

COMMITTEE ON PARKS AND RECREATION

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CITY COUNCIL
CITY OF NEW YORK

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

Of the

COMMITTEE ON PARKS AND RECREATION

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March 1, 2024
Start: 1:15 p.m.
Recess: 3:20 p.m.

HELD AT: COMMITTEE ROOM - CITY HALL

B E F O R E: Shekar Krishnan, Chairperson

COUNCIL MEMBERS:

David M. Carr
Robert F. Holden
Linda Lee
Julie Menin
Mercedes Narcisse
Vickie Paladino
Sandra Ung

OTHER COUNCIL MEMBERS ATTENDING:

Gale A. Brewer

A P P E A R A N C E S

Sue Donoghue, Commissioner for New York City Parks

Matt Drury, Chief of Citywide Legislative Affairs at New York City Parks

Iris Rodriguez-Rosa, First Deputy Commissioner at New York City Parks

Emily Chase, Assistant Commissioner for Public Programs at New York City Parks

Shanna Blanchard, Water Safety Coalition

Nora Cronin, Program Director at Friends of Plus Pool

Sherrise Palomino, Director of Advocacy and Programs in New Yorkers for Parks

Shawn Slevin, Executive Director and founder of Swim Strong Foundation

Kaitlin Krause, Founder and Executive Director of Rising Tide Effect

Sharon Levy, Senior Vice President for Public Affairs at the YMCA of Greater New York

Eric Goldstein, New York City Environment Director at the Natural Resources Defense Council

Justin Green, Executive Director of Big Reuse

2 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: This is a microphone
3 check for the Committee on Parks and Recreation.
4 Today's date is March 1, 2024, located in the
5 Committee Room, recorded by Steve Sadowski.

6 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Good afternoon, ladies
7 and gentlemen. Welcome to the Committee on Parks.
8 We're getting ready to commence the meeting.

9 Please silence all electronic devices.

10 From this moment on, do not approach the
11 dais. If you need anybody from behind the dais, just
12 reach out to me and I'll help you get in touch with
13 that individual.

14 If you're testifying online and you want
15 to submit, or anybody that's here, if you want to
16 submit testimony for the record later on, you can
17 submit it to testimony@council.nyc.gov. Again, that
18 is testimony@council.nyc.gov.

19 Chairman, we're ready to begin.

20 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you so much,
21 Sergeant. Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Shekar
22 Krishnan. I'm the Chair of our City's Council's
23 Committee on Parks and Recreation and want to welcome
24 you all for today's very important hearing on how the
25 City can improve water safety and increase access to

2 our beaches and pools. Now, as we said earlier today
3 at our press conference before the hearing, and I'm
4 glad to see all the organizations and groups who are
5 here who do such excellent work alongside our Parks
6 Department to ensure that all New Yorkers know how to
7 swim, we are a city surrounded by water on all sides.
8 The climate crisis has only painfully reminded us of
9 how much that's true, whether it's our beaches and
10 pools or our coastal flooding, or even flooding
11 within our communities that we see. Learning how to
12 swim as a life-saving skill, and it is crucial that
13 all New Yorkers know how to be safe in the water,
14 know how to swim, and can protect themselves, because
15 we've seen far too many and read far too many stories
16 every year of children who have tragically drowned in
17 the Rockaways or Coney Island every summer. In fact,
18 drowning is the second leading cause of death for
19 children between the ages of 5 and 15 years old. We
20 also know that we only have in total about 91 pools
21 in the city, 74 outdoor pools and about 17 or so
22 indoor pools, but with a city of 8 million residents,
23 that's one pool for every 91,000 residents in our
24 city. It's simply not enough. On top of that, we know
25 this issue of water safety and swimming is

2 fundamentally an issue of racial justice. Communities
3 of color have far less access to pools and swimming
4 programs than white and wealthier communities in the
5 city. Black children in particular die at a rate of
6 five times greater because of drowning than white
7 children. The racial disparities of not knowing how
8 to swim are stark. On every front, from a safety
9 standpoint, from a climate standpoint, from a racial
10 justice standpoint, the urgency of being able to swim
11 and be safe in the water could not be greater, and
12 the purpose of this hearing is to really call
13 attention to this issue and how it deserves far more
14 public attention from our city.

15 Now we know millions of people make use
16 of the city's beaches and pools each year, and the
17 pandemic highlighted the extent of how crucial our
18 parks, pools, and beaches are for New Yorkers like
19 never before. Since the recovery from the pandemic,
20 attendance at pools and beaches has soared, and I
21 know this upcoming season will see an additional
22 increase. Therefore, we have to be prepared to meet
23 this increased usage with enough resources to
24 sufficiently meet the public's safety and
25 recreational needs. The Parks Department itself,

2 under their jurisdiction, there are currently 53
3 locations with outdoor swimming pools, 17 mini pools,
4 and 12 indoor swimming pools which are located in
5 recreation centers. Outdoor pools are free and open
6 to the public, typically from late June through early
7 September. There are also nine beaches covering 14
8 miles, which are open from Memorial Day weekend
9 through the Sunday after Labor Day each year, with
10 lifeguards on duty daily from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. The
11 city's pools and beaches represent some of the best
12 examples of how municipal resources can be used to
13 serve residents from all walks of life, particularly
14 low-income and working-class New Yorkers, who
15 otherwise would not have had the means to vacation or
16 seek recreation outside of New York City during the
17 stifling summer months. That, however, just like
18 Parks, does not mean these services have reached
19 their full potential to adequately meet the needs and
20 access for everyone. For example, equitable access
21 remains an ongoing issue. Using a similar metric that
22 is typically used to determine access to open space,
23 65 percent of Manhattan residents are able to walk to
24 a pool in 15 minutes or less, followed by the Bronx
25 with 34 percent, Brooklyn with 31 percent, Staten

2 Island with 19 percent, and Queens, my home, with
3 only 12 percent of residents able to walk to a pool
4 in 15 minutes or less, 12 percent of residents able
5 to walk to a pool. Further, although there are 64
6 Parks locations that contain pools, there are 18
7 Council Districts including my own in Jackson Heights
8 and Elmhurst that currently have no public pools.
9 This includes areas like Lower Manhattan, South
10 Brooklyn, most of Queens, like my District. Clearly,
11 we can do better with focusing our resources on where
12 we can build more pools and expand access.

13 On that note, I want to also highlight
14 the excellent Committee Report prepared by our Parks
15 Committee Staff here in the Council, and in
16 particular, the Council Data Team, which put
17 together, just like last year when we had this
18 hearing, this year too put together really excellent
19 maps that show exactly which Districts have pools,
20 which Districts like my own have none, that's on page
21 10 of the Committee Report, and on page 11 which
22 Districts have Access to a pool within a walk of 15
23 minutes. Again, my own in Jackson and Elmhurst shows
24 up as a zero on both, zero public pools and zero
25 within a walking distance of 15 minutes to get access

2 to a pool, but really, a lot of credit to our Council
3 Data Team, our Parks Committee for putting together
4 an excellent set of maps that highlight visually the
5 stark inequities when it comes to pool and swimming
6 access.

7 Of course, these are facets of the
8 problem, but there's more. The continued lifeguard
9 shortage is also deeply problematic. The Parks
10 Department has historically assigned around 1,400
11 lifeguards to beaches and pools throughout the city
12 by July 4th. However, during the 2022 beach and pool
13 season, the Parks Department only hired 778
14 lifeguards by July. Last year, there were only 480
15 lifeguards to start the season in May. Pools and
16 beaches remained open. However, as a result of the
17 shortage, DPR altered opening hours and had to limit
18 swim programs, including Lap Swim, Senior Swim, and
19 Learn to Swim at outdoor pools. To its credit, the
20 Parks Department has recognized the problem and
21 reacted by raising lifeguard pay rates from 2022
22 through this year. It also engaged in numerous
23 efforts to start the recruitment process earlier and
24 adjusted training and testing regimen and efforts to
25 increase the number of potential applicants, but the

2 shortage persists and impacts public safety. This
3 shortage has real life consequences. Sadly, four
4 people drowned last year off of the city beaches, all
5 of them when lifeguards were off duty and three
6 drowned the year before that, but there have been
7 years with more drownings. In 2019, there were at
8 least seven at Rockaway Beach alone. Many of these
9 drowning deaths have occurred in the Rockaways, where
10 the currents are fierce, and those who lack
11 sufficient swimming or water safety skills often find
12 themselves in very dangerous situations. Lifeguards
13 here make frequent saves and having a sufficient
14 number of them is absolutely critical, is literally
15 life-saving.

16 That's why this morning, with my
17 Colleagues in the Council and all our organizations,
18 we announced a Five-Point Plan to improve water
19 safety, a focus of our Parks Committee and this City
20 Council, and I should also add, follows Speaker Adams
21 State of the City last year, where she highlighted
22 the issues of swim access as a top priority of this
23 Council's.

24 The first point in our Five-Point Plan,
25 the City should expand the hours and seasons for

2 pools and beaches. To be safe in the water, New
3 Yorkers need to be exposed to the water. Outdoor
4 public pools and beaches should be open to families
5 when weather allows on a schedule that accommodates
6 working parents and their children. The bill I've
7 sponsored, Intro. 275, would mandate that operating
8 hours should be from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. and the bathing
9 season should run from mid-May to mid-October, which
10 also reflects the reality, unfortunately because of
11 climate change, of warmer weather earlier in the
12 season, as we're seeing today, and later into the
13 fall. This bill and these expanded hours will add
14 four hours each day and seven weeks each season,
15 effectively doubling the time that New Yorkers can
16 use outdoor pools and beaches.

17 Next, point two, the Department of
18 Education should create a Junior Lifeguard Corps. We
19 are approaching year five of a severe lifeguard
20 shortage. It's an issue also of not only not having
21 enough applicants, but not having a pipeline of those
22 who can apply for the position. This lifeguard
23 shortage doesn't just put families at risk of
24 drowning when they call off in public waters, it also
25 forces closures, depriving New Yorkers of access, and

2 DOE should launch a Junior Lifeguard Corps, using
3 students, school pools, and city or a great non-
4 profit organization staff to provide training to city
5 students who will be able to satisfy physical
6 education requirements, work towards a rewarding
7 career, and spend their summers as youth saving
8 lives.

9 Third, we must expand free swim
10 instruction for all New Yorkers. One in four New York
11 City children doesn't know how to swim. They'll grow
12 up to be an adult afraid of the water. The Parks
13 Department and DOE should work with non-profits to
14 ensure universal access to free swim instruction for
15 second graders, for all adults, for all New Yorkers.
16 This is especially crucial since these programs are
17 potentially slated for cuts in the Administration's
18 proposed budget. In fact, cuts to the Learn to Swim
19 program that Mayor Adams himself funded last year are
20 now being rolled back, shockingly. We also see how
21 private funding was needed to be raised to create new
22 swim programs as a bulwark against what would be a
23 terrible hit to public water safety programs. I want
24 to recognize our Colleague, Council Member Julie
25 Menin and I, who worked together to create a pilot

2 program for 2,000 second graders to access with
3 private foundation funding from the Gray Foundation,
4 access to free swim instruction. It's an example of
5 what we can do, what really needs to happen when
6 government doesn't live up to its expectations. We've
7 stepped in to keep it moving forward, but there's
8 more that can be done.

9 Fourth, we must build more pools. More
10 than two thirds of New Yorkers, as you saw in my
11 District 2, do not have access to a single public
12 pool. Not even one nearby. We cannot ensure that New
13 Yorkers are safe in the water if they cannot access
14 pools. We must build more pools in every borough,
15 prioritizing the communities that lack them, and we
16 have to get creative about doing so.

17 Lastly, our Five-Point Plan calls for the
18 City and working on legislation to create an atlas of
19 aquatics programs in our city. Aquatics programs,
20 swim instruction, swim classes, or other aquatics
21 programs can help New Yorkers if we know when, where,
22 and how to find them. The Parks Department should
23 create a public, searchable, web-based map listing
24 both public and non-profit pools and beaches as well
25 as programs available at each site. The map should

2 link directly to registration pages for these
3 programs. I know the Parks Department has one when it
4 comes to the Learn to Swim program. I think it could
5 be more user friendly, but more importantly, we need
6 a larger website, a one-stop shop, where families
7 like my own, when my kids who need to learn how to
8 swim, when my wife and I go to look online, it is
9 very difficult to find in a centralized place all the
10 programs in New York City Parks but also non-profit
11 organizations to know what is available and how we
12 can sign up our own children for swim classes. In
13 light of the upcoming beach season, it is time for
14 the City to fully dedicate itself to fully investing
15 in all that our beaches and pools need to not only
16 operate sufficiently but fully thrive long into the
17 future.

