



On Tuesday, November 13, 2007, Independence National Historical Park (INHP) hosted a public meeting to discuss Washington Square. About 50 local residents, business owners and representatives from park partners (including other tourism organizations and non-profit supporters of the park) participated. At the meeting, participants sat in small groups of about 10 people, and were asked to discuss three questions: What attracts you to Washington Square? What are some ideas to better inform and engage neighbors and visitors? How do you use the Square, how would you like to use the Square? Each group had a facilitator and a note-taker.

This format allowed all participants to express their ideas and concerns about uses of Washington Square in a way that can be used by park managers to inform park policy. A summary of the ideas shared during the public meeting and next steps is provided below.

- Requests by outside organizations to hold events in Washington Square will be reviewed by INHP to identify more activities within Washington Square that the park can support.
- Activities that already take place within Washington Square will be promoted (for example, through the INHP website).
- Improvements in signage and staffing will be assessed to further promote the history of the Square and clarify prohibited or restricted activities. INHP will consider demarcating certain areas of the Square as appropriate (or not appropriate) for certain activities.
- A section on Washington Square will be included in the Superintendent's Compendium, which details all activities that are restricted or prohibited within the park. The Compendium is available on the park website, [ww.nps.gov/inde/upload/compendium.pdf](http://ww.nps.gov/inde/upload/compendium.pdf).

## Meeting Summary

The public meeting resulted in a broad exchange of ideas, not only between citizens and park managers, but also between members of the public with divergent interests. This summary highlights the key points raised during these discussions. In some areas – such as Washington Square's quality as an open, green space – there was broad agreement. But in other areas – such as musical events in the Square – there were different opinions. These opinions are all summarized below. Before these discussion questions were raised, there was a brief discussion of the problem of a large number of homeless people in Washington Square. This is an ongoing problem that many residents raised as one of their most important concerns. INHP Chief Ranger Ian Crane addressed this issue first and answered some questions, providing participants with information about who to call in different situations.

## **What attracts you to Washington Square?**

1. Participants felt that Washington Square is a **neighborhood park**. It creates a sense of community within the neighborhood. It is child and dog friendly, which helps residents feel comfortable using it. Residents feel safe in the Square, and particularly appreciate the improved lighting and increased security patrols from park rangers. It's a vibrant, living park, used by residents and tourists alike, that promotes neighborly interaction.



2. Participants agreed that Washington Square is one of only a few **green, open spaces** within the city. The fountain in particular adds to the garden atmosphere. The grass and trees also help make this an oasis, a place of nature within the urban setting. It provides fabulous views for residents around the Square. It's a beautiful space enjoyed by a variety of people, all of whom use it because it is so open and attractive. Citizens and visitors use it in many different ways.

For some, because it is a large, open, green space, it's an ideal location for **recreation and outdoor activities**. Visitors (whether neighbors or tourists) like that it can be used by people of all ages for recreational activities, to walk their dogs, to socialize.

For others, because of its atmosphere, and the sacred space of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, the Square provides an ideal place for **quiet contemplation and relaxation**. Visitors who are looking for a quiet, peaceful location appreciate the absence of vendors along the sidewalk and being able to use the park benches (when they are available). The many paths within the Square create a pleasant walking environment.

3. Participants expressed the opinion that because the Square is a place of **history**, it is a wonderful destination for visitors and helps the public learn about the history of our city and nation. The historic design of the Square and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier create a sense of history and make this a unique and special place.

4. Because of its location within the city and its long history, the Square is perfect for **tourists**, whether visiting residents or tour groups from around the country and around the world.

## **What are some ideas to better inform and engage neighbors and visitors?**

1. The National Park Service (NPS) has done a great job improving the Square, but more work still needs to be done: **keep up the maintenance, keep it clean, and keep it organized**. Participants expressed overall support for the improvements made since Washington Square became part of the National Park Service, but urged the park to keep up the good work. This could include using quieter machines for cleaning and maintenance work, moving trash cans away from the benches, providing supplies for dog clean-up, and replacing the flags at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. The fountain could also use a little sprucing up, and more plants could be used.

There was some disagreement over whether or not the NPS should install restrooms in the Square. Some participants thought this would provide a necessary visitor service, but others expressed concern that this might lead to an increased number of homeless people loitering on the Square.

2. Participants expressed a desire for **improved communication** about what's going on in the Square. This could include better promoting Veterans Day activities (and other events that commemorate the historical aspects of the park as a cemetery). Large events that are already held in the Square could be publicized in local papers, in surrounding high rises and on the INHP website. Participants suggested providing more information about the Square within the Square itself, for example by installing boxes with brochures or informational pamphlets.



In particular, communication could be improved by **working more closely with partners** such as neighborhood associations or the Independence Visitor Center Corporation, to promote activities in the Square. This improved communication could also help improve the coordination between the various neighborhood groups, “Friends” groups and others involved in Washington Square. This could also help relationships between these groups and some of the local schools and daycare centers that frequent the park.

Participants also suggested that communication could be improved by better **use of signs**. Signs could be posted that clarify rules regarding the park, what activities are or are not allowed. Participants also suggested putting up more interpretive signs, about the Square and its history and about the trees and plants in the Square.

3. Many participants wanted to see more **events** taking place in the Square, but there were different opinions as to what types of events would be appropriate for the Square. Some suggested having more memorial events, music and storytellers. For some, the most important thing was to make the Square more fun. As someone said, “the history lesson should be optional.” While some supported adding more visitor services such as a café to the Square, others in the discussion group opposed that idea on the grounds that it would add noise and clutter to the Square as well as compete with local businesses.

4. Participants in the public meeting generally wanted to **increase staffing** in Washington Square, through a variety of means. Some participants wanted to see more interpretive rangers in the Square. These rangers could give educational or interpretive programs in the Square. Some participants wanted to see more tours in the Square, for example foreign language tours. Volunteers or park partners could be used to provide increased staffing in the Square.

Other participants expressed a desire for more law enforcement rangers in the Square. Some suggested adding a 24/7 guard to the Square. This could also help address the homeless situation. Law enforcement rangers could patrol on foot or on bicycle. Some participants raised the question of whether the NPS could post a military honor guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

5. There was some feeling among participants that different areas of the Square should be identified for different **activities**. For example, some suggested creating a dedicated section for walking dogs. Others thought areas should be identified to separate quiet, contemplative activities from the more vibrant activities of children. There was some disagreement about this, as other participants thought this would result in “carving up the Square,” a potentially negative outcome.

## **How do you use the Square, how would you like to use the Square?**

1. Some participants use the Square to walk their **dogs**.
2. Some participants like to use the Square for **fun activities or events**. There were a wide variety of opinions as to what appropriate activities for the Square might be, and some participants expressed concern about having too many, or too loud, activities. Some suggestions that were shared include: a “Fair in the Square”; a fund-raiser during the summer to raise funds for park up-keep; community or



neighborhood events; an art show; a dog show; events related to the history of the businesses surrounding Washington Square; First Fridays on Washington Square; outdoor movies; concerts and other evening activities. Some participants stressed that activities must be “tasteful,” quiet, and not involve loud music.

3. Other participants focused on a desire for more **recreational activities** rather than events. Again, there were a wide variety of opinions. Some suggestions included: children’s play areas; Tai Chi; checkers; activities for seniors; nature walks.

4. Participants identified **relaxation** as a key activity they do in the park, which often requires peace and quiet. Some quiet activities that participants enjoy and would like to keep doing include: reading; picnicking; relaxing on the benches (when available); people watching. Participants liked using Washington Square for these activities because they see it is as a great open space and they feel safe.