

Gathering at the River To Save an Ailing Park

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the soccer — the children had nowhere else to play.”

But most of the group members were inexperienced in dealing with politics and city officials, so progress was slow. “We’d never done this,” Mr. Cruz said. “Most of us had just preached from pulpits.”

Lower Manhattan Together pressed the city to fix the park’s bathrooms, streetlights and emergency call boxes. It took two years to do it.

When the work was done, they set their sights higher, lobbying for a complete renovation of the park, a huge project. To their surprise, they succeeded — with luck, good timing and the help of the Industrial Areas Foundation, which had a long relationship with Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani.

In the two years that they struggled to get basic repairs for the park, the foundation was feuding with the mayor, but in 1999, Mr. Giuliani agreed to major renovations, said Joe Morris, director of Lower Manhattan Together.

“He said he used to play ball there when he was a kid,” Mr. Morris said. The city is building new basketball courts, ball fields, a bicycle path and a roller hockey rink in the park. The project design by George Vellonikas, the landscape architect, includes new landscaping and the restoration of Depression-era ornamental details.

In addition, work should start soon on the \$42 million repair of the 1.3-mile seawall and the reconstruction of the promenade on top of the crumbling sea wall, which was closed last year for safety reasons. There are also plans to build a recreation center on Pier 42 on the south end of the park, though no money for that has been allotted.

The East River Park project got another boost last month when “Challenge America,” an ABC television program that gathers volunteers for big civic projects to videotape the work and create a program from it, pitched in to rebuild the amphitheater and eroded soccer field. They recruited architects, engineers, planners, laborers, materials

and meals.

The volunteers worked around the clock for six days to meet the television show’s deadline. The result was a new amphitheater and a reconstructed soccer field with artificial turf. The labor and materials were valued at about \$5 million, according to the Parks Department.

It is unusual for a neighborhood improvement group to succeed in a project of such scope and expense, though many try. “There are a lot of citizen’s groups out there who are trying to get a lot of things done,” said Adrian Benepe, the Manhattan parks commissioner. Many neighborhood organizations struggle for years to accomplish much smaller projects, he added.

Certainly in 1997, such success seemed unlikely. The clergy members spent four months trying to get an appointment with Parks Commissioner Henry J. Stern. Finally, applying the tactics taught to them by veterans of the Industrial Areas Foundation, 18 clergy members, wearing clerical black, walked into Parks Department headquarters and asked to see Mr. Stern.

“Because we were ministers,” said the Rev. Neil Connolly of St. Mary’s Catholic Church, “they let us walk up to his office.”

Mr. Stern was out, and the group was sent to see Mr. Benepe, where they used another newly learned tactic.

“He tried to brush us off,” said Father Connolly. “We stood up and walked out. It was very rude, I must admit. For those of us who were clergy, it was very difficult to be so rude.”

Soon after, they used similarly brusque tactics with Mr. Stern. But when they succeeded in getting money from Mayor Giuliani for the park renovation, Mr. Stern thanked them.

With the East River Park construction under way, the clergy and congregation members have moved on to other projects. The success of the park, said Mr. Cruz, was greatly encouraging.

“When we first started,” he said, “we had these dreams. But we never thought we would see so much happening so fast. It’s given us a larger appetite. We want to do more, in housing and education.”