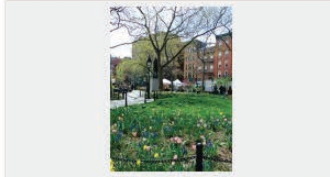




Abingdon Square Bruised by Another Boom and Bust Cycle

By Joe Mayock
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Susan Sipos, Abingdon Square's horticulturalist, often receives compliments about the park. She usually bites her tongue and thanks the kind passersby. However, Sipos has a different response to those who will stop, look, and listen. "It's happening again. There are fewer tulips this year than last. The grass in our little meadow is now splotchy. The irrigation system is broken." According to Sipos, the park is once again in a cycle of slow decline following its most recent renovation in 2004.



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Susan's employer is the newly revitalized Abingdon Square Conservancy, a non-profit park conservancy that has begun implementing governance and finance reforms designed to reverse the most current slide and ensure that all of the hard won progress in beautification and improvements lasts.

A Cycle of Boom and Bust

"The 176-year history of Abingdon Square is one of boom and bust. The Square has been renovated numerous times only to see it decline again within a few years," said George Vellonakis, the architect of the most recent renovation. His research includes news reports and letters that indicate numerous low points for the Square, including the 1930s, 1948, 1965, and 1989.

A Revitalized Protector

Last year when Lee Zimmerman, one of the Conservancy's co-founders, decided to step back from his role as the Square's administrator after over a decade of tireless service, a cadre of committed West Villagers came together to begin building a strong and sustainable foundation on which the Square is widely supported. The Conservancy formed its first board of directors. A series of communications and fundraising vehicles was established, including a corporate identity, fundraising and events committees, and a website with an e-commerce capability. On May 1, the Conservancy held its first fundraiser, its Spring Tulip Gala, which it plans to hold annually. Nearly 100 West Village neighbors enjoyed delicious fare and libations, learned how they are making a difference, swore an oath of stewardship and then went on their way with a limited edition gift bag with treasures inside.

Square Is Solely Dependent on Private Donations

Bruce Mastalinski, the vice-chair of the Conservancy's board of directors, talked about the need for community support, "The Conservancy is solely dependent on private donations for its operations and receives no public funding. Our donors and volunteers are absolutely vital to maintaining and improving the Square."

The annual expenses for the Square as it exists now are approximately \$64,000. They involve maintaining its beautiful trees, perennials, grasses and other plantings, benches, bluestone paths, garden posts and chains, trash receptacles, the historic wrought-iron perimeter fence and the historic "Doughboy" monument, as well as the troublesome irrigation system. In addition to funding park maintenance, the Conservancy also hosts three annual events: the spring tulip display, the carved pumpkin patch on Halloween night, and a winter holiday display.

Todd Hittle, the Conservancy's treasurer, explained that, since the 2004 renovation, the Square has made it tenuously from year to year with donations from a few residential buildings surrounding the Square and a few businesses. It has also benefited from a small grant from the Greenacre Foundation and some contributions from individuals. Hittle said that Flank, the development, architectural design and brokerage firm behind the renovation of the former Village Care nursing home into a luxury condo, now known as The Abingdon, has been a big supporter of the Conservancy's renewal. However, Hittle says that the Conservancy's current funding is insufficient. "We can't get by on the generosity of only three or four buildings surrounding the Square alone. We need to expand and diversify Abingdon Square's donor base by getting the word out on how the Park benefits the entire neighborhood – residents and businesses – and winning broad support from the West Village community."

Looking Ahead

The Conservancy ultimately seeks to create a lasting foundation for Abingdon Square by establishing a seven-figure endowment that will support the park in perpetuity. Conservancy board member Natane Boudreau explained, "Abingdon Square is one of the most important institutions in the West Village. It will celebrate its bicentennial in 2036 and will be around for generations to come. The endowment and its resultant income can mean the difference between just 'getting by' and the security of bringing the Square's mission and vision to life for generations to come."

More information about the Abingdon Square Conservancy and ways to support it can be found at <http://abingdonsquare.org>.

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