

## **Madison Square Park Conservancy**

### **IDEA Project 2024**

#### **Final Report**

##### **Project**

Using a participatory approach to develop an inclusive and accessible mission statement that better reflects the current work and future goals of the conservancy.

##### **Why did you pick your project?**

We chose this project to develop a new mission statement that will inform staff, board members, and the broader community about who we are, what we do, and our aspirations. The current mission statement was developed in 2017 with input from an internal and external focus group, but it did not include the whole staff and was ultimately crafted by an outside PR firm. While it reads poetically, it does not clearly state what the conservancy actually does and reads like an outsider drafted it. This was evident in our 2023 community survey results when 63% of survey participants were aware that the conservancy exists, but only 36% knew what the conservancy does. We also heard from staff that the statement did not resonate with them. Perhaps because the statement did not speak to the MSPC team, the conservancy's internal documents, grant applications, and website had multiple versions of a mission statement that staff had developed on their own, few resembling the official mission statement. To ensure that the new mission statement was a true reflection of the conservancy's current work and future goals, we wanted to include all staff, board members, and other stakeholders throughout the process.

##### **What is changing because of your project?**

While having a new mission statement is the most immediate change, the process we used to develop it brings opportunities for broader change in the organization. Being more transparent and inclusive with the whole staff in projects and initiatives, with senior staff being receptive to and incorporating feedback, is a good model for the future. The new mission statement will help unify the staff, board, community, and other conservancy stakeholders.

##### **Who are you making the change for?**

By making the mission statement more inclusive and accessible, it will become a deeper part of the fabric of the organization and a beacon for our work going forward. Including all of our staff in the process to develop this foundational document, we hope they feel more invested in the organization and the work they do every day. This project will also focus the board's attention on inclusivity as a priority. We hope our community will feel more welcome to utilize and enjoy Madison Square Park, and donors and potential donors will have a stronger sense of the organization's values and mission. During the process, it was important to clearly state that the work of the conservancy is to serve all regardless of where they come from.

## **What was your approach?**

We sought to take a more participatory approach throughout this process to ensure that all staff, board members, and other stakeholders could share their opinions and stay meaningfully involved in each step. This brought a broader perspective on the work of MSPC that vastly improved the final product.

To create a true participatory approach, we took the following steps:

- Created a staff Mission Statement Committee
- Sought input from the board and integrated feedback from the board's Strategic Plan Committee
- Reviewed the 2023 strategic plan, 2023 Community Survey data and 2020 Census data
- Mission Statement Committee analyzed our existing and prior mission statements, as well as the mission statements of several peer organizations for what we liked and didn't like
- Presented the project at an all staff meeting to begin soliciting staff input
- Scheduled four small focus group discussions to gather input from staff in a more intimate setting
- Condensed input from all discussions and reviewed as a committee for trends
- Drafted a statement and reviewed and revised it as a committee
- Presented a draft at an all-staff meeting and gathered further input
- Edited/refined mission statement further
- To do: Present the new mission statement to the Board in June

We will present the mission statement to the Board in June, then roll it out on social media, our website, during tabling events, and in all materials going forward.

## **What were the challenges you faced (expected and/or unexpected) and how did you work through them?**

One of the main challenges we faced was that the project's leading facilitator left the organization just as we were launching the staff focus groups, and a new facilitator had to be identified and brought up to speed. There was limited time to update the new facilitator before the first facilitator's departure, pushing back the project's timeline by a few weeks.

Another challenge we had but knew would be difficult to overcome was bringing together multiple departments, staff members, and stakeholders whose roles and understanding of the organization varied. This was apparent when senior staff met with the Board Strategic Planning Committee to discuss the process and solicit input. The board members, though champions for the park, showed little appreciation for the importance of process, not just result. Throughout our brainstorming session, a board member interrupted several times to share different versions of a mission statement the AI program Chatgpt came up with based on her entry of a few key words. The original project facilitator and senior staff members left the session feeling deflated. To

avoid this during staff sessions, we divided staff into small, cross-department groups and started each session with a grounding exercise. The grounding exercise had staff reflect on their time at the conservancy, the importance of their role and work, and their connection with other team members - this successfully set the stage for meaningful discussion and a thoughtful process.

### **What were your biggest takeaways / lessons learned?**

There are a number of lessons learned from our discussions as a cohort and while conducting this project. The main lessons learned are outlined below in no particular order.

1. The conservancy staff is a dedicated group. One priority we had was creating a safe environment for staff to share their thoughts and ideas without fear of criticism. During our sessions, we saw that each staff member has a personal connection to the park and really cares about the work we do as an organization.
2. Accessibility includes thinking carefully about the language you use in communications. During our sessions, we realized individuals often had different interpretations of words based on their background and role in the conservancy. This made us think about the importance of making each word in the statement approachable and using clear language for the diverse audience we serve. It has made us reflect on our broader communication strategies on social media, our newsletter, and other materials. We started to be more conscious of the "internal speak" we use that the general public may not be familiar with, such as "steward," "activate" and "vital."
3. We want to seek more opportunities for the entire staff to gather beyond staff meetings and work on projects like this to strengthen the team.

### **What resources did you use and/or would recommend?**

1. Facilitator Guide in the Quido folder
2. Your organization's strategic plan
3. Census data or information
4. 2023 Community Survey
5. Our and peer organizations' existing mission statements

### **If you were to go back and do things differently, what would you have done?**

Knowing what we learned along the way, we would have structured our first session with the Board Strategic Plan Committee differently, more like we did the staff focus groups, to create a more thoughtful process for soliciting input.

### **What advice would you give others?**

The process is just as important as the outcome. Throughout the whole project, we prized transparency and kept the staff informed about progress every step of the way. This was essential to creating trust between staff and the cohort.

### **What's next for you?**

During this process we implemented a “plant nursery” (parkies’ version of a “parking lot”) for related concerns and other potential projects that came up during our staff discussions. Our goal is to continue meeting as a cohort, review the plant nursery items, and choose an IDEA project to implement as a staff each year. Items that are currently growing in the nursery are:

1. Updating our living land acknowledgement from 2017
2. Review departmental mission statements and determine if they are needed
3. Improve the ways in which conduct community outreach

### **Current Mission Statement**

Our mission is to protect, nurture, and enhance Madison Square Park, creating an environment that fosters moments of inspiration.

As stewards, we strive to engage the community through our beautiful gardens, inviting amenities, and world-class programming.

We believe that in an urban setting everyone deserves access to a park that allows for recreation, respite, and reflection.

### **Newly Developed Mission Statement**

Madison Square Park Conservancy is the nonprofit entrusted by the City of New York to operate Madison Square Park, a 6.2-acre public space in the heart of Manhattan. Our mission is to conserve, maintain, and program this historic green space, including raising 100% of the park’s operating budget. Our dedicated team takes great pride in caring for and shaping an urban oasis for all to enjoy.