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FIERCE-LY SEEKING SAFE HARBOR ON THE WATERFRONT

Should financing flow again for the redevelopment of Pier 40, gay youth are speaking up for their goals to be included in the planning. > *By Nekoro Gomes*



Jojo Edwards, right, and other FIERCE members perform at the white paper release event held earlier this month. *Photos by Alice Proujansky*

Joseph “Jojo” Edwards, 21, first joined the youth organization FIERCE a year ago, while looking for emergency housing for a friend who had been kicked out of her family home after coming out as a lesbian.

“We spent the whole night out because I didn’t want her to be out on the streets by herself,” Edwards said. His introduction to the group led him to a greater awareness of challenges facing lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) youth in New York City – including the pressures they feel even at the unique “safe space” that is the Christopher Street pier in the West Village, officially known as Pier 45.

During a recent presentation by FIERCE of recommendations for the redevelopment of nearby Pier 40, Edwards gave voice to a community for whom the Hudson River piers mean more than just a place for recreation and enjoyment. “What about those with no place to call home?” he asked. “Do they just fade away into darkness?”

The group – whose name stands for Fabulous, Independent, Educated Radicals for Community Empowerment – released a white paper entitled *Expanding Access to Public Space at the Hudson River Park*, which calls for a greater role for the LGBTQ community in discussion over future development on Pier 40—an opportunity they believe was missed in the redevelopment of the Christopher Street Pier.

The Christopher Street pier has been considered a haven for the city’s LGBTQ community for decades. But in 2003, after the pier was re-opened to the public following three years of renovations, many of the younger LGBTQ people of color that congregate at the pier noticed more subtle changes in how their community was being treated by park authorities.

“I felt accepted,” says Edwards about his discovery of the pier a year and a half ago. “But I also felt as though things were moving against me at the same time, as though I wasn’t really welcome here.”

During the white paper release event, many FIERCE members said they’ve been harassed by parks police officers, and

they object to the post-renovation institution of a "curfew" at 1 a.m. – which is actually the official closing time park-wide – and the closing of public bathrooms hours earlier. Members also point to the higher price of concessions, expensive event permit fees, and entertainment programming aimed at other demographics as changes that make them feel less welcome.



Keen Berger, left, and Vern Fry, members of the Social Service Committee of CB2, attended the FIERCE event because they support the pier as "a community resource."

"We all have the right to public access to the park, right?" asked FIERCE organizer Desiree Marshall. "Tonight we're going to demonstrate to everybody how this is going to be possible."

FIERCE sees an opportunity now to steer the remaking of Pier 40 as a welcoming site for the city's LGBTQ community – and the people of the immediate neighborhoods more generally. It's due for a renovation both because it's structurally unstable, and because it's part of the in-progress Hudson River Park, a five-mile stretch of the waterfront from Battery Place to 59th Street. Even as the pier's future is debated, it presently serves as the busy home to many youth soccer games, as well as housing parking and offices. But FIERCE is calling for a clearer commitment to the need for public space in the language of the 1998 act that established the park – and in concrete terms, that could develop into a desired 24-hour drop-in center for LGBTQ youth.

The act established the Hudson River Park Trust, a group made up of members appointed by the governor, mayor and Manhattan borough president to oversee the park's operation, design and development. The white paper contends that decision makers have consistently favored private interests over the community's needs, most notably in the trust's call last year for an amendment to the act which would extend the lease term for developers interested in building on the pier from 30 to 49 years.

Plans are suspended at present both because of the financial crisis, and because the trust rejected two very different requests-for-proposals for the site last year. The first proposal, from CampGroup LLC and Urban Dove (and backed by FIERCE) would have established more athletic fields at the site for both day camps and community uses.

According to the white paper, this proposal was rejected because of concerns by the trust over its financial viability. The second proposal by the mega-developer Related Companies would have established a performing arts center at Pier 40, and was rejected by the trust because the 30-year lease established in the act was too short for this project to be financially viable.

Rickie Mananzala, FIERCE's Executive Director, estimates preliminary costs for building a drop-in center at Pier 40 at \$3 million and says the project could take anywhere from two to four years to be built. But the group anticipates that federal stimulus money expected to go toward structural repairs would ease the financial need for a private developer to take over management of the pier, paving the way for an LGBTQ community center.

"In this time of a severe budget crunch," Mananzala said, "we're asking elected officials to really advocate to make sure that

services go to the people that need them the most.”

“One private developer shouldn't be able to determine the future of over one million square feet of public land,” he continued.

Friends of Hudson River Park, a nonprofit formed to support the park, agrees with FIERCE's priority of community involvement, said Executive Director A.J. Pietrantone – but he thinks there's been plenty of open dialogue all along. “I think the issues they raise are important,” said Pietrantone, who hadn't yet reviewed the white paper. But “we're not big fans of amending the Hudson River Park Act at this point ... It could set a precedent that could complicate the process moving forward” in the development of other sections.

Meanwhile, the role of commercial enterprise is a “hallmark” of the park, Pietrantone said. No city or state tax money is used for operations, so other revenue generation is necessary to the park's existence.

Through spokesman John Marino, the Trust issued a statement, saying it “will continue to try to implement a development strategy for Pier 40 that meets our objectives of ensuring the structural integrity of the pier, consistency with the Hudson River Park Act, and generating sufficient revenue to maintain and operate Hudson River Park well into the future. The Hudson River Park Trust is now in discussions with its board members, elected officials, and community representatives to re-examine the best course of action as it relates to development at Pier 40.”

For his part, State Senator Tom Duane, who represents the area, commends FIERCE for working with Community Board 2 and other elected officials on Pier 40's development process, but says any talk of future development regarding the site is still premature.

“We can't even get up to the point of whether a commercial proposal would end up [including] a LGBTQ youth center ... we just don't know,” says Duane. “For anyone to use the space on the pier we have to first make sure it doesn't collapse into the river.”