18 Last but not least, we'll switch gears a
19 little bit of a detour, but we do it all in this
20 Parks Committee in this hearing and consider another
21 bill on composting. Intro. number 130 sponsored by my
22 great Colleague and friend, Council Member Gale
23 Brewer. This bill would build on the crucial work the
24 City is engaged in to reach its zero waste goals and
25 increase the diversion of organic waste by requiring

2 the Department of Sanitation and the Parks Department
3 to establish composting facilities for plant waste
4 collection near the 10 largest parks in each borough
5 throughout the city no later than by July 1, 2027.
6 When Council Member Brewer comes back from her other
7 hearing, she'll give a statement on that bill as
8 well.

9 These issues are all connected. Parks,
10 green space, composting. I look forward to further
11 discussing these issues today and welcome all who
12 have come to testify today. The Colleagues who have
13 joined us today, We thank you all for our Committee
14 Hearing, Council Member Linda Lee, Council Member
15 Julie Menin, Council Member Bob Holden, Council
16 Member David Carr, Council Member Vickie Paladino.

17 Now, I'd like to ask our Committee
18 Counsel, Kris Sartori, to swear on the witnesses to
19 begin their testimony.

20 COMMITTEE COUNSEL SARTORI: Thank you,
21 Chair.

22 Would Commissioner Donoghue and the
23 representatives from the Parks Department please
24 raise your right hand if you're able?
25

2 Do you affirm to tell the truth, the
3 whole truth, and nothing but the truth in your
4 testimony before this Committee and to respond
5 honestly to Council Member questions?

6 ADMINISTRATION: (INAUDIBLE)

7 COMMITTEE COUNSEL SARTORI: Thank you.
8 Please begin.

9 COMMISSIONER DONOGHUE: Good afternoon,
10 Chair Krishnan, Members of the Parks Committee, and
11 other Members of the City Council who are with us
12 today. I'm Sue Donoghue, the Commissioner for New
13 York City Parks. I'm pleased to be joined today by
14 our First Deputy...

15 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Sorry,
16 Commissioner, do you mind just moving the microphone
17 a bit closer?

18 COMMISSIONER DONOGHUE: Not at all.

19 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you.

20 COMMISSIONER DONOGHUE: I'm pleased to be
21 joined today by our First Deputy Commissioner, Iris
22 Rodriguez-Rosa, as well as other great members of my
23 team. We have our Assistant Commissioner for Public
24 Programs, Emily Chase, on the dais with us as well as

2 Matt Drury, our Chief of Citywide Legislative
3 Affairs.

4 New York City Parks has long been
5 committed to improving New Yorkers quality of life
6 through aquatic recreation, promoting health,
7 fitness, and safety awareness at all of our pools and
8 beaches. Whether cooling off in the summer or getting
9 fit in the winter, there's nothing like a refreshing
10 swim in one of our indoor or outdoor pools, and as
11 you all well know, our city beaches are the primary
12 getaway summer destination for millions of New
13 Yorkers when the temperatures start to rise. I'd like
14 today to begin by offering a brief overview of the
15 beaches and pools under our jurisdiction. In addition
16 to the 148 miles of waterfront parkland, our agency
17 maintains over 14 miles of public beaches, which we
18 manage as nine separate beach areas located at
19 various points along New York City's shoreline, all
20 of which are open to the public for swimming and
21 other recreational activities completely for free.
22 Our beaches are open for swimming from Memorial Day
23 weekend through the week after Labor Day.

24 New York City Parks also has a total of
25 65 public pool facilities under our jurisdiction, 45

2 of which, nearly 70 percent, are located in
3 neighborhoods that have been declared environmental
4 justice areas or potential environmental justice
5 areas as defined by the EJNYC Report, which
6 identified low-income and/or minority communities
7 based on U.S. Census data. 53 of our 65 facilities
8 host outdoor pools, ranging in size from the massive
9 Olympic pools at Van Cortlandt Park in the Bronx and
10 McCarren Park in Brooklyn, which is 330 feet long and
11 well over four feet deep, to our medium-sized
12 intermediate pools, down to the wonderful mini pools
13 located in many of our playgrounds, where kids can
14 splash and enjoy the cool water on a hot day.

15 Many of our larger outdoor pool
16 facilities offer smaller wading pools, primarily used
17 by younger children and their families alongside the
18 larger, deeper pools. One of these iconic larger
19 pools, Astoria Pool in Queens, originally opened on
20 July 4th of 1936. One of president Franklin D
21 Roosevelt's New Deal Public Works projects that
22 helped the country recover from the Great Depression.
23 The nearly 100-year-old is the city's oldest and
24 largest, over a full acre in size. We're thrilled to
25 announce that this historic facility will be

2 reopening to the public this summer, having undergone
3 a full-scale renovation, a 19-million-dollar
4 investment in this beloved community amenity. We've
5 reconstructed the pool shell, installed new
6 filtration, recirculation and treatment systems, and
7 upgraded other elements to improve pool operations
8 and provide a more enjoyable experience for pool
9 visitors. We're looking forward to reopening the pool
10 at the start of our outdoor season in late June so
11 Queens residents and other New Yorkers from all over
12 the city can once again enjoy this revitalized public
13 space. We invite anyone on the committee to join us
14 in jumping in that day for our pool opening.

15 The remaining 12 of our 65 facilities
16 host indoor pools, usually located within larger New
17 York City Parks Recreation Centers. New York City
18 Park's indoor pools are crucial in delivering
19 swimming opportunities to New Yorkers year-round. Our
20 indoor pools are nearly all intermediate-sized,
21 roughly 60 to 70 feet long, except for the larger
22 Olympic pool at the Aquatic Center at Flushing
23 Meadows Corona Park. With an NYC Recreation Center
24 membership, which is completely free for anyone 24 or
25 younger and available to adults and seniors for a

2 very, very low cost, New Yorkers can enjoy our indoor
3 pools and our robust offerings of aquatic programming
4 for no additional cost whatsoever. We are pleased to
5 be working in partnership with New York City DDC to
6 advance two new recreation center projects that will
7 include indoor pools, the 141-million-dollar Shirley
8 Chisholm Recreation Center at Nostrand Playground in
9 Brooklyn, and a brand new 131-million-dollar
10 recreation center facility at Roy Wilkins Park in
11 Southeast Queens. These will be the first new New
12 York City pools in over 15 years, delivering access
13 to state-of-the-art, recreational, and aquatic
14 facilities to the communities that need them most.

15 Beyond the important benefits for health
16 and fitness that aquatic programming can provide,
17 tragic drowning accidents over the years have proved
18 all too often that water safety and swim instruction
19 can save lives. Accidental drowning is the second
20 leading cause of unintentional injury related death
21 among children under the age of 14 with a
22 disproportionate impact on black and brown youth,
23 which is why we are very proud to offer a wide
24 variety of free aquatic programming and swim
25 instruction classes so that New Yorkers of any age

2 can learn vital water safety skills, develop healthy
3 fitness habits, and have fun in the water throughout
4 their lives. This takes place primarily through our
5 Learn to Swim program as well as through Swim for
6 Life, our targeted initiative conducted in
7 partnership with the New York City Department of
8 Education. Swim for Life focuses on second grade
9 students, providing them with top certified swim
10 instruction at our indoor pools during the school day
11 as a regular part of their weekly class schedule
12 reaching nearly 2,400 second grade students so far
13 this Fiscal Year. We also offer swim classes tailored
14 for adults and senior citizens, and over 9,000 New
15 Yorkers of all ages have taken advantage of our swim
16 instruction and other aquatics classes so far this
17 Fiscal Year, joining hundreds of thousands of others
18 that have benefited from our swim instruction
19 programs over the past decade. Lastly, we routinely
20 incorporate dry land water safety instruction into
21 our youth public programming, encouraging kids to be
22 water safe in different environments in and around
23 water, including water parks, oceans, lakes, and
24 rivers.

2 Keeping our beaches and pools clean,
3 enjoyable and safe is our top priority, and to make
4 it a reality, it takes an amazing team effort from an
5 incredibly hard-working staff, including our
6 maintenance and operations workers, aquatics
7 programming staff, Parks Enforcement Patrol and, of
8 course, our dedicated Corps of lifeguards.

9 As we've discussed with the Council, many
10 employers are still facing hiring challenges in a
11 post-COVID world, and it's been well-documented that
12 qualified lifeguards are in short supply across the
13 country. While many U.S. cities had to make difficult
14 choices in the last few years to close some or all of
15 their public beaches and pools or start charging
16 attendance fees, we're proud that New York City has
17 been able to keep all of our public pools and beaches
18 open for free public use, a testament to the City's
19 commitment to equitable access. Despite significant
20 operational challenges, 2023 was a successful summer
21 season for New York City Parks with millions of
22 visitors to our beaches and pools, and we look
23 forward to having New Yorkers come out and enjoy the
24 sun and fun all summer long.

2 We launched our lifeguard recruitment
3 efforts for the 2024 beach and pool season late last
4 year and are well underway in our training and
5 certification process to make the upcoming season as
6 successful as possible. We were pleased to recently
7 announced that the City has reached an agreement on a
8 new hourly wage of 22 dollars an hour for seasonal
9 lifeguards plus a 1,000 bonus for all returning
10 lifeguards that work through peak season. We've
11 continued to explore every avenue to recruit and
12 retain more qualified lifeguards for the 2024 season,
13 including increasing opportunities for potential
14 lifeguards to test and qualify. However, the reality
15 is that the entire nation is still facing a very
16 challenging environment for lifeguard hiring. Despite
17 these challenges, keeping our beachgoers safe will
18 continue to be our top priority, and our incredible
19 lifeguards will continue to be a core component of
20 our beach and pool operations.

21 I now turn to the legislation being
22 formally heard today, Intro. 275 and Intro. 130.

23 Intro. 275, as currently drafted, would
24 require New York City Parks to extend the hours of
25 operations of our beaches, outdoor pools, and indoor

2 pools, and would extend the beach and outdoor pool
3 operating season. We are reviewing this recently
4 proposed legislation and look forward to discussing
5 it further with the Council. We share the Council's
6 desire to offer as much access to our public spaces
7 as possible but need to be clear that the legislation
8 as drafted would present very substantial budgetary
9 and operational challenges, especially in light of
10 the existing hiring market and fiscal environment. We
11 are very proud of our extensive lifeguard recruitment
12 efforts and process improvements, but the stark
13 reality is that we still face a very challenging
14 environment for hiring, which means that the
15 expansion of the beach and pool season and operating
16 hours proposed by the legislation is unlikely to be
17 feasible any time in the foreseeable near future. We
18 have kept beaches and pools open for a week past
19 Labor Day for the past several years and have
20 consistently found that visitation decreases sharply
21 in the final weeks of the season. It's also important
22 to note that our staffing ranks begin to decrease as
23 the season nears its end since most of our seasonal
24 lifeguards are students that need to return to school

2 or summer employees such as teachers who need to
3 return to their primary occupation in the fall.

4 Intro. 130 would require DSNY to
5 establish facilities near the 10 largest city parks
6 to process leaf and wood waste from those parks. We
7 are reviewing this recently proposed legislation and
8 look forward to discussing it further with the
9 Council. We share the Council's support of
10 sustainable practices, and New York City Parks and
11 DSNY work together in a variety of ways to ensure
12 that yard and leaf waste collected from city parks
13 are kept out of landfills. We would be happy to work
14 with DSNY to provide the Council with more
15 information about those ongoing efforts.

16 We'd like to thank the Council for their
17 continued interest and advocacy regarding these
18 subjects, and we know how important water safety is
19 for all New Yorkers. If there are any questions on
20 the legislation or other related topics, we'd be
21 happy to answer those at this time.

22 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you so much,
23 Commissioner Donoghue and to Parks Department
24 leadership for all your work and for your testimony.

2 We'll start with some questions and turn
3 over to Colleagues that have questions as well, but
4 just want to get a sense of overall how many people
5 have visited the Parks Department pools and beaches
6 last season. How does that number compare to the last
7 few seasons?

8 COMMISSIONER DONOGHUE: Thank you, Council
9 Member, for the question. During the summer 2023
10 season, New York City beaches and outdoor pools had
11 over 12.7 million visitors. The beaches had almost 12
12 million visitors and our outdoor pools had over
13 900,000 visitors. That's consistent with what we've
14 been seeing since 2020, although the COVID-19
15 pandemic certainly has made it difficult. There's
16 been a lot of fluctuation, and so it's hard to say in
17 terms of numbers but, overall, we've seen strong
18 usership, absolutely.

19 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: How many, you
20 mentioned this before, but I just wanted to clarify
21 it again, but how many public pools are, of these 65
22 facilities, how many of them are actually open, and
23 how many are in rec centers versus other types of
24 pools?

2 COMMISSIONER DONOGHUE: Thank you, Council
3 Member, I heard the first part of your question, but
4 not the second part.

5 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: So just how many
6 public pools are there? I think you had testified 65
7 overall.

8 COMMISSIONER DONOGHUE: Yep.

9 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Are they all open?
10 If not, how many are actually open, and where are
11 they located?

