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The Villager

Rats rampage at KFC, but face park counteroffensive

By amNY 0 comments Posted on March 6, 2007



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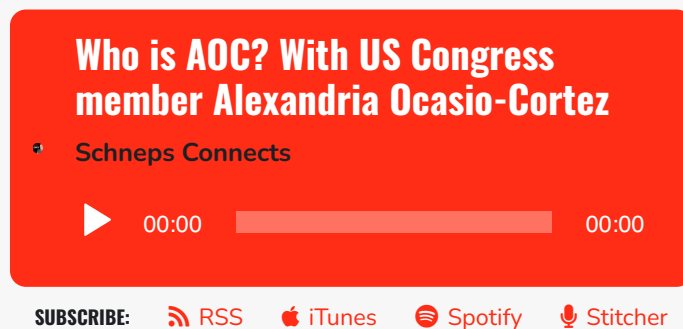
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By Kristin Edwards

It may be the Year of the Pig in the Chinese calendar, but last week it was the Week of the Rat in Greenwich Village.

The rats of Greenwich Village have become the city's newest celebrities after a television news crew spotted them using the KFC-Taco Bell restaurant on Sixth Ave. as their personal playground. The video, which showed nearly a dozen rats scampering on the floor and climbing up onto the seats and high chairs, caused a sensation across the nation, with the video aired on various news programs and streamed on Web sites such as YouTube.

Rats remain a citywide concern and, in the Village at least, the rat population continues to grow. Washington Square Park has seen an increase in infestation this year, which the Parks Department has been working to keep under control.



Earlier this month, the Washington Square News, New York University's student newspaper, announced the university's involvement in fighting the rat problem in and around the square. Administrators told W.S.N. they would be fighting the infestation problems, which had increased on campus, and that Parks would be handling the problem in the park.

Sharon Woolums lives near the park and has seen how bad the problem has become. Woolums said she noticed an increase in rats over the summer. In fact, Woolums even witnessed a rat run right over a man's foot in broad daylight.

"It was right on the northwest corner [of the square]," Woolums said.

Woolums said the rat problem was worse at night, “and when it rains, my goodness, they’re everywhere,” she added.



Woolums pointed at the garbage as part of the problem.

“I don’t think they empty their garbage at night,” she said, regarding the park’s trashcans. Also, Woolums noted, “I used to see signs warning about rat pesticides, but I don’t see those anymore.”

“We have been baiting the park once a week to kill the rats,” said Cristina DeLuca, a Parks spokesperson. In addition, Parks has installed new garbage cans with rat-proof lids in the park, DeLuca said.

As a Villager photographer was attempting to document the rat infestation on Saturday night, a park regular — a marijuana dealer who goes by the name Bones — filled her in about the situation. Bones said he had noticed the new trashcans on Saturday and that they seem better, since the rats can’t climb into them,

either from below or above, to get at the garbage. Bones reported that while he did see some rats on Saturday night, it was much less than what he had seen earlier in the week. He showed the photographer a dead rat and also a slow-moving rat that he had noticed earlier.



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Since the KFC was closed because of health violations relating to the rat infestation there, the next-best option to baiting the rats for a photo shoot proved to be a cheeseburger. As soon as the burger was placed on the ground, one rat made a beeline for it, going for the meat right away.

DeLuca said: “We began covering the approximately 80 garbage cans in the park with rat-proof lids a couple of weeks ago and we completed the installation last week.

“Any park that is used by a heavy lunch crowd can experience rat problems,” she added.

“However, we are aware of the concerns and are taking steps to address them. Rats are a systemic problem in parks throughout the city

and we regularly bait the parks for rats, but it is difficult to totally eradicate the problem. Lunchgoers can help us in reducing rats in New York City parks by properly disposing their garbage and calling 311 to report rat problems.”

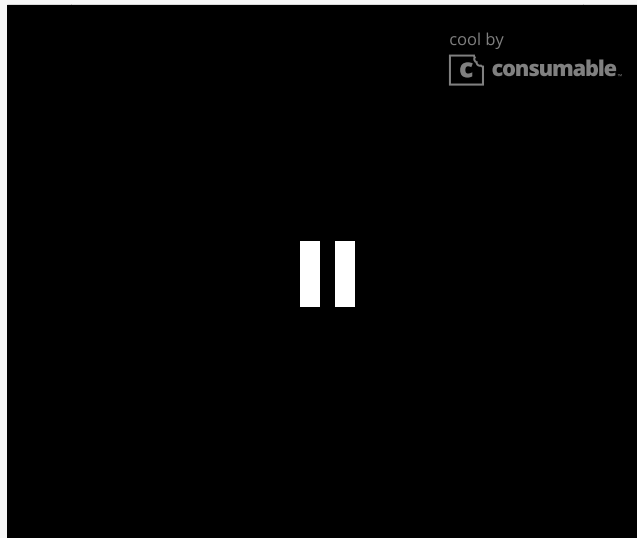


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The rat infestation problem comes amid the ongoing debate surrounding the park. In the planning for more than two years, the proposed \$16 million renovation of the park is now stalled in the courts in the face of community and environmental lawsuits.

Woolums, who opposes the proposed renovation and whose group Emergency Coalition to Save Washington Square Park is a plaintiff, said, “If Parks had been allowed to have their way with their original [renovation] plan” and the park had been torn up for the project, the rats might have spread out to neighboring areas. Woolums said such a dispersal would put residents’ homes at risk of infestation.

