

Our River, Our Streets

A publication from the Federation to Preserve the Greenwich Village Waterfront and Great Port

An independent voice advocating for the best possible choices for our community

Our River, Our Streets

Our Neighbor: John Raskin



photo courtesy John Raskin.

by Lacey Tauber

In last year's hotly-contested elections, nearly every Democratic candidate claimed some responsibility for the death of the West Side stadium. Add Cablevision and the *New York Times* into the mix and you've got a tidy little anti-stadium package.

But the picture excludes one constituency that was fundamental to the stadium's demise: the West Side residents who trudged to early-morning hearings, marched in the streets and demanded an end to taxpayer-

sure that the leaders understand that this is really important to people in the neighborhood," he said.

Despite the enthusiastic response, Raskin admitted he wasn't always sure if they would succeed. "When we would show up at a public hearing and our band of 100 or 150 neighborhood people...were outnumbered, out-sized, and shouted down by 300 construction workers sent by the construction industry and the mayor's office to rev up support for the plan," he said, the neighborhood residents would emerge a bit shaken.

The tides turned at the Javits Center in December 2004, when protesters made their voices heard just as loud as the construction workers' at the only state-run public hearing about the stadium. "I think that was the moment when people realized that if you can get 300 people together in a room, and if you can start shouting loud enough and holding the right signs, that people out there will start listening to you," said Raskin.

The group continued the fight down to the stressful final days. "It's a good thing that our elected officials are also in support of universal health-care, because the stadium was incredibly destructive to our blood pressure and nerves," Raskin joked.

He recounted the conflicting reports that saturated the media: "We spent six months, more or less...reading conflicting news reports almost everyday that explained that the stadium had at once gained and lost momentum and that it was at once inevitably going to pass and never going to happen...I was the one everyone kept asking what was going to happen, and I had no idea!"

Finally, the Alliance sent two busloads of people to the voting in Albany. Raskin painted quite a picture of the scene: "Lobbyists and neighborhood activists had to stand on chairs in the back of the room, jumping and hoisting each other up to see over a scrum of construction workers who had convened around a tight and threatened ring of press, that were themselves around a small wooden table behind which representatives of the governor, the speaker and the majority leader were sitting and voting." When it was over, the group left under protection of state troopers.

Yet this is not the end of the story. A fight remains ahead for the neighborhood, as no decision has yet been made about the future of the railyards. According to Raskin, the Alliance has put out a statement of principles detailing what they would like to see there, including: housing (a large portion of it affordable), open space, access to the Hudson River, and facilities such as a school and a library. Said Raskin, "Three square blocks of riverfront property are a huge asset and if you develop them properly, the neighborhood can get real benefits."

**"I think
the
stadium
really hit
people on
a gut
level
in the
neighbor-
hood."**

subsidized neighborhood destruction. Ordinary West Siders converged by the hundreds to stick up for their neighborhood when it was under attack, and their two-year-long campaign to beat back the stadium was ultimately successful. Meet the community organizer who helped popularize the anti-stadium fight: John Raskin.

When Raskin, then a 22-year-old recent Harvard grad, moved to NYC two years ago, he never thought he'd be working on one of the most high-profile issues in recent city history. A Social Studies major with a background in urban issues, he hoped to work with free civil legal services. "It's very hard to get a job doing that if you're not a lawyer," he quipped.

He began volunteering at Housing Conservation Coordinators, a Hell's Kitchen non-profit that provides legal services, community organizing and other support to the area. "I liked HCC because it had a very strong relationship with this little chunk of Manhattan, which is a remarkably functional neighborhood," he said. "I live uptown, but this is the neighborhood that I'm a part of."

HCC hired Raskin as a full-time organizer just as the fight against the stadium heated up. They joined other non-profits and community leaders to form the Hell's Kitchen Hudson Yards Alliance, and began holding informational meetings about the stadium plan.

Raskin was pleased with the response. "From what I hear from organizers in other neighborhoods, it's very difficult to get community members engaged," he said, "I have to say, I don't think we have that problem on the West Side."

As residents learned more, Raskin was again pleased by their strong reactions. "I think the stadium really hit people on a gut level in the neighborhood," he said. "People were concerned about traffic, noise, quality of life, tailgating, and about using such a valuable spot of property in our neighborhood for a purpose that doesn't serve the community at all."

The stadium, said Raskin, was a tangible manifestation of the neighborhood's concerns about gentrification, rising rents, and the feeling that they may soon be priced out of their community. The Alliance began a grassroots campaign of flyering, protesting, contacting media, and letter writing. According to Raskin, they ultimately sent more than 25,000 anti-stadium letters to Albany.

"We didn't have the money that the Jets or Cablevision had, and we didn't have the visibility that some of the politicians had, but we could make