12 COMMISSIONER DONOGHUE: You're right. We
13 have 65 public pool facilities. 58 of those 65 are
14 open to the public. Where they're open, we have two
15 in Queens, Metropolitan Pool, St. John's; four in
16 Manhattan, Asser Levy, Chelsea, Constance Baker
17 Motley, Gertrude Ederle; in Queens, Flushing Meadows
18 Corona Park and Roy Wilkins. The closed pools, there
19 are four of them, one in the Bronx, St. Mary's; in
20 Brooklyn, Brownsville; and then two in Manhattan,
21 Hansborough and Tony D'Apolito.

22 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Got it. I did want
23 to say that I'm glad to hear the news that Astoria
24 Park pool will be reopened in June.

25 COMMISSIONER DONOGHUE: Very excited.

2 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: I have to take a
3 rain check on that offer on the opening day of
4 jumping in. Maybe not. Okay, fine. The First Deputy
5 Commission has given me a look. All right, so I'll
6 revise my statement there, but I'll keep it open, but
7 I'm very excited to hear that pool will finally be
8 re-opened given that it serves so many Queens
9 residents and families, my own included.

10 Now, what did the budget allocate for
11 maintaining such beaches and pools?

12 COMMISSIONER DONOGHUE: Thank you for the
13 question, Council Member. The way our budget is
14 structured, it covers all boroughs and a diverse
15 range of properties and numerous different
16 programming opportunities so our budget is not
17 allocated by type of property such as beaches and
18 pools, but rather it's based on our need to serve New
19 Yorkers equitably. We don't look at it, as I said, by
20 property, but we're looking at it by borough and how
21 we are servicing New Yorkers overall.

22 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: I see. Okay. How
23 many swimming pools are located, and this is a bit
24 outside your jurisdiction, but I think if you have

2 the numbers too, how many swimming pools are located
3 on DOE, Department of Education, property?

4 COMMISSIONER DONOGHUE: Thank you for the
5 question, Council Member. I do not, at this time,
6 have the answer to that question. That would be a DOE
7 question to answer.

8 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Okay, it would be
9 helpful if you all can get us that information. It
10 would be a bit easier than checking with DOE, but if
11 you can let us know how many public school pools
12 there are.

13 Do you happen to know, are any of these
14 pools open to the general public or to groups other
15 than DOE students at any time?

16 COMMISSIONER DONOGHUE: The DOE pools?

17 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Yes.

18 COMMISSIONER DONOGHUE: Thank you for the
19 question. We are fortunate to have a great
20 partnership with DOE, and we do work closely with
21 them on our Swim for Life programming. We actually
22 have for many years worked in partnership with DOE
23 where they have students that we are able to train
24 with our aquatics professionals in DOE pools so they
25 are very much a great partner of ours in utilizing

2 and we are utilizing DOE pools. I also know that this
3 Administration has placed a priority on that kind of
4 interagency collaboration and in particular opening
5 up DOE facilities writ large, not just their pools,
6 but DOE facilities to the public.

7 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: I'm going to get
8 back to that interagency collaboration in a second,
9 but has Parks and DOE ever discussed opening these
10 pools for use by the public at times when schools are
11 not in session?

12 COMMISSIONER DONOGHUE: Our conversations
13 with DOE have largely been around partnering on
14 providing our swim programming and using our aquatics
15 instructors for swim instruction. As I said, we've
16 done that quite productively with DOE over the years.
17 In terms of opening up to the public, we've not
18 engaged in those conversations specifically, and that
19 would be more of a DOE question.

20 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: The reason why I
21 bring up these questions and the City Hall's stated
22 intention of interagency collaboration, here is a
23 great opportunity, and I'm wondering how we can
24 expand or think, I think to solve the water safety
25 and swimming crisis, we have to think more

2 expansively and creatively about how we harness all
3 the resources and tools available. You have the Parks
4 Department, public pools, we have the DOE school
5 pools. Oh, sorry. I think did you have information
6 you wanted to share?

7 COMMISSIONER DONOGHUE: Yeah. I think, as
8 I said, Council Member, it is a very close and very
9 productive partnership with DOE and would love to
10 tell you a little bit more about what we're doing
11 today.

12 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER CHASE: Thank you
13 for the question. I just wanted to add to
14 Commissioner's comment that we're currently working
15 in several DOE pools specifically, Evander Childs in
16 the Bronx, Far Rockaway Educational Campus in Queens,
17 and Curtis High School in Staten Island, and that's
18 to run our Swim for Life program five days a week at
19 Evander, two days a week at Far Rockaway, two days at
20 Curtis High School. We are actively working with them
21 at the moment.

22 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: That's good to
23 hear. Thank you for the information.

24 As I was just saying, I think in order to
25 solve this crisis, we have to think creatively and

2 ambitiously about how we open up and access more
3 pools, which will lead to more swim instruction, more
4 access for New Yorkers.

5 As I understand it, we have the Parks
6 pools, we have DOE school pools. There are
7 collaborations between Parks and DOE for programs in
8 DOE pools. Of course, Parks runs its own swim
9 programs within Parks pools, but what that seems to
10 be leaving out is a whole pool, no pun intended, of
11 non-profit organizations that do this work that
12 provide swim instruction. Do they have access to
13 either Parks pools for swim programs or to DOE pools
14 for programs?

15 COMMISSIONER DONOGHUE: Thank you, Council
16 Member, for the question. And again, I can just speak
17 to the Parks side of things, and we are always
18 looking for opportunities to partner with non-profit
19 organizations, and we do that extensively across the
20 Parks system. We are constrained by trying to provide
21 as much access for the public for our existing swim
22 programming, for Senior Swim, for Lap Swimming, and
23 so we have constraints on the use of our facilities,
24 and then there's also, as we have discussed,
25 constraints, around all of our swim programming is

2 free that we offer in our rec centers and facilities.
3 That's really important to us in terms of access, and
4 so that generally tends to be the issue is we would
5 just want to make sure that the program that is
6 provided through our facilities is free and open to
7 the public.

8 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: If non-profit
9 organizations were able to provide free swim
10 programs, would they be able to have access to Parks
11 pools to provide that?

12 COMMISSIONER DONOGHUE: Would absolutely
13 love to have that conversation and would be open to
14 having that conversation.

15 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Okay, because I
16 think, and I just noticed we've been also joined by
17 Council Member Sandra Ong and Council Member Mercedes
18 Narcisse as well. Thank you, Council Member. Very
19 nice to have you two.

20 The reason why I mention this is because
21 it seems to me that Parks Department will be able to
22 do a certain number of things to help provide free
23 swim instruction, but for a number of reasons, we're
24 not actually reaching the number of children who need
25 to learn how to swim. Families need access to pools,

2 whether it's the lifeguard crisis, whether it's
3 budgetary issues, and on that point, I do want to say
4 if this is the stated goal of the Mayor's to improve
5 some access, to invest in parks and green space, it
6 is unacceptable to be cutting from all of these
7 programs and to say that things like extending pool
8 and beach hours simply can't happen because there's
9 no funding for it. It's a matter of choices, and I
10 think here, it's an investment that would benefit all
11 New Yorkers, but if that is a stated reason where
12 these programs can't be expanded, where legislation
13 runs into concerns, whether or not I disagree with
14 that, and I do disagree with that, I do think that
15 there is a huge opportunity to bring a lot of swim
16 providers and organizations to partner, and together,
17 the number of people who can be served, the number of
18 New Yorkers, grows dramatically because these
19 organizations are also running great swim programs
20 too in their own facilities and so it seems to me the
21 collaboration between government agency and the non-
22 profit side could really expand the amount of New
23 Yorkers served and who have access to pools so would
24 love to hear more, continue the conversation about
25 what might be possible in terms of access to both

2 Parks Department pools, DOE pools too, and that is an
3 interagency collaboration that we can all be working
4 on together to find ways to essentially open up more
5 pools and open up more access for more organizations,
6 more classes. That's the only way, until we build
7 those public pools in the future, that we can make
8 sure all New Yorkers are at least safe in the water
9 or know how to swim, and it seems like we're leaving
10 a lot of those resources on the table.

11 On that point, can you please describe
12 for us right now, and you did a bit in your opening
13 statement, but also just what the Parks Department's
14 current swim lesson instruction program is, what is
15 the annual budget allocated to that program?

16 COMMISSIONER DONOGHUE: Thank you for the
17 question. As I said, we for years had a very robust
18 swim training program between our Learn to Swim
19 programming, our Swim for Life programming. To give
20 you some of the specifics, I'm going to hand it over
21 to Emily just to talk about what we do today.

22 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER CHASE: Thank you
23 so much, Commissioner, and thank you, Chair.

24 We are so proud to offer a wide variety
25 of swim instruction classes so that New Yorkers of

2 any age can learn those vital water safety skills,
3 develop healthy fitness habits, and just have fun in
4 the water throughout their lives. This takes place
5 primarily through our Learn to Swim program as well
6 as through Swim for Life, which I mentioned, our
7 targeted initiative conducted in partnership with
8 DOE, as we said.

9 Swim for Life as you may know, focuses on
10 second grade students. They come as a class, and it
11 provides them with swim instruction at our indoor
12 pools during the school day as part of their regular
13 day. Our approach to swim instruction also includes
14 dry land water safety instruction so once a year
15 around Water Safety Awareness Week, we make sure we
16 make sure to place a lot of emphasis on getting some
17 of those principles across so, as Commissioner
18 Donoghue said, people can be safe in different
19 environments in and around the water. We offer swim
20 lessons for all ages, tots right up through seniors.
21 We offer senior water aerobics and water ballet, and
22 we're really proud to introduce a new swim
23 improvement program which allows candidates that may
24 want to become a lifeguard to get in the water with
25 our trained aquatics specialists to learn where they

2 might be able to close that gap between their current
3 abilities and passing that lifeguard test so that's
4 something new we did this year. It's recommended for
5 those working on passing that NYC Parks lifeguard
6 qualifying test and we saw a lot of success with that
7 program. Just a little summary of some of our current
8 offerings.

9 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you for that
10 information.

11 Before I turn it over to my Colleagues
12 for some questions as well, I just spoke a bit about
13 the importance of exploring ways to ensure non-
14 profits have access to Parks pools and DOE pools. On
15 that same note, when it comes to swim programming,
16 has the Parks Department explored collaborations with
17 non-profit partners to expand the reach of swimming
18 instruction beyond City-owned facilities, so if
19 they're, whether it's school or DOE parks, that's one
20 category, but are there partnerships that Parks has
21 explored to collaborate with non-profits outside of
22 City facilities?

23 COMMISSIONER DONOGHUE: Thank you, Council
24 Member, for the question. We're pleased to sit on the
25 Lifeguard Task Force that's been formed. It was

2 formed last year. First time that that within the
3 city, all the non-profits, City agencies are sitting
4 at the table together, looking at opportunities to
5 collaborate, whether that be how do we recruit more
6 lifeguards, how do we get information out there about
7 programs, so it's been an important way that we're
8 all working together towards a common goal.

9 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Have there been any
10 discussions as part of that task force to find ways
11 to bring non-profit partners into programming efforts
12 as well outside of Parks facilities?

13 COMMISSIONER DONOGHUE: It is very much a
14 focus is to see about how we can expand programming
15 across the board. It's focused on how do we have more
16 opportunities for water safety and swim training,
17 absolutely.

18 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: What is the annual
19 budget allocated to the Swim for Life or Learn to
20 Swim programs that Parks runs?

21 COMMISSIONER DONOGHUE: As I said,
22 typically our budget isn't focused on facilities or
23 programming. It's more by borough so we're not able
24 to give you a specific number for those programs.

2 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: But there was an
3 increase in last year's budget that this
4 Administration put in for the Learn to Swim program,
5 I think, right?

6 COMMISSIONER DONOGHUE: Yes. Absolutely.
7 There was a proposal put forward for a 5-million-
8 dollar increase for our Swim for Life program to be
9 able to expand it, and as part of the PEG cuts in
10 November, all City agencies had to make really
11 difficult decisions in order to meet that PEG target.
12 The Mayor has spoken about the difficult, the
13 challenging fiscal environment, and the Parks
14 Department had to make very difficult decisions and
15 that was one of them, to not proceed forward with
16 that program. Again, a new program so it didn't have
17 staffing assigned to it. It meant that we didn't have
18 to cut people or employees, but it was just a program
19 that we weren't unfortunately able to start.

20 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: How were employees
21 or positions impacted? It's a new program, but how
22 were employees or positions impacted by the PEG,
23 whether it's this program or in general?

24 COMMISSIONER DONOGHUE: You mean writ
25 large by the budget cuts? So employees weren't

2 impacted by the cut in terms of this program because
3 it hadn't started yet, but in terms of our overall
4 peg we had a 5 percent PEG and a 25-million-dollar
5 reduction that we are incorporating and that will
6 impact our ability in terms of moving forward. We
7 will still continue to have our seasonal plan in
8 effect, but we are in part of a hiring freeze and
9 that kind of thing.

10 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: We'll get more into
11 that in the budget hearing.