David Gruber, president of the Carmine St. Block Association, said he saw an increase in rats in his neighborhood during the initial stages of renovation of Father Demo Square. Gruber said the KFC-Taco Bell infestation is an unrelated event, since the Demo Square rat problem has settled down since then and the rats hadn't spread that far.



Some say that, not the KFC-Taco Bell or Demo Square, but the mounds — the three, small, currently cordoned-off climbing hills in Washington Square Park — are, in fact, the nexus of the Village's rat population. Indeed, Parks has long wanted to raze the mounds, which have been frequently criticized as being virtual "rat condos."

Eliza Nichols, a mounds advocate, strongly disputes this claim, calling it a “very good excuse” to destroy the three asphalt-covered humps. Nichols said this rumor was a scare tactic.

“The Parks Department has always hated the mounds,” Nichols said, explaining that she feels Parks just wants to flatten the whole park and make it more unified looking. Nichols has been fighting for more than 10 years to renovate the mounds, with little tangible success. The mounds, Nichols said, are great for children.

“They’re fun for children, they are great for exercise and an efficient use of space,” she said. In the winter, she said, “kids can sit on top and see the whole park” and go sledding on them.

Nichols explained that she has had multiple petitions signed showing support for the mounds. Nichols said Parks said they would renovate the mounds if the mounds supporters would fund it. Nichols has started many

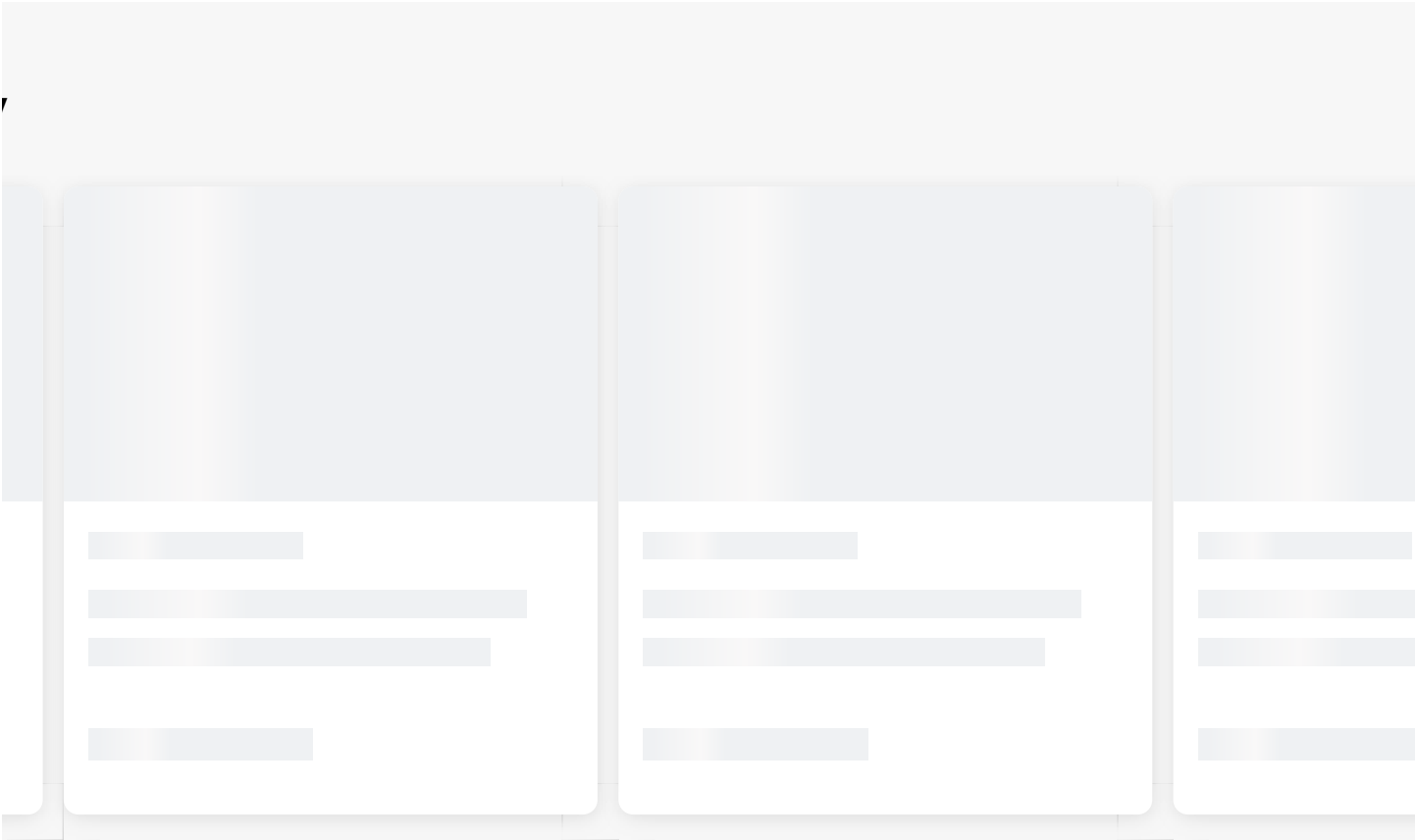
petitions and even raised money to renovate the diminutive hillocks. Despite assurance from Parks both in person and in writing, the mounds remain closed off.

When The Villager photographer and Bones were scouting out the area on Saturday night, they noticed many rats around the mounds.

Said Parks' DeLuca: "The mounds have been closed off for years because they are unsafe for children to play on. As part of the overall renovation of Washington Square Park, the mounds will eventually be reconstructed."

With reporting by Esther Martin








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