

TIMES *Ledger*.COM

ASTORIA *Times*

BAYSIDE *Times*

FLUSHING *Times*

FOREST HILLS *Ledger*

FRESH MEADOWS *Times*

GLEN OAKS *Ledger*

HOWARD BEACH *Times*

JACKSON HEIGHTS *Times*

JAMAICA *Times*

LAURELTON *Times*

LITTLE NECK *Ledger*

QUEENS VILLAGE *Times*

RICHMOND HILL *Times*

RIDGEWOOD *Ledger*

WHITESTONE *Times*

WOODSIDE *Times*

The Public Ought To Know: GOP protesters take alternate route to free speech

By Corey Bearak

08/05/2004



Corey Bearak

My publisher counsels a Queens angle to connect this column to our readership. The following problem relates to a demonstration, the route and the end-of-demonstration rally site in Manhattan when the Republicans come to town. The free speech implications affect us all, especially in Queens.

Security concerns offer no basis for limiting opportunities for average citizens to influence policy and public officials. Demonstrators' settling for an out-of-the-way route to hold their protest in Lower Manhattan as opposed to Central Park during the upcoming Republican National Convention shows a compromise of citizens' free speech rights.

Protest organizer United for Peace and Justice appears to accept this dictated route that ends within sight of the fallen World Trade Center.

The group should recognize that this is unacceptable, and the protest should be canceled, replaced with a gathering of private citizens independently massing around Madison Square Garden and then strolling up Seventh Avenue into Central Park to take in some rays on the Great Lawn.

Before I continue, a bit of disclosure for the few who might not know: A lifelong Democrat, I registered to vote in the spring of my senior year at Martin Van Buren High School.

I even head a northeast Queens Democratic club. I have worked for public

officials as an aide and a consultant since 1978. I've volunteered in Democratic campaigns going back to my days as a political science student at Hofstra University.

When I discussed my inclination to draft this column a few weekends back with my friend Dennis at the Deepdale pool, I wished the protagonists were a President Gore seeking renomination at a Democratic Convention held here and a Mayor Green (well, actually Mayor Ferrer, but then I'd not be writing this). Not to be.

You see, party affiliation colors not my views on free speech and assembly.

Today people appear more willing to accept certain inconveniences in exchange for safety. When demonstrators gather, just like when parades or visits by presidents and important foreign dignitaries cause delays, it means traffic tie-ups and plain inconvenience for the rest of us.

Where folks do not join a protest or at least support the issue, they may not sympathize with the demonstration. In those cases, we must maintain greater vigilance to assert these protections -- meant for us.

Some years ago when Mayor Mike's predecessor tried to close City Hall to the public, many New Yorkers objected.

The New York Civil Liberties Union sued. Perhaps setting an example for his successor, the Giuliani administration proposed regulations that require the public to apply to the NYPD for a permit to gather at City Hall and speak formally to reporters.

Now, Mayor Mike hides behind his worthy police commissioner to block the expected 250,000 protesters, as reported in the Times, from peacefully gathering near the delegates.

Worse, as Newsday columnist Jimmy Breslin points out, the Lower Manhattan alternative to the Great Lawn allows the mayor's adoptive political party to make noise about the nerve of demonstrators gathering near what many believe is hallowed ground.

The haggling centers on a stage and accessibility to drinking water and bathroom facilities at this out-of-the-way location.

Shame on the organizers for acceding to the mayor, who appears to place party above public good -- shades of Chicago's Mayor Richard Daley, a Democrat, and 1968's Democratic National Convention.

As we all know, the result did not help Daley's party keep the White House.

The mayor seems bent on relegating demonstrators downtown while delegates gather in Midtown. Some 30,000 members of the media expected may even venture downtown; their cameras and video will no doubt capture the former Trade Center backdrop. That certainly distracts from the protesters' message.

Some may see victory in marching past Madison Square Garden and heading downtown via the West Side Highway. Yeah, right.

Instead, why not protest the protest's handling and call it off? But don't stop there. Why not urge folks to make their own personal pilgrimages to the convention site? Maybe wear a hat or T-shirt or carry a shopping bag with an appropriate message.

Here's the Queens angle. Since many folks no doubt plan to fly in, many will likely opt for a flight to Kennedy or LaGuardia airports.

Those who might drive here might also start out in Queens, perhaps parking at one of the Shea Stadium lots. All those like-minded individuals could perhaps meet up with a few more, maybe use Flushing Meadows Corona Park. Take in the museum, the Hall of Science or the zoo while there.

Then, spontaneously, of course, let these committed souls take a nice stroll west along Roosevelt Avenue (or take the No. 7 train to Times Square) to Queens Boulevard and on to the Queensborough Bridge, continue down Second Avenue to 34th Street, then west to the Garden and up Seventh Avenue to Central Park. It should be a nice couple of days for a stroll.

Corey Bearak is an attorney and adviser on government, community and public affairs. He is also active in Queens civic and political circles. He can be reached via e-mail at Bearak@aol.com.