12 COMMISSIONER DONOGHUE: We will.
13 Absolutely.

14 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: I'll save that for
15 then, but I will just say it is shocking that for an
16 Administration that seems to be committed or states
17 that is committed to swimming, to our parks and green
18 spaces, to see a program that City Hall, just to
19 reiterate, included for 5 million to expand Learn to
20 Swim, that same City Hall has cut that funding from
21 the Parks Department budget so we're not moving
22 forward in any way to actually achieve swim access
23 and water safety access for all New Yorkers. We're
24 actually taking steps backwards, and that's very
25 disappointing, but that is something that must be put

2 back in and quite shocking that they would, City Hall
3 would implement it, put the funding aside, and then
4 take that funding back.

5 I'll end there with the first round of
6 questions. I have some more on this topic, but I want
7 to turn it over to my Colleagues to ask some
8 questions as well.

9 I know we've been joined by Council
10 Member Brewer so we'll start with Council Member
11 Narcisse.

12 COUNCIL MEMBER NARCISSE: Good afternoon.
13 Chair. I appreciate you because we have the best
14 Chair for the Parks because you love parks and we
15 love it too, and thank you for coming to our
16 community.

17 My question is about swimming lessons. I
18 know the Chair been probably touching about that, one
19 thing, I don't have any, I only have a little bitty
20 swimming pool in my community, and I would like to
21 know if you have a current data on how many swimming
22 class going around the park right now for the lessons
23 in our city.

24 COMMISSIONER DONOGHUE: Thank you, Council
25 Member, for the question. As we've discussed here,

2 and as we've said in our testimony, it's an
3 incredibly important priority for the Parks
4 Department, and we have worked both internally to
5 provide programming and, as Assistant Commissioner
6 Chase said, to provide both as much swim program as
7 we can and partnering with DOE in order to have
8 programming in city schools. Also, as I said in my
9 testimony, opening two brand new rec centers that
10 will include indoor pools, which will be an
11 incredible asset we know, both at Roy Wilkins and the
12 Shirley Chisholm Rec Center, which we're excited
13 about, which will enable us to expand our programming
14 that we can do across the city.

15 In terms of the exact number of swim
16 classes that we hold today, Emily, do you want to
17 take that?

18 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER CHASE: Thank you
19 so much for the question. To give you an idea
20 currently we have a swim team happening, which,
21 forgive me, I didn't mention that program before.
22 Swim team is a great competitive program for kids who
23 are upping their skills and looking to be part of a
24 team environment. Swim team is happening at eight
25 pools across the city. Learn to Swim programming is

2 happening at seven pools. I'm speaking about indoor
3 pools here. Water aerobics and ballet and adaptive
4 aquatics are happening at seven pools across the
5 city, and Swim for Life programming is happening at
6 nine pools so six Parks pools, and the three DOE
7 pools that I mentioned so that gives you a sense of
8 some of our scale and scope.

9 COUNCIL MEMBER NARCISSE: Where are thy
10 located, those pools that we're talking about?

11 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER CHASE: In all of
12 our Indoor Recreation Center pools, which I can
13 rattle off here. In Brooklyn, we have Metropolitan
14 Pool and St. John's. In Manhattan, we have Asser
15 Levy, Chelsea, Constance Baker Motley, and Gertrude
16 Ederle. In Queens, we have Flushing Meadows Corona
17 Park and Roy Wilkins Pool. As I had mentioned before,
18 we work in the DOE pools, Evander, Far Rockaway, and
19 Curtis High School.

20 COUNCIL MEMBER NARCISSE: Okay. What do
21 you have around southeast of Brooklyn? Mainly by zip
22 code 11236, 34, 207, 208. Do you have any?

23 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER CHASE: I'd love to
24 get back to you with that specific information. We

2 can get back to you and follow up with some
3 specifics.

4 COUNCIL MEMBER NARCISSE: Okay, so what
5 I'm getting at is the inequities when it comes to
6 pools, because a lot of our children, they don't know
7 how to swim, and we end up losing them when they go
8 out in a picnic because they're trying to swim, and
9 swimming is very important, especially in their
10 underserved communities, right?

11 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER CHASE: If I may,
12 water safety, we try to keep it as an important part
13 of all of our programs, so those dry land activities
14 that focus not only on what you're doing in the pool
15 to improve your swim skills, but information for
16 families, to keep people safe in and around the
17 water, whether it's on a boat, or near a pond, lake,
18 beach, even outside New York City so focusing on
19 those overall concepts to help kids.

20 COUNCIL MEMBER NARCISSE: That was going
21 to be my next question. Water safety awareness. How
22 you do it, where you do it. Do you do it around where
23 they have pools or you do it throughout the city or
24 are you trying to do it with a park, even though we

2 don't have no pools, maybe we can be aware of the
3 safety.

4 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER CHASE: I think
5 that's a great idea. Thank you so much. As I said,
6 May 15th is International Water Safety Awareness Day.
7 I referenced this before. Each year, Citywide
8 Aquatics offers workshops supporting the cause of
9 raising global awareness of drownings and educating
10 youth how to be safe in and around the water. On
11 occasion, we've run other workshops outside of the
12 pool setting, like in classrooms, and that's
13 something that I always encourage our team to do
14 within our capacity, and we'd love to talk more about
15 how we can expand that.

16 COUNCIL MEMBER NARCISSE: Yeah. My Speaker
17 have a plan and I hope that plan come to reality very
18 soon to have pools all over throughout the city of
19 New York. Thank you. Thank you so much. Thank you.

20 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you so much,
21 Council Member Narcisse.

22 Before moving on to our next questions
23 and testimony, I just wanted to add, again, I think
24 that that is the issue, and I'm we'll hear more about
25 it from our public testimony as well, is you're going

2 to hear it over and over again. Whether it's my
3 District, Council Member Narcisse's District, the
4 lack of public pools, the lack of access to
5 programming, is really stark, and it's not something
6 that we're going to fix overnight, or even in the
7 near future, because pools take a long time to build,
8 finding them, siting them, unless we find ways to
9 expand our partnerships, and I sure we'll hear more
10 between difficulties in swim organizations and non-
11 profit partners getting access to Parks Department
12 pools and very happy, Commissioner, that we can have
13 that conversation later, but also even with DOE pools
14 and we'll follow up with DOE, but I know there too,
15 there are a number of bureaucratic hurdles, insurance
16 requirements that are very onerous that make it very
17 difficult for non-profit partners to get access to
18 even DOE pools. The end results, the upshot of all of
19 this is that non-profits that have excellent programs
20 and services and serve so many New Yorkers are boxed
21 out of any kinds of facilities to augment swim
22 programming. Their facilities are still not yet being
23 used in some way with the Parks Department beyond
24 Parks pools to provide programming, and there's a
25 real gap there, and in that gap are so many

2 communities and districts that without more
3 collaboration, without that gap being filled, simply
4 are not going to have access, and I think we've got
5 to find ways to really bridge that gap and do it with
6 everyone at the table, but thank you, Council Member
7 Narcisse for your questions.

8 Council Member Brewer. Very happy to have
9 you here. I know you've got, we will take a little
10 detour from our topic of today's hearing to hear your
11 excellent legislation so I want to invite you to make
12 your statement on your bill.

13 COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Thank you very
14 much, Chair Krishnan. I usually don't thank anybody
15 because that's how I am, but I thank you tremendously
16 for sticking this bill in and it is, as you know,
17 Intro. 130 of 2024, composting plant waste in parks,
18 particularly our large parks. This particular
19 legislation would establish composting facilities for
20 plant waste collection near the 10 largest parks in
21 each borough throughout the city. Currently, I think
22 we know hundreds of pounds of plant trimmings, leaves
23 and other organic materials are collected in black
24 plastic bags and shipped to landfills. This is a
25 waste. It also contributes to greenhouse gas emission

2 through decomposition. I think you all know that.

3 Composting does several things. One reduces reliance

4 on landfills. Instead of taking out valuable space

5 and contributing to methane emissions, plant waste

6 will be transformed into nutrient rich compost, a

7 valuable resource for city landscaping and community

8 gardens, two, promotes environmental sustainability.

9 I think you know that. Composting reduces greenhouse

10 gas emissions associated with waste, transportation,

11 and landfill decomposition, and it really does

12 enhance, number three, park aesthetics. By diverting

13 organic waste from landfills, we can keep our parks

14 cleaner and healthier. I do love Riverside Park,

15 everybody knows that, and I could not believe what a

16 difference it made when composting showed up in the,

17 what was really just an empty driveway space. It's

18 not even one of the 10 biggest parks, I thought it

19 was, but it's not. Along with Earth Matter New York,

20 Riverside Park established the first on-site facility

21 for composting yard waste by converting an existing

22 waste transfer parking lot, I didn't know it was

23 called a waste transfer, it was just a parking lot,

24 into a composting facility. In just six months, the

25 park has prevented 926.5 cubic yards of organic

2 waste, that's about 90 dump trucks, from reaching
3 landfills. Think of what we could do citywide. This
4 initiative has widespread support from organizations
5 such as Big Reuse, you'll hear from them soon, but
6 also from Con Edison, New Yorkers for Parks,
7 Riverside Park Conservancy, Earth Matter New York,
8 Center for Zero Waste Design, and many others. They
9 all submitted testimony to the Committee. I'm sure
10 others will also. We've gotten lots of good feedback.
11 We look forward to working with the Parks Department
12 on the bill to further enhance the benefit of a
13 program like this for our parks, our environment, and
14 city as a whole.

15 I want to thank the Staff from the
16 Speaker's office, Shula Puder, Cynthia Hornig from my
17 office. I could not believe what Riverside Park did
18 in six months so I hope we can do that in all the
19 large parks, and thank you, Mr. Chair.

20 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you so much,
21 Council Member Brewer. Thank you for this great
22 legislation.

23 Now, I've got a few more questions on our
24 topic of water safety, switching over a bit to
25 lifeguards and the lifeguard crisis we face. As we

2 mentioned earlier with our Five-Point Plan, there are
3 different ways to address the swim crisis. We talked
4 about water safety education, expanding swim
5 instruction, building more pools, but a very
6 important plank of that is lifeguards, lifeguard
7 hiring, getting us out of this crisis, and I would
8 hope, Commissioner, could you give us a sense of
9 where you are right now in the lifeguard hiring
10 process and what the timeline is to staff up for
11 beaches and pools this summer?

12 COMMISSIONER DONOGHUE: Thank you, Council
13 Member, and yes, we'd love to talk about that. As you
14 mentioned and well know, any kind of expansion, any
15 kind of work around water safety, the numbers of
16 lifeguards and availability of lifeguards are
17 critical to that activity, and we're so proud of the
18 Parks Department, even with a national lifeguard
19 shortage, we've worked really hard over the last
20 couple of years to still be able to open every single
21 one of our pools and beaches, even with the
22 constraints that we're facing. I have to give so much
23 credit to my First Deputy Commissioner here, Iris
24 Rodriguez-Rosa and her team. We don't think about
25 recruiting just at the start of the year. We've been

2 thinking about recruitment since last September when
3 the season ended, and Commissioner Rodriguez-Rosa and
4 her team have been at it nonstop and I'm hoping that
5 you've seen everything from some great marketing
6 campaigns across the city that we developed
7 highlighting our lifeguards with the tagline of
8 "challenge accepted" to really emphasize the
9 importance of this job. What a great summer job it
10 is. We so appreciate this City Council helping us on
11 those efforts and on recruitment. We need everybody
12 focused on helping bring people in the door and
13 taking our qualifying exams. One of the things that
14 we worked really hard to do with the Lifeguard Union,
15 and we're pleased to be successful in this year and
16 increasing the wage to 22 dollars an hour for
17 lifeguards including a 1,000-dollar bonus. We know
18 it's an important job. We want to make sure that
19 people are paid what they should be paid, and we're
20 thrilled to be able to see this increase in the
21 salary, and we think it makes us more competitive and
22 will bring more people in the door so emphasizing
23 that, that it's a great job and a great salary, and
24 then we have also done a number of things to expand
25 access to, the first part of becoming a lifeguard is

2 passing the qualifying test, and so we have increased
3 the number of qualifying tests by 47 percent this
4 year, from 47 to 67. We've also increased the number
5 of test sites by nearly double, so making it easier
6 for individuals, young people to come in and take the
7 qualifying test. We've done that. We've expanded
8 access to test sites in the outer boroughs, working
9 with DOE, and making test sites available at DOE
10 schools as well as at our recreation centers, and so
11 a huge amount of effort that has been spearheaded by
12 Commissioner Rodriguez-Rosa to bring in as many
13 lifeguards as we can. We're right now in the process.
14 As I said, the first step is passing the qualifying
15 test. The last tests are happening tomorrow so
16 anything that we can do to promote that and get more
17 people in the door, we'd really appreciate that, and
18 I'm pleased to say that we have seen increases in the
19 number of people coming in. They have to pass the
20 qualifying test and then there's 16 weeks of
21 training, and then we would look to hire those that
22 are able to pass the training and become lifeguards
23 the end of May, early June.

