

Soccer Plan Upsets a Brooklyn Campus's Neighbors



Residents of University Towers in Brooklyn, right, citing noise and parking problems, are unhappy with Long Island University's push to widen its soccer field and expand seating.

By **VIVIAN YEE**
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The city campus of [Long Island University](#) would like to think of itself as a Brooklyn institution. Its sports teams are called the Brooklyn Blackbirds. Its men's basketball team, which has qualified for the [N.C.A.A.](#) tournament three years in a row, once played in the former Brooklyn Paramount Theater. It sits across the street from [Junior's](#), of cheesecake fame.

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But to the residents of Fort Greene, on whose western edge the campus has stood since the 1960s, it is little more than an obstacle to navigate around, its high walls and guarded gates precluding shortcuts through its flower-lined walkways.

"You see people for a year or a semester," said Joseph Ranghelli, 82, who lives across Willoughby Street in an apartment complex called University Towers. "They're over there, and we're over here."

Town and gown have had little relations to speak of in recent decades — until two years ago, when the university announced plans to expand the roughly 100-yard-long swath of grass on the corner of Ashland Place and Willoughby Street, the field of play for its Division 1 soccer team, so that the soccer field can grow to N.C.A.A. regulation size. The extra yards would come out of the sidewalks on the bordering streets, and the university would add extra bleachers for fans as well as upgrade its outdated lighting and sound systems. It would also wall off the field on the street sides. The field, overlapping with a baseball and a softball diamond, is also used for the lacrosse, baseball and softball teams.

University Towers residents have pushed back, worried about noise, lights and a dearth of parking: the streets around the field would close during games, potentially blocking their access to the complex's parking lot, and there is not enough street parking to

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accommodate more fans, they say. The university says it will just bring its soccer field up to regulation standards so it can reclaim the home-team advantage in the postseason and attract more fans — possibly even some of the neighbors who usually keep their distance.

“It’s really hard for us to draw the community and even kids to watch the game,” said John Suarez, the athletic director, noting that the field did not even have enough seats for parents and friends. “They’re basically standing behind the team benches.”

Town-gown disputes, always fraught when universities become the most important employers, taxpayers, landlords and builders around, can be unusually tricky in New York, a city so big and bustling that it could never be defined by any one campus. Columbia and New York Universities are both dominant in their neighborhoods, their every expansion move met with anxiety by local residents who say they are stripping their streets of diversity and gobbling up space without regard to neighborhood needs.

The university swimming pool, which University Towers residents are allowed to use, seems to be one strong connection between campus and community. More than three-quarters of the undergraduates commute to campus, and students rarely venture into Fort Greene. Those who do live on campus might explore the shops of the Fulton Street Mall, the Barclays Center area or Brooklyn Bridge Park.

“We have access to everything in Brooklyn,” said Matt Mummert, 21, a student from Indiana and the captain of the men’s soccer team, “which is a real selling point for me, coming from the Midwest.”

The expansion has worsened a sore spot in the nonrelationship. University Towers residents have complained for years about the noise, light and parking squeezes generated by sports events across the street, often without a response from the university, they say. In a packed University Towers meeting and several community meetings, they have expressed fears that the problems will get worse. But the local community board approved the expansion, which is now up for review by the borough president’s office.

There are athletic reasons for the \$7.5 million expansion, the university says. With the soccer teams training on a short field, they are at a disadvantage when they compete on longer ones. And in the postseason, the Blackbirds lose an important home-team boost: Three years ago, the women’s soccer team was seeded first going into the conference tournament, but lost after hosting the championship on another field.

While the championship men’s basketball team regularly attracts many fans, soccer games draw mostly other athletes and parents. Not only is the soccer field about seven yards too short under N.C.A.A. rules and its bleachers too few, but also the sound system consists of a portable stereo and the lights are decades old. Update it all and add a concession stand, the thinking goes, and more people might come.

The problem with that reasoning, several residents said, is that most people in University Towers are not soccer fans — and do not plan to be.

“The school thinks it’s because they don’t have the field and facilities,” said Joanne Heith, an adjunct professor of psychology there who also lives in University Towers. “But most people don’t care about that. They care about their property.”

She said she would like to attend more games and wanted the university to do well, but had mixed feelings about a project that threatened to add more noise and a tall wall, unless the university also added landscaping to the wall. (The university has said it will plant hydrangeas, trees and other greenery along the borders of the field.)

Mr. Suarez said the university would install lighting and a sound system that, as in Yankee Stadium, would confine both lights and noise inside the sports area. And the university has promised to renovate a nearby plaza. “It’s a win-win, I think, for everybody,” he said.

Mr. Ranghelli begs to differ. “This is like the opening salvo,” he said. “They’re pushing the

neighborhood around because they can. Who knows what's coming next?"

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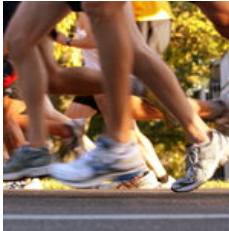
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