Side Of Ft. Greene Park Becomes Issue

by Brooklyn Eagle ([edit@brooklyneagle.net](mailto:edit@brooklyneagle.net)), published online 12-07-2007

#### Upturn in Neighborhood, Decline in Crime Lead to Calls for New Benches

*By Kenan Davis*  
Special to Brooklyn Daily Eagle  
FORT GREENE — Park benches are an invitation to sit and hang out.

On one side of Fort Greene Park, the invitation is open. On the other side, it is not. Walk along the north side of the park, and nine sets of park benches offer a seat. Take a stroll on the south side, and only gnarled chunks of concrete and metal jut out of the sidewalk.

These are two sides of the same community. The park serves as a geographical dividing line between the Walt Whitman public housing projects to the north and the historic district of mid-19th century brownstones to the south.



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This economic disparity can be seen in something as simple as finding a place to sit.

Erasmus Perez, 44, recently stopped at a bench on Myrtle Avenue to rest his broken foot. On the north side of Fort Greene Park, he sat enjoying the noonday sun and a slight breeze before continuing the walk to his sister's house. On the south side of the park, he would have no chance to rest.

Lois Staton-Godwin, 65, and her friend George Brown, 60, sit on a Myrtle Avenue park bench — on the north side of Fort Greene Park. People living near the south side aren't so lucky.  
Eagle photo by Kenan Davis

1/1

<<first < previous next> last>>

### Conflicting Stories

The benches along DeKalb Avenue were torn out long ago by the Parks Department, but the rumors of why they disappeared remain.

"What I was told is that there were people who hung out on the benches late at night, and some people felt unsafe because of that," said Robert Perris, district manager of Community Board 2. It's a persistent theory that most residents and public officials repeat.

"There's stories that people in brownstones on the DeKalb side didn't like having the people hanging out there, so they wanted them [the benches] removed," said Mauricio Lorence, 65, a tour guide and resident.

Ruth Goldstein, the founding chair of the Fort Greene Park Conservancy, challenged this theory. She recalled that the benches along DeKalb Avenue from Washington Park to the Brooklyn Hospital Center were uprooted around 1972 because of work being done below the surface of the sidewalk.

Sitting in her brownstone on South Oxford Street, she explained the view held by many in the community: "There was a rumor that went around now. This started surfacing long after the benches were gone, that the residents had risen up and trashed the benches because they didn't want homeless people using the benches."

"Now that rumor got legs because it's a more dramatic story than that they were doing work and removed them and they never came back," Goldstein said.

Park Manager Jeff Sandgrund, though, said the benches were removed "at the community's request because they were seen by the community as a haven for drug use and homelessness." Many benches inside the park were taken out for the same reason around the same time, he added. Now that the neighborhood has become much safer, and there is less vandalism being done to park property, there has been "a movement to reinstall the things that were removed over the last 30 years," Sandgrund said.

These also include four bronze eagles and a plaque from the King of Spain that were stolen from the park in the 1970s and have since been recovered. According to the Parks Department, the eagles will return once the restoration of the Prison Ship Martyrs' Monument is completed.

### 'For the Seniors And the Children'

Juanita Edwards, a community organizer for the Pratt Area Community Council, said, "For the seniors and even as well as the children if you have benches on one side of the park, they should definitely be on the other side of the park."

Community Board 2 has proposed replacing the benches on the southern exterior of the park in the requests for next year's capital spending.

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The city also has a program to install privately funded benches in public parks. The Fort Greene Park Conservancy spearheaded this initiative by offering people the opportunity to sponsor a bench inside the park. The Parks Department identified seven locations where 37 park benches can be placed. Four benches have been sold, said Jim Barnes, board member of Fort Greene Park Conservancy.

Two months ago, the Conservancy announced that it had secured \$1.3 million in funding for the restoration of the park entrance at Washington Park and Myrtle. But none of this money, however, will go towards replacing the benches on the exterior of the park.

Community leaders in Fort Greene stressed the importance of uniting all parts of the community on both sides of the park.

Ursula Hegewisch, chair of the Fort Greene Association, said diplomatically "we can, should and will do more to bring our community together through our beautiful park."

Lois Staton-Godwin, 65, and her friend George Brown, 60, sat on a Myrtle Avenue park bench and talked with each other about the differences in the neighborhood.

"Well, here we have New York City Housing, the housing projects on this side," Staton-Godwin said. "So, is it an income situation, do you believe?" Brown asked.

"Well, in that case, if so then maybe the benches would be on the other side...if you were looking at the disparity here."

"Yeah, but if it's to keep you from..."

"Congregating over there?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I hadn't looked at that. I hadn't thought of that. It's a possibility."

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