24 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: You mentioned the
25 number of test sites had doubled. Where are the test

2 sites exactly, and how many sites have doubled, from
3 what to what?

4 COMMISSIONER DONOGHUE: The number doubled
5 from 9 to 17, 9 in 2023 to 17 in 2024. They're in the
6 outer boroughs. We had a great partnership with
7 Fordham University in the Bronx. They opened up their
8 doors for us for a lifeguard qualifying test. Fort
9 Hamilton High School in Brooklyn, great facility,
10 opened up their doors as well to have more qualifying
11 tests so that we could capture individuals from
12 Staten Island and Brooklyn to bring more people in.

13 Iris, what other?

14 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER RODRIGUEZ-ROSA:
15 Thank you, Chair. As the Commissioner said, we've
16 this year increased so much in terms of having the
17 DOE schools have opened up their doors. We doubled
18 some of the many schools that we've gone throughout
19 the city because we wanted to make sure that we had
20 an equitable number of locations throughout the city.
21 In Queens, in the Bronx, in Staten Island, we had
22 Curtis High School in Staten Island, and we've had
23 every borough has been covered to be able to do that.
24 We appreciate it. As the Commissioner mentioned,
25 Fordham University, which was a first for us to be

2 able to have individuals be able to come there so we
3 are very proud of the efforts that we've made. Along
4 those lines also, we're having three training
5 situations. We have one that's already started, one
6 that's about to start now in March at Gertrude
7 Ederle, and then we also have a very new site, which
8 when you talk about the partnerships, we talk about
9 DOE is offering for Fort Hamilton High School will
10 now be a new site for the first time to be able to
11 allow for participants from Staten Island and
12 Brooklyn to be able to be fully trained through the
13 lifeguard school at that location. We're very proud
14 of the efforts that we've made. Again, in terms of
15 the recruitment efforts, we've exceeded so much in
16 terms of PSAL. We've gone to many of their schools
17 when they've had their swim meets and their
18 championship events so we're very proud of the
19 efforts that this agency and the city has made in
20 this realm.

21 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you so much
22 for the update, and I know from my end too how much
23 the Parks Department is doing to aggressively recruit
24 for the positions, but as the same thing with pools
25 and with beaches, these are systemic issues that are

2 very difficult to overcome. You're doing all the
3 outreach you can do, but it still falls short of
4 fully staffing up for lifeguards and for pools and
5 beaches so I just wanted to focus on different issues
6 that I see as part of it, things you've addressed and
7 other things as well.

8 My first question is, as I understand it,
9 last year, I think the numbers are wrong, but I think
10 we fully staffing beaches and pools and you need
11 about 1,600 lifeguards and I think Parks was at 800
12 last year, maybe a little bit less the year before.
13 Is that give or take right from where we need to be
14 and where we're at.

15 COMMISSIONER DONOGHUE: Thank you for the
16 question. Not 1,600. We generally say about 1,400
17 lifeguards, and last year we were close to 800.

18 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: 800, and the year
19 before?

20 COMMISSIONER DONOGHUE: I think it was
21 close to that as well. Close to 800.

22 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER RODRIGUEZ-ROSA:
23 Just to add that we increased the number, we had 120
24 new recruits in 2022. In 2023, we had 189 that
25 actually made it through the whole process so it's

2 important to note that we have individuals that go
3 for the qualifiers, and then after they qualify, they
4 have a certain number that come into the training
5 classes. After the training classes, at the final end
6 of it, then there's the final exam. Those are the
7 ones that actually are assigned to either the beaches
8 or the pools. Just to share with you that at this
9 time last year, we had about 375 individuals that
10 were in the class actually going through the
11 training, actually, that passed the qualifiers. This
12 year, we exceeded over 500 that actually qualify to
13 be able to go into the training classes. Now, of
14 course, there may be drop-offs. We have to understand
15 there may be individuals that passed and that are
16 eligible to go into the training but may not go and
17 then at the end of it, we'll see what we what we
18 arrive at.

19 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: So about 500 about
20 to go through the training now. How do you get to the
21 800? That list will be whittled down. Is it a
22 combination of returning lifeguards from last year?

23 COMMISSIONER DONOGHUE: Exactly. Yes.
24 There's always a combination of new recruits that

2 we're adding to the fold and then returning
3 lifeguards.

4 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: From my vantage
5 point, I think, last year, the year before, this year
6 given the numbers, correct me if I'm wrong, but it
7 seems like you'll end up somewhere around where you
8 were prior years, which is still you know about 50
9 percent give or take, maybe 60 percent of what we
10 need to get to the 1,400 and you all are doing
11 everything, outreach, PSAs, and so just want to look
12 at each the individual pieces of what is causing this
13 shortage and how can we think about things
14 differently? The first piece of it is I commend you
15 all and I think it was great to see the news about
16 the increase in lifeguard pay so is that now on par
17 with the state lifeguard pay of 22 an hour, I think,
18 is the City Parks pay. Is that on par with the state
19 pay?

20 COMMISSIONER DONOGHUE: Yes, it makes it
21 competitive, absolutely.

22 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: The retention bonus
23 as well, is that something similar to what the state
24 does too, or are there discrepancies between the
25 state and city?

2 COMMISSIONER DONOGHUE: I'm not sure. I'm
3 not aware that they have a bonus.

4 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Okay.

5 COMMISSIONER DONOGHUE: I'm not sure.

6 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: So we've got the
7 state pay, matching where the state pay is at now,
8 which is great, retention bonus for coming back as
9 well, advertising all different places. I guess
10 another question I have too is have you had
11 conversations with other major cities in terms of, if
12 you're doing all of these different things but still
13 we don't have the pipeline. That's what we mentioned
14 in our Five-Point Plan, looking at the DOE Junior
15 Lifeguard Corps. How do we create that pipeline? What
16 conversations, if any, have you had with other cities
17 about ways to increase hiring if you're doing all of
18 the things that you should be doing, but clearly
19 there's not enough of a pipeline of applicants.

20 COMMISSIONER DONOGHUE: Thank you for the
21 question. First, I just want to specify, we
22 absolutely want to and recognize the urgency of
23 bringing as many people in the door as we can, having
24 as many lifeguards as possible, and that's the reason
25 why there's been such a concerted effort to do that.

2 As I said in my testimony, we were very proud of the
3 fact that we were able to open all of our beaches and
4 pools last year, so 1,400 is optimal because it gets
5 us to be able to have extended hours at our beaches
6 and pools, doing some of the extended programming
7 that we'd like to do, but with the 800 as we've seen
8 the last two years, we still are able to open all of
9 our beaches and pools so I want to be clear that,
10 while it's not optimal, we are still able to open our
11 beaches and pools, which we're very proud of, and
12 we'll continue to work to do that. We are always
13 looking at opportunities for speaking with, meeting
14 with others. It's why we're part of this this larger
15 Lifeguard Task Force. We know that the pay was really
16 important. We worked really hard to get that
17 information out sooner. As we've seen, we are not
18 alone in having challenges with hiring. Restaurants,
19 other industries across the city, across the nation
20 have seen structural changes and in finding
21 employees. To become a New York City lifeguard is a
22 really difficult task. It's a really hard test to
23 pass, and that's why we're offering as many
24 opportunities for advanced swim training, doing all
25 we can to prepare young people to make it as exciting

2 and interesting of a summer job as possible so we
3 recognize the need to do more and to continue to find
4 ways to make the job appealing, but it does mirror
5 other changes you see since COVID and just people's
6 work.

7 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: But do you think
8 compared to other cities, that the staffing versus
9 the need, is that percentage what it's like for other
10 major cities? For example, when it comes to our Parks
11 Department, we are underfunded compared to other
12 major cities in terms of our City budget dedicated
13 towards Parks. Do you know how it compares to other
14 major cities or how other cities have looked at this
15 problem?

16 COMMISSIONER DONOGHUE: We do, and thank
17 you for the question, Council Member. One, we know
18 that New York City is bigger and needs more, has more
19 facilities, has more people we're looking to serve
20 than almost any city in the country. What we have
21 seen in the last couple years, unfortunately, is
22 cities reducing hours, not opening, instituting a
23 fee, reducing their availability of their pools and
24 beaches. That has been the response that other cities
25 have been forced to make because of a national

2 lifeguard shortage. We have really worked hard not to
3 have that be New York City's response.

4 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Going to the
5 standards themselves, can you provide a breakdown of
6 exactly what the standards are that you need to meet
7 to be able to qualify for a lifeguard program?

8 COMMISSIONER DONOGHUE: Absolutely. Yes.
9 Iris, do you want to take that?

10 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER RODRIGUEZ-ROSA:
11 In terms of every provider that that provides
12 lifeguard certifications have their own particular to
13 qualify so for the New York City Lifeguard School, at
14 this point, you have to have a 20/30 vision in one
15 eye, 20/40 in the other eye without corrective lenses
16 to be able to do that. You also have to be able to
17 swim, to qualify, to swim 50 yards within 45 seconds
18 to be able to qualify, and also you have to have the
19 proper form. There's a proper form in terms of
20 swimming that is expected in order to be able to
21 qualify to go into the training. Then at the end of
22 the training, as it stands right now, you have to
23 have 440 yards in 6 minutes and 40 seconds for the
24 beach and 440 yards in 7 minutes and 40 seconds for
25 the pool.

2 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: What was the
3 prescription requirement that you had said in the
4 beginning?

5 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER RODRIGUEZ-ROSA:
6 In the beginning is 20/40 in one eye and 20/30 in the
7 other eye uncorrected.

8 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: 20/40 in one eye,
9 20/30 in the other eye. Knowing that prescriptions
10 change and eyesight changes over time, do you think
11 that every lifeguard currently who is employed by
12 Parks still has that prescription? If that's the
13 requirement, does every lifeguard currently have that
14 prescription. I'm sure there's some have been there
15 for many years. Is that actually a requirement that
16 every single lifeguard on the existing staff
17 currently meets.

18 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER RODRIGUEZ-ROSA:
19 It is expected that the new lifeguards and that the
20 returning lifeguards should be able to have that.

21 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: All returning
22 lifeguards meet that same prescription requirement.

23 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER RODRIGUEZ-ROSA:
24 It is expected, yes.

2 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Now, with all the
3 data you provide about the test itself, it seems like
4 this is a Parks certification, a Parks training. Why
5 is it that only a Parks certification can be used to
6 hire lifeguards?

7 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER RODRIGUEZ-ROSA:
8 Every provider has their own standards by which they
9 allow for it to be completed so these are the
10 standards that have been in place for many years here
11 for this particular lifeguard school.

12 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Because there are
13 other organizations around the city, swim
14 organizations that have their own certification
15 standards. Their quality of instruction is just as
16 good. They train so many New Yorkers. It seems to me
17 that if we're all to be thinking about ways, and
18 everyone at the table should really have a role in
19 rethinking things, in that you're doing all you can,
20 you're paying more, you're advertising aggressively
21 everywhere, and if we're looking at are we taking
22 every measure we can to really expand the way that we
23 can attract and hire lifeguards, my question is why
24 aren't we looking at other training standards and
25 certifications that other organizations in this city

2 use and expanding the different qualifying tests so
3 that we can expand the pool of lifeguards available.

4 COMMISSIONER DONOGHUE: Thank you for the
5 question, and we appreciate it. Any changes to the
6 existing curriculum would need to go through a
7 collective bargaining.

8 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: It's my
9 understanding, I don't know if you all know correct
10 me, but it's my understanding is that the Department
11 of Education allows for different non-Parks
12 certification for lifeguards in their pools. Do you
13 know if that's accurate?

14 COMMISSIONER DONOGHUE: I really couldn't
15 comment on that. Sorry, Councilman.

16 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Okay. I'll comment
17 on that. I think that is the case that the DOE has
18 different standards for lifeguard training and
19 certification than Parks does. I just want to
20 highlight two City agencies under the same agency
21 using different lifeguard training protocols for
22 certifying lifeguards. One, that's Parks Department
23 exclusively. One that DOE has a different trading
24 regimen for. Seems like a big inconsistency there,
25 and it seems like within our own City government, if

2 we can't figure out ways to be expansive of the
3 certification requirements we're looking at, we are
4 limiting the amount of lifeguards that will be
5 available.

6 There's one more question I have too,
7 which is, I'm glad to hear the number of training
8 sites that are now in use. Do you know if that serves
9 all New Yorkers? The reason I ask that is because I
10 have a constituent whose child just passed the
11 lifeguard qualifying exam, but they have to go to
12 Fort Hamilton from Jackson Heights to participate in
13 the training. That's a two-hour-at-least subway ride
14 all the way from Jackson Heights, Queens to Fort
15 Hamilton. To me, if that is representative of what
16 others who have to participate in the training have
17 to do, that's another way you're limiting the amount
18 of people who can participate. It's just very
19 difficult to manage getting someone that far for
20 training. Can you talk a bit more about what are the
21 sites and how do you accommodate, especially for
22 boroughs like mine in Queens and others, how do you
23 accommodate having training facilities that are close
24 enough that don't create a burden in themselves for
25 people who have passed the qualifying test?

