

IRA M. MILLSTEIN
767 Fifth Avenue, Suite 3067
New York, New York 10153

March 31, 2021

The Honorable Bill de Blasio
Mayor
City of New York
City Hall
New York, NY 10007

Dear Mayor de Blasio,

This is a critical moment for the City and the Park we love. Central Park has provided millions of New Yorkers across all five boroughs with a much-needed place for respite over the past year, thanks to the dedication of the City's long-time partner and day-to-day manager of the Park, the Central Park Conservancy.

The Conservancy first stepped up for New York City in 1980. It was founded on the heels of the City's near bankruptcy to rescue the derelict Park, then marred by the dustbowl of the Great Lawn and graffiti-covered historic buildings. It took the Conservancy 40 years and close to \$1 billion dollars in private philanthropy to restore the great Olmsted and Vaux open space which serves New York's diverse neighborhoods, and which is now a cultural gem.

Since the very beginning, I have personally witnessed the organization's tremendous dedication to this effort, completely transforming the Park and keeping it clean, beautiful, and accessible for its 42 million visitors every year. The City now has the opportunity to leverage this historically successful partnership to further benefit the public at Wollman Rink.

Upon your decision to conclude the decades-old concession agreement with the Trump Organization, Wollman needs a new operator. This is a once-in-a-generation planning opportunity. The Central Park Conservancy has proposed a minimum investment of \$50 million dollars to re-envision and rebuild Wollman and manage the site with a sharp new focus on expanded public access and community programming.

As early as June of 1981, the approach of having nonprofit partners, rather than private concessionaires, manage public facilities like Wollman was endorsed in a *New York Times* editorial entitled "Thin Ice in Central Park." <https://www.nytimes.com/1981/06/24/opinion/thin-ice-in-central-park.html>.

That editorial warned of serious compromises when public property is forced to meet the needs of private operators. Unfortunately, the City is ignoring that warning again; it has put aside the Conservancy's current proposal and is taking a short-term view by seeking a five-year contract for Wollman with a for-profit operator, which will prioritize its branding opportunity and take profits out of the Park.

There is still time for the City to forego a for-profit operator. It should turn again, as it has in the past, to the Central Park Conservancy, which would coordinate Wollman with the Lasker Rink on the Harlem Meer. Wollman and Lasker have always been operated jointly, which is what the Conservancy is offering to continue.

The Conservancy is about to start reconstruction on Lasker, to which it has committed \$100 million to augment the City's \$50 million investment. The Conservancy has now offered to raise millions of dollars for the planning, reconstructing, and operation of Wollman in a longer-term agreement that ensures that the rinks remain tied together and allows all profits to be reinvested back into the Parks system. It also promises to re-envision the eight-month, non-skating season, filling the site with free or low-cost cultural performances from across the City.

Many public agencies do not have experienced and professional not-for-profit partners to turn to. But here you do. The Conservancy's capacity to do what it promises is demonstrated by its continuously successful stewardship of the Park and its ongoing commitment to managing this public space.

The wisdom of prioritizing the Park as a public amenity for all is as applicable today as it was in 1981. I ask that you act wisely: forego profit-making in Central Park and continue to put the public first by accepting the Conservancy's offer of continued stewardship and transformational investment.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ira M. Millstein", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Ira M. Millstein
Former Chairman and Life Trustee, Central Park Conservancy

CC: Betsy Smith, President and CEO, Central Park Conservancy
Vicki Been, Deputy Mayor for Housing and Economic Development
Mitchell Silver, NYC Parks Commissioner