2 COMMISSIONER DONOGHUE: Thank you for the
3 question. We absolutely agree the importance of
4 having training sites that are located across the
5 city, which is why, as we said earlier, that we
6 doubled the number of those training sites available.
7 Fort Hamilton, yes, is a distance from Queens. We
8 have Chelsea, our rec center in Manhattan. We've
9 worked hard to make alternative sites available for
10 the qualifying tests, and it's been a big priority of
11 this Administration and of Commissioner Rodriguez-
12 Rosa to expand those sites so we've doubled the
13 number of training sites. Where we're limited in
14 going beyond the doubling of sites is that you need
15 the instructors, you need the people who can actually
16 accommodate those tests, which we've also looked to
17 improve those numbers, but as I said earlier, this
18 year we've doubled the number of sites available so
19 we agree with you, it's really important to have more
20 access and have more access across the five boroughs,
21 and we've worked hard to do that.

22 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you. That
23 concludes all the questions that I had for you.

24 Council Member Brewer, do you have any
25 questions?

2 COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: One on the water,
3 you know my question, so Gertrude Ederle, which is
4 Adrian Benepe's name for the 59th Street Rec Center.
5 I think that many of the lifeguard belongings are in
6 the teen room. Is there some way of moving them out
7 of there? What's the status with that space?

8 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER RODRIGUEZ-ROSA:
9 Council Member, yes. Are you asking about the room
10 that's there that they use for the classroom there to
11 be able to have multiple use of that room? We're
12 looking at in terms of being able...

13 COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: It's supposed to
14 be a teen room, because I built it for a teen room.

15 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER RODRIGUEZ-ROSA:
16 Right, at Gertrude Ederle, I have someone working
17 with me to try to make sure that we secure storage,
18 that they can still be in the room but it could be
19 still be used.

20 COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Okay. Thank you.

21 FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER RODRIGUEZ-ROSA:
22 Absolutely.

23 COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: It's like 30 years
24 of story, just so you know.

2 The second issue is where there is a
3 NYCHA development, like in that area, because the
4 lifeguards are there a lot, the students can't really
5 go over from the high schools or from NYCHA so my
6 question is do you map in some way where there's a
7 pool near a NYCHA development so that we could work
8 with the two on swimming lessons? Is that something
9 that would be possible?

10 COMMISSIONER DONOGHUE: Thank you, Council
11 Member, for the question. I want to make sure I
12 understand it. Are you saying are we mapping where we
13 need to add more pools nearby?

14 COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: No, I mean where
15 there is already a pool and a NYCHA development, in
16 this case they're right next to each other. We can
17 talk later about the lifeguard taking over the pools,
18 but that would be an example where you could make
19 more of a match so where already there's a pool and
20 there's already a NYCHA development. Let's work
21 better. They don't work together right now. And then
22 the same obviously I think when you're doing new
23 pools, I don't know when that's going to take place,
24 I would always look to see where NYCHA is personally,

2 because those students and those families need to
3 have that support.

4 COMMISSIONER DONOGHUE: Thank you.

5 Absolutely, and we agree with you. We are building
6 the two new rec centers, as I said in my testimony,
7 one in Southeast Queens, Roy Wilkins, and then the
8 Shirley Chisholm Rec Center in Brooklyn. Both over
9 130-million-dollar investments in each of those, and
10 we do, with our planning division, we have looked at
11 swim deserts and taking into account where pools are
12 most needed and, absolutely, we're looking at
13 environmental justice neighborhoods, taking into
14 account where the access is most needed across the
15 city.

16 COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Finally, do you
17 support the notion of composting in large city parks.

18 COMMISSIONER DONOGHUE: Thank you for the
19 question, and we appreciate the new legislation and
20 we're looking forward to discussing it further. We
21 work closely today with DSNY on composting and, as
22 you know we are always for ways to make our parks
23 more sustainable and more resilient so we absolutely
24 look forward to having further discussion on it.

2 COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Thank you, Mr.
3 Chair.

4 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you so much,
5 Council Member.

6 Just in conclusion, you know what? One
7 point I wanted to add to when we talked about the
8 training certifications before was that the
9 alternative certifications are national standards,
10 Red Cross and otherwise, these are universally
11 accepted, except in New York City, and we are unique
12 in that way, and we're not unique yet, unfortunately,
13 in making sure we have enough lifeguards to make sure
14 every New Yorker can swim and access their pools and
15 beaches so I say that to just conclude with this
16 panel, and thank you all first for your testimony and
17 for all your information, and of course, all the work
18 that you're doing to address this issue. This is a
19 crisis frankly years, decades in the making and going
20 back to Robert Moses and where pools and parks were
21 sited. I've always felt in my work as a fair housing
22 lawyer before, and now as Parks Chair, that I'm
23 fighting against the damaging legacy of Robert Moses,
24 especially to communities of color, whether it's
25 parks and green space or to pools, and we've got a

2 lot of work to do to get there. I thank you all for
3 your work, your testimony today, and the reality is,
4 to get to a city where every New Yorker feels safe in
5 the water, can swim and can feel safe, we need to be
6 thinking about out of the box, creative, expansive,
7 comprehensive ways to address the swim crisis. The
8 Five-Point Plan we laid out earlier this morning, our
9 discussion today, are things that we can do, and I
10 know Parks is doing all they can on every front with
11 the budget that it gets, although in my opinion the
12 budget needs to be far more that you all receive, and
13 we'll save that for the budget hearing, those points,
14 but I will just say knowing you all are doing all
15 that you can, the challenge you're running into is a
16 limit on the amount of resources you all have to do
17 this work. That's true for Parks maintenance as it is
18 true for swimming and pools, but the solutions that
19 would solve this are long-term work-intensive
20 solutions, and so in the short term, we don't have
21 that time to wait, and in the short term, we've got
22 to think of measures that can create alternative
23 pathways and solutions to address this crisis, and
24 the things that we talked about today seem like very
25 sensible ways to, in the short term, creatively find

2 ways to expand water access. Council Member Narcisse
3 testified, Council Member Brewer, myself, all to the
4 lack of access in our Districts, and I think the work
5 we have ahead of us is to make sure we can find ways
6 to expand access despite the structural limitations
7 we may face that we're addressing in the long term,
8 and I think that's the discussion that we all have as
9 a Council, you all as the agency bringing in other
10 agencies through interagency collaboration, and I
11 look forward to that work ahead. I look forward to
12 those discussions. I look forward to your
13 partnership, Commissioner, First Deputy Commissioner.
14 Thank you all for your work, and thank you for your
15 testimony today.

16 COMMITTEE COUNSEL SARTORI: Thank you so
17 much, and now we'll move to our public testimony.

18 We are going to call up Shanna Blanchard
19 from the Water Safety Coalition and Nora Cronin with
20 Plus Pools.

21 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Yes, you may start.

22 SHANNA BLANCHARD: Thank you. Good
23 afternoon. My name is Shanna Blanchard. I'm here on
24 behalf of the Water Safety Coalition. Many of my
25 colleagues are here over to my left. Thank you so

2 much, Chair Krishnan, for overseeing this oversight
3 hearing. It's very important. We are a group of
4 concerned citizens and non-profit organizations
5 working to make water safety an essential right for
6 all, to save lives, and create a more inclusive water
7 recreation community. We are grateful for the steps
8 forward and momentum around water safety in the last
9 year with a suite of bills passed by the Council last
10 year and Governor Hochul's historic New York Swims
11 Initiative announced earlier this year. We strongly
12 support Council Member Krishnan's Five-Point Plan for
13 Water Safety, many points of which we have advocated
14 for for years and believe it is a critical step
15 forward in delivering the necessary skills,
16 knowledge, and resources New Yorkers need to
17 positively engage with their coastlines and live with
18 and understand the water around them, but we are
19 still behind and there is more work to do. New York
20 City needs to meet the New York State's ambition,
21 vision, and goals and create its own New York City
22 Swims Initiative. Many New Yorkers do not know how to
23 swim, but still flock to the city's beaches and pools
24 each year to stay cool during the heat of summer or
25 simply to have a good time. We all read about

2 drownings occurring along the city's many coastlines
3 throughout the year, and sadly, we will likely read
4 about more this year, but we can and should take as
5 many preventative measures as possible to prevent
6 these deaths. If the City can prioritize and sustain
7 funding for free swim lessons for children and
8 adults, adequately staff the city's beaches and pools
9 and eliminate barriers to making this happen,
10 recognize the way in which climate change is
11 extending our need to engage in water-based
12 recreation and extend beach and pool season, better
13 utilize existing aquatics infrastructure and identify
14 areas for new ones, and incorporate water safety
15 education into our schools, all New Yorkers,
16 regardless of income and home neighborhood, can
17 better connect to the water around them and benefit
18 from the life-saving skill of swimming. Since the
19 COVID-19 pandemic, staffing at New York City's
20 beaches and pools have been a challenge with many
21 Learn to Swim and Lap Swim programs canceled and
22 various beaches and pools closed each year. Prior to
23 the pandemic, 20,000 children were served in the
24 City's Learn to Swim programs in 2019, with only
25 1,000 being able to utilize the program last year.

2 This is unacceptable. There are numerous non-profits
3 represented here today, ready and willing to help
4 fill this gap if there are only systems in place to
5 enable them to easily use city pools, and if more of
6 the city's pools were appropriately maintained and
7 available. There are other needs regarding water
8 safety, including a close look at the city's
9 Lifeguard Corps and associated strategies and a
10 development of a new strategic plan, increased water
11 safety education programming and signage along the
12 city's shorelines, and also a strong need for more
13 education about water safety by PEP officers, rather
14 than solely being enforcers and reprimanding people
15 for simply putting their feet in the water when the
16 beach is closed for whatever reason.

17 Simply put, we need more funding to make
18 all of this happen. The New York City Parks
19 Department will shoulder the brunt of responsibility
20 to enact all of this meaningful and positive change,
21 and they do incredible work with the meager budget it
22 is offered each year, but this needs to change. We
23 strongly support the Play Fair Coalition's 1 Percent
24 for Parks recommendation and beyond that believe that
25 funding for water safety and aquatics should be

2 increased and sustained year to year. Interest in
3 water-based recreation is only growing and whether we
4 want it to or not, water is at our doorstep, not only
5 because we are a city of water with 520 miles of
6 shoreline, but because climate change is changing the
7 way water interacts with our daily lives. We must
8 better understand it and make sure our citizens have
9 the tools necessary to do. We urge the City Council
10 and the Mayor to appropriately fund New York City
11 Parks and develop other sustainable funding streams
12 that will prioritize water safety and build a better
13 New York City aquatics culture. We are here to help.

14 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you.

15 NORA CRONIN: Good afternoon, Committee
16 Chair Krishnan, Committee Members. My name is Nora
17 Cronin, and I am the Program Director at Friends of
18 Plus Pool, and on behalf of Plus Pool, I would like
19 to thank the City Council for holding this hearing on
20 improving water safety. Since 2016, our non-profit
21 organization has been providing free, yes free, swim
22 education to low-income New Yorkers, collaborating
23 with NYCHA to place families in our programs that now
24 serve both youth and adults. 80 to 90 percent of our
25 program participants have households that make under

2 26,000 dollars a year, and 80 to 90 percent of our
3 students are persons of color. All participants
4 report low income. We have heard the statistics
5 regarding the disparity of swim access as it applies
6 to low-income households and people of color. Council
7 Member Narcisse pointed it out just today. Less
8 talked about are the statistics that show we have
9 fewer public pools per capita than any major U.S.
10 city. Only 53 outdoor public pools exist to serve all
11 New Yorkers. History has shown that the investment in
12 public swimming pools provides incredible economic,
13 social, and public health benefits, including a
14 reduction in drowning fatalities, and even crime
15 reduction. In contemporary times, municipal pools
16 provide relief from increased instances of extreme
17 heat. They serve thousands a day as opposed to
18 private pools that may only serve a single family and
19 their friends, making them much more sustainable.
20 Yet, we have not had a major investment in a
21 municipal swimming pool since the 1970s or a new
22 beach open for swimming in our city since 2011. Non-
23 profits like ours often spend upwards of 75 percent
24 of our programming budgets on pool rental costs. At
25 Plus Pool, our summer rental costs for space have

2 reached upwards of 600 per hour for a pool rental.
3 That is why we are in full support of the proposed
4 plans to have the Parks Department and Department of
5 Education collaborate with non-profits to provide
6 swim instruction for those who need it most. If we
7 were to leverage public pools for our programs and
8 eliminate or greatly reduce the cost of pool rentals,
9 we would be able to serve three times as many
10 students. The lack of adequate swim facilities is
11 just one issue affecting our ability to support
12 greater access to swimming for all New Yorkers. We
13 need bold ideas to address the challenges being
14 discussed here today. Could we leverage the tech
15 industry to establish a database of unavailable or
16 unused pools for groups to provide swimming lessons?
17 Could we leverage the Governor's Fund for new pools
18 to create a New York City-based facility dedicated to
19 lifeguard training throughout the year? Could FDNY or
20 New York City EMTs become lifeguards themselves
21 because they already have first responder
22 credentials? Is there really a lifeguard shortage or
23 are there just barriers put in place such as having
24 no part time work and a costly or ineffective or, as
25 Council Member Krishnan pointed out, a certification

2 process that is different between agencies that are
3 causing people not to become lifeguards who would
4 otherwise want to be. We believe we can leverage
5 opportunities here, and we support City Council in
6 its efforts to do. Thank you so much for your time.

7 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you so much
8 both for your testimony.

9 COMMITTEE COUNSEL SARTORI: Next, we have
10 Shawn Slevin from Swim Strong and Kaitlin Krause from
11 Rising Tide.

12 SHAWN SLEVIN: Greetings, esteemed Council
13 Members and Staff, members of the New York City Parks
14 Commission, task force colleagues, and fellow New
15 Yorkers. My name is Shawn Slevin. I am the Executive
16 Director and founder of Swim Strong Foundation. We
17 have been a not-for-profit here in New York City for
18 17 years, providing an opportunity to reduce
19 unintended drowning and water-based accidents. We've
20 helped more than 10,700 people learn to swim, given
21 1.6-million-plus dollars in free swim lessons, we now
22 have an educational program in schools, we've reached
23 41,000-plus students in schools, and we're advocates
24 for legislation that helps to build an aquatic
25 infrastructure and culture here in New York City and

2 State. I'm also part of the Water Safety Coalition
3 that Shanna and Kate actually co-chair, and also a
4 part of the New York City Lifeguard
5 Interorganizational Task Force here in New York City.
6 I want to thank you, Commissioner, in particular for
7 your work and your team in developing the Five-Point
8 Plan for Water Safety. It highlights the important
9 role that the Department of Parks and Recreation can
10 play as one partner of many which are already working
11 tirelessly to create an aquatic culture here in our
12 maritime city. In addition, I want to thank Council
13 Member Selvena Brooks-Powers, Julie Menin, and
14 yourself and teams for your work previously on the
15 three bills that recently passed, which addressed the
16 lack of public pool infrastructure, lack of
17 affordable opportunities to learn to swim, lack of
18 being able to get timely data as it relates to the
19 drowning and water-based accidents that we are
20 incurring. These bills and others at the state level
21 as well as the Governor's New York City Swims
22 Initiative are a start to narrowing the huge gaps we
23 have here across the city and state as it relates to
24 the criticality of aquatics knowledge and skill. What
25 follows is Swim Strong's comprehensive plan to create

2 an opportunity of relevance to the water, which
3 supports building an aquatic culture. You'll note
4 several diverse stakeholders are required in this
5 endeavor. After all, you cannot be what you do not
6 see, and if you have no familial or personal
7 experience and connection to the water, you will not
8 prioritize the knowledge required from an
9 intellectual or skill-based perspective. So what is
10 an aquatic culture?

11 It's the knowledge of and skills in the
12 water which sustains our lives. Water must be
13 relevant for everyone. This knowledge includes
14 managing the risk associated with water. Climate
15 action is bringing more water into our daily lives.
16 Avoidance is not the answer, and it is not possible.
17 It encompasses safe drinking water, management of
18 wastewater, sustained health of our natural waters to
19 promote marine life, management of wetlands, et al,
20 to survive the rising water levels, safe transport
21 through water and vibrant maritime history, aquatics
22 knowledge and skills to enjoy the health,
23 recreational, and occupational benefits of water.

24 I'm going to take you back to children,
25 toddlers under the age of five. Drowning is now a

2 leading cause of death for those kids, and most of
3 them are dying in their own homes. Every year here in
4 the U.S., we lose between 450 and 500 children per
5 year to this. Solutions, we need to give parents and
6 caregivers the tools to understand how to manage the
7 risk of water in their own homes, and there is some
8 state legislation that's just recently been passed,
9 but we can do more here at the city to be able to do
10 that. To acclimatize children and their parents to
11 the water, very important. As we get into the school
12 age for children's age 5 to 10, we need to bring
13 situational knowledge of water into the classroom to
14 help children understand the benefits, the risks and
15 the dangers affiliated with all types of water from
16 inside their homes to everywhere they will meet it
17 out of doors, around the seasons and, of course, with
18 extreme weather of climate. That in itself needs to
19 be carried through to the older classes with again
20 more emphasis on this situational knowledge of water,
21 and we also need to be providing a focus on the risky
22 behaviors that students, particularly in middle
23 school to high school, are beginning to explore,
24 right, because this is the time that they're
25 independent, they're gaining their independence and

2 where you don't have knowledge, you have problems,
3 and this is how we lose so many of our children year
4 after year. Of course, in the older ages, we want to
5 encourage aquatics as a profession so opportunities
6 to pursue that as lifeguards, water safety
7 instructors, competitive swim coaches, and other
8 aquatic activities such as water polo, etc. First
9 responder status for beach lifeguards who are senior
10 in their positions to really give them that they are
11 the first responders, right, and maybe even move
12 lifeguards out of the Parks Department entirely and
13 move them into the Fire Department. Just a thought.
14 Happens across the rest of the country by the way. We
15 also want to make sure that we are removing the
16 barriers to other City agencies to become lifeguards
17 so this certification issue that you mentioned
18 earlier, Commissioner, to rehire retired lifeguards
19 and again restructure the lifeguard passage. We at
20 this point have a cookie-cutter process. Every
21 lifeguard has the ability to guard multi-facilities,
22 which is positive on one hand, but it really
23 restricts the ability to bring more people into the
24 work so we do not need a person who is guarding a
25 splash pad to have the same credentials and skill as

2 a person who is working an open water facility. If we
3 can make that change, we can open the pipeline
4 considerably and bring more people in to bear.

5 What will support this is actually the
6 following. infrastructure and incentive to support
7 adding multi-use public pools and schools,
8 development of natural water venues including
9 lifejacket loaner stations, expanded services to
10 align with the climate action as you spoke of
11 earlier, and utilizing new technology, equitable
12 sharing of public and private pool spaces. Yes, the
13 Parks Department and the Department of Education
14 spaces, but how about residential buildings? How can
15 we open that market? That's existing infrastructure
16 that we have not been able to tap yet. If other not-
17 for-profits can utilize that space, we all lift that
18 nine-million-person nut that we have ahead of us. Not
19 one organization, not even a few organizations can
20 tackle that. We all must lean in together with that,
21 and legislation to ensure resources are directed to
22 build and maintain infrastructure, education, and
23 communication campaigns.

24 Finally, we are a city of water. We are a
25 maritime city, and together we can create a culture

2 that prioritizes situational knowledge of water and
3 swim skills, appropriate infrastructure, education,
4 legislation, and funding to support the training and
5 development of aquatic knowledge and skills. Aquatics
6 becomes relevant to all of us via safe, equitable
7 access to the water. Cutting edge educational and
8 public safety strategies and practices to effectively
9 manage climate action, the blue economy and maritime
10 opportunities. Remember, you cannot be what you
11 cannot experience nor see. Please let us help you
12 make water safety, knowledge, and skills relevant to
13 all New Yorkers so it may be prioritized in every
14 family in New York City. Thank you.

15 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you so much,
16 Shawn. Now Kaitlin.

17 KAITLIN KRAUSE: Good afternoon, respected
18 Members of City Council, New York Parks Commission,
19 valued task force colleagues, dedicated partners, and
20 all gathered here today. My name is Kaitlin Krause,
21 and I serve our city and state in multiple
22 capacities, as a Commissioner on the New York State
23 Commission to Prevent Childhood Drowning, as a member
24 of the New York City Lifeguard Interorganizational
25 Task Force, as Vice Chair of the Water Safety

2 Coalition, and as Founder and Executive Director of
3 Rising Tide Effect.

4 Today, we stand at a pivotal junction in
5 our city surrounded by magnificent waterways, a city
6 currently shadowed by a preventable crisis that
7 disproportionately snatches away the bright futures
8 of New Yorkers. The Five-Point Plan for Water Safety
9 is more than a set of initiatives and is an urgent
10 appeal for a transformative approach to water safety,
11 demanding a shift in how our community interacts and
12 respects the water. The collective vision for
13 tackling the issue hinges on a crucial realization,
14 though. The Parks Department, despite its significant
15 contributions, cannot shoulder this burden alone. The
16 path to safety, to prevention, and to education is
17 one that requires the hands of many, building a
18 bridge across every sector of our city. The proposal
19 to extend pool and beach seasons and hours is not
20 just about increasing access. It's about creating a
21 unified approach where City agencies, community
22 organizations, and private entities work together to
23 ensure that every neighborhood, especially the
24 underserved, can enjoy and learn from water. The
25 current fragmentation in accessing information about

2 water safety resources is a barrier to participation.

3 By creating a centralized collaborative aquatics

4 atlas, we call upon tech companies, educational

5 institutions and non-profits to contribute, ensuring

6 every New Yorker has knowledge at their fingertips.

7 The proposal to integrate a junior lifeguard program

8 into our schools is a testament to the power of

9 cross-sector collaboration. By linking the Department

10 of Education with local aquatic programs, we not only

11 address the lifeguard shortage, but we also embed a

12 culture of water safety and swimming proficiency from

13 an early age. This initiative requires the alignment

14 of City resources, philanthropic efforts, and

15 community-based organizations to ensure that

16 financial constraints never hinder a New Yorker's

17 right to learn to swim. Expanding our city's

18 infrastructure is a call to action for government,

19 for private investors, and community advocates alike,

20 highlighting the need for a collective investment in

21 our future. Governor Hochul's recently announced New

22 York Swims Initiative stands as a beacon, paving the

23 way toward a sustainable and thriving aquatic future

24 for our community. This Five-Point Plan for Water

25 Safety serves as a blueprint for a comprehensive

2 citywide approach to drowning prevention. It
3 underscores the imperative for all of us, city
4 agencies, non-profits, educational institutions,
5 private sector partners, and community members to
6 come together in a united effort. In reframing this
7 issue, we recognize that the responsibility to
8 protect our children, to educate our communities, and
9 to provide equitable access to swimming education
10 does not rest on a single entity. It's a shared duty,
11 a collective endeavor that embodies the spirit of New
12 York City itself and, as we embark on this journey
13 together, let us remember that the ultimate goal, to
14 transform New York City into a model of culture for
15 water safety, where drowning is not a statistic, but
16 a rarity. It's a vision that we can only achieve
17 together by ensuring that water safety is recognized
18 as a communal right and responsibility. Thank you for
19 your unwavering commitment to this cause and for
20 joining hands in this critical mission.

21 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you so much
22 and thank you both for your testimony.

23 COMMITTEE COUNSEL SARTORI: Next, we'll
24 call up Sharon Levy from the YMCA and Sherrise
25 Palomino from New Yorkers for Parks.

2 SHARON LEVY: Hello. Good afternoon. My
3 challenge is the three-minute clock and I'm going to
4 take it. Good afternoon. My name is Sharon Levy. I'm
5 Senior Vice President for Public Affairs at the YMCA
6 of Greater New York. I'll be testifying on behalf of
7 the YMCA. Thank you, Chair Krishnan, Council Member
8 Brewer, Council Member Holden, and all the other
9 Council Members that were here earlier today, for
10 holding this hearing and listening to our cause.

11 The YMCA of Greater New York is committed
12 to empowering youth, improving health and
13 strengthening community with 24 branches and over 100
14 community sites across New York City. One of the ways
15 we reach our communities is through our aquatics
16 programs, which place children and adults on a path
17 to develop life-saving skills in the water. Utilizing
18 22 Y Aquatic Centers in all five boroughs, the Y
19 provides pool access to tens of thousands of New
20 Yorkers each year. We do this through programs like
21 second grade swim, swim instruction, summer day camp,
22 adult lap swim, and a variety of other programs.
23 Furthermore, through our newly created Aquatic Center
24 for Excellence, we have been providing free lifeguard
25 training and certification programs since 2022, and

2 over 300 participants have been certified by the Y's
3 lifeguard training and certification programs. In
4 2023, the Y, along with other organizations
5 testifying here today, convened the Lifeguard and
6 Aquatics Interorganizational Task Force comprised of
7 non-profit providers and City agencies focused first
8 on tackling the city's acute lifeguard shortage, and
9 then on the broader issue of water safety in our
10 city. Over the last year, through the work of the
11 task force, we have created new collaborations that
12 have supported recruitment efforts, shared resources
13 and developed joint advocacy efforts to elevate these
14 critical issues with our city and state elected
15 officials, but more work remains. Before I go on, I
16 do want to acknowledge and commend the New York City
17 Department of Parks and Recreation and their
18 leadership on these efforts. They have been great
19 partners on the task force. They have succeeded in
20 increasing the salaries of lifeguard staff, and they
21 have created an engaging and impactful marketing
22 campaign that has significantly elevated the
23 visibility of lifeguard recruitment. We also want to
24 acknowledge the work of the New York City Department
25 of Education for their efforts in increasing access

2 to New York City pools and reopening shuttered school
3 pools. As New Yorkers, we pride ourselves on being a
4 diverse and dynamic community.

5 Yet, when it comes to knowing how to swim
6 or access of swimming pools, we as a city fall short.
7 We are a waterfront city, as has been mentioned
8 before, with 520 miles of waterfront, and yet too
9 many New Yorkers never learned how to swim. With over
10 eight million residents and a warming global climate,
11 our public pools are woefully insufficient to meet
12 the need for quality swim instruction and recreation.
13 According to the CDC, drowning is a leading cause of
14 unintentional death worldwide, with children and
15 people of color disproportionately affected. Black
16 children are five times more likely to drown than
17 their white counterparts. In a city where the vast
18 majority of our communities are black and brown,
19 these disparities are unacceptable. It's time we
20 recognize the importance of, I'm not even close.

21 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: It's a loose three
22 minutes.

23 SHARON LEVY: Thank you. It's time we
24 recognize the importance of swimming for all and take
25 concrete steps to ensure every resident has the

2 opportunity to learn, enjoy, and stay safe in the
3 water. The key to addressing these issues is
4 improving access to swim and swim instruction for all
5 New Yorkers. We can accomplish this by creating
6 additional access to existing pools, public, private
7 and those run by non-profit organizations. We can
8 immediately significantly increase funding for swim
9 instruction and pool operations in the City's budget.
10 Expansion of free swim lessons and pools across our
11 city, including but not limited to Parks, DOE, and
12 non-profit pools will significantly impact the rate
13 of injury and fatality from swim-related incidents in
14 our city. Even before recent budget cuts, only a tiny
15 fraction of the City's budget went toward swim
16 instruction, which is a troubling reflection of its
17 overall prioritization in our city.

18 Over the long-term, we must prioritize
19 the expansion of aquatic infrastructure. This means
20 building more pools, particularly in neighborhoods
21 who do not have access to aquatic spaces. It also
22 means finding ways to include pools as critical
23 public investments along with parks and green spaces
24 in our capital planning process. As many know, our
25 city's lifeguard shortage has been an issue for years

2 and was significantly exacerbated by the pandemic. We
3 believe that through partnership and regulatory
4 changes, we could increase the number of lifeguards
5 in New York City exponentially. For example, the
6 City, namely the Parks Department, should have the
7 ability to accept nationally recognized lifeguard
8 certifications like the Red Cross and the YMCA
9 certifications. This would allow us to train a more
10 robust workforce as well as employ more lifeguards
11 and fill in the staffing gaps across our city. In
12 addition, we urge the City to work with non-profit
13 providers to establish a lifeguard development
14 program as well as a training and certification
15 program within our high schools, very similar to one
16 of the Five-Point Plan points related to the Junior
17 Lifeguard Corps. By engaging youth from diverse
18 communities to strengthen their swim skills and train
19 to become lifeguards, we can not only create a
20 sustainable pipeline of qualified lifeguards but also
21 foster a sense of responsibility and leadership among
22 the next generation, investing in training and
23 mentorship opportunities for young New Yorkers.
24 Universal swimming access is not just a matter of
25 convenience or leisure. It's a matter of equity,

2 public health and safety. By implementing these
3 solutions, we can make significant strides towards
4 creating a city where every resident, regardless of
5 background or circumstance, is able to swim safely.
6 We appreciate your support, leadership and
7 partnership in addressing the city's water safety
8 challenges. Thank you so much for fighting for our
9 children, families, and adults across New York City.

10 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you so much
11 for testimony. Sherrise.

12 SHERRISE PALOMINO: Thank you. Good
13 afternoon. My name is Sherrise Palomino, and I am the
14 Director of Advocacy and Programs in New Yorkers for
15 Parks. We are a founding member of the Play Fair for
16 Parks Coalition, which includes over 400
17 organizations from across the city. Thank you to
18 Chair Krishnan for this timely hearing.

19 I am grateful for the opportunity to
20 address the critical issue of water safety at our
21 beloved beaches and pools in New York city. As we
22 navigate these challenges posed by Mayor Adams'
23 directive to reduce spending by 5 percent, which
24 translates to a staggering 25 million reduction in
25 the Parks Department's budget, it becomes

2 increasingly evident that our ability to ensure water
3 safety is at risk. New York City's beaches and pools
4 have long served as a lifeline for our residents,
5 especially during the scorching summer months.

6 However, the demand for increased hours and staffing
7 has become more pressing, particularly as we have
8 grappled with two major crises, the COVID-19 pandemic
9 and the climate crisis. Extending beach and outdoor
10 pool seasons as outlined in Intro. 275 signifies a
11 significant stride towards enhancing public access to
12 these amenities. With the passage of the bill, we
13 ensure that New Yorkers can enjoy these facilities
14 for a more extended period, transcending the
15 traditional closure following Labor Day. While these
16 measures outlined in Intro. 275 represent significant
17 strides towards enhancing water safety and
18 recreational opportunities, the budgetary
19 implications must be carefully addressed to ensure
20 effective implementation. Additionally, Intro. 130's
21 requirement for the Parks Department and the
22 Sanitation Department to establish composting
23 facilities near the 10 largest parks demonstrates a
24 proactive approach to environmental stewardship. By
25 investing in composting initiatives, we not only

2 reduce waste, but also contribute to the health and
3 sustainability of our city's green spaces. I urge the
4 Council to consider the dual imperatives of water
5 safety and environmental sustainability as we
6 navigate Mayor Adams' budget reduction mandate that
7 reduces the agency's ability to deliver on core
8 services that are critical to equitable access to
9 amenities and the safety of our waterfront and pools.
10 By investing in our park system and supporting
11 initiatives like those outlined in the proposed
12 bills, we can ensure a safer, healthier, and more
13 vibrant city for generations to come. However, it is
14 essential to acknowledge the challenges posed by the
15 budgetary constraints highlighted by the November PEG
16 cuts. There is an urgent need to reverse the hiring
17 freeze and increase staffing as outlined in Play
18 Fair's FY25 budget ask. If crises of the last few
19 years show us anything, it's that we are overdue for
20 a transformative investment in our park system. 1
21 percent of the City budget for Parks could ensure
22 that our beaches and pools can be resourced to
23 support New York City and be a safe haven for all
24 residents. Thank you.

2 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you all so
3 much for your testimony. Right on time, right on the
4 clock.

5 Finally, our last panel is Eric Goldstein
6 from the National Resources Defense Council, Justin
7 Green from Big Reuse.

8 JUSTIN GREEN: Hi. My name is Justin
9 Green. I'm the Executive Director of Big Reuse. Thank
10 you, guys, for having us. Thank you, Chair, for
11 having this hearing, and thank you, Council Member
12 Brewer, for introducing the composting legislation.
13 Despite the testimony you just heard from Parks about
14 supporting composting and sustainability, on
15 Wednesday, they just told us, Big Reuse, that they
16 were not renewing our license to continue operating
17 our composting site that we've operated for over a
18 decade underneath the Queensborough Bridge. The site
19 produces the most compost on Parks land even though
20 it's under 20,000 square feet. Parks is planning to
21 evict our community composting site this June, not
22 renewing our license agreement. That's despite every
23 local elected official, every community board
24 surrounding it, assembly members, Council Members,
25 borough presidents, all design (INAUDIBLE) that

2 they've had around Baby Queensbridge Park asking that
3 we remain. They've taken all that input and thrown it
4 out the window. They are telling us that they need
5 that space for parking and they're going to kick off
6 our composting site. They have unused parking space
7 up and down the Queensborough Bridge Plaza that is
8 underutilized so despite what they're saying, they
9 are not actually following through on their
10 requirement currently to compost yard waste, and
11 hopefully the bill that Council Member Brewer has
12 introduced will push them in the right direction.
13 When we took over the site, we removed 40 dumpsters
14 of garbage. Parks have been managing that site. We
15 worked with the Department of Sanitation. We built
16 out a nationally recognized state-of-the-art
17 composting site. We compost at that site over two
18 million pounds of food waste and yard waste that we
19 supply to over 300 community groups around the city
20 and help Parks become more sustainable. With the
21 budget cuts additionally as you're all aware,
22 Department of Sanitation cut funding for community
23 composting with the last round of PEGs in November,
24 causing a layoff of 115 staff across eight non-
25 profits and botanical gardens. We support Intro. 130,

2 especially if it can be amended to support the
3 existing community composting groups that have built
4 support over the last decade for composting and
5 beyond in New York City that pushes Parks to take
6 responsibility and for managing its yard waste
7 sustainably. Parks is the City's largest producer of
8 leaf and yard waste and needs that compost so it just
9 makes sense for Parks to compost and for composting
10 to happen in parks. Thanks.

11 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you for your
12 testimony.

13 ERIC GOLDSTEIN: Good afternoon, Chair
14 Krishnan, and bravo to you for all your good work on
15 swimming access and swimming safety. Very, very
16 important issue.

17 My name is Eric Goldstein, and I am New
18 York City Environment Director at the Natural
19 Resources Defense Council. As you know, we're a
20 national non-profit environmental group, we have no
21 connection to Big Reuse or the other non-profit
22 composting organizations, financial or otherwise,
23 other than thinking that they are an amazing group of
24 New Yorkers who are doing spectacular work on behalf
25 of all city residents. We appreciate you being here

2 today, Council Member Holden and Council Member
3 Brewer, for your leadership on this issue. I'm going
4 to summarize my written testimony.

5 Collecting organics and processing them
6 to be turned into finished compost should be viewed
7 as an essential City service, just like snow removal
8 and trash collection. Right now, our food scraps and
9 yard waste, the organics, the single largest portion
10 of the waste stream, are sent to landfills and
11 incinerators, creating all kinds of environmental
12 problems, and it's costing taxpayers over 200 million
13 dollars a year to export that waste, just the organic
14 waste. Community composting, where these non-profit
15 organizations work and turn this food scraps, yard
16 waste, food, soil, paper into finished compost, a
17 useful product is necessary for the success of the
18 whole organics collection program. The Council did a
19 great thing when it passed the Universal Curbside
20 Compost Organics Collection Bill last year along with
21 the Zero Waste Package, but that will never succeed,
22 you'll never get the full public participation, buy-
23 in, endorsement, unless you preserve community
24 composting. These are the folks that train New
25 Yorkers on how to compost. They educate New Yorkers

2 on why it's important to compost. They get kids
3 involved in nature. They bring people into this
4 movement. You can't just mandate something like this
5 and expect it to succeed, but for reasons that don't
6 make any sense, community composting seems now to be
7 on life support in this city and hanging by a thread,
8 not just with Big Reuse, but with the Lower East Side
9 Ecology Center and the other botanic gardens in all
10 of the boroughs as well as Earth Matters on
11 Governor's Island. The Parks Department has long had
12 a critical role to play in all of this. Since 1989,
13 when the Council first passed the Mandatory Recycling
14 Law, there was a responsibility on City agencies and
15 particularly the Parks Department to compost. Section
16 16-308c of the Administrative Code says even today,
17 any city agency that generates a substantial amount
18 of yard waste, and as Justin just said, the Parks
19 Department is number one in that category, any city
20 agency that generates a substantial amount of yard
21 waste shall provide for the source separation,
22 collection, and composting of such yard waste. By my
23 reading, the Parks Department along with the
24 Sanitation Department has been in violation of this
25 law for over 30 years. Even today, a significant

2 amount of leaf and yard waste generated on Parks
3 Department property is not being composted. The Parks
4 Department should be embracing this composting and
5 community composting, not be embarrassed by it or
6 running away from it.

7 Council Member Brewer is an environmental
8 champion and has done so much to protect our
9 environment and quality of life, and we support the
10 intent of Intro. 130. For boosting the role of Parks
11 and composting, we think there should be four
12 significant amendments to that bill before you enact
13 it into law.

14 First, the Parks Department should be
15 directed to continue providing suitable space,
16 preferably their existing space, to any non-profit
17 organization currently conducting community
18 composting that operates in the city without a permit
19 from DEC on Parks properties. That's really Big Reuse
20 in the Lower East side. Again, these community scale
21 composting operations are consistent with Parks'
22 purposes. They bring people into parks, they teach
23 kids about nature, they're popular, and they advance
24 numerous city, environmental, and economic
25 objectives.

2 Second, the 10 parks to be selected for
3 this expedited composting operation in the 130 bill
4 should be selected based on the amount of organics
5 waste that they generate. Some parks generate a lot,
6 some parks a little. You want to get the biggest bang
7 for the buck by focusing on the amount of organic
8 waste they generate.

9 Third, the Department should be
10 encouraged to work with the not-for-profit
11 organizations to facilitate NGO engagement in the
12 operations of some or all of these composting
13 productions at these selected parks. The non-profit
14 groups have dedicated, spectacular employees who work
15 for relatively modest wages. They can be enormously
16 helpful and they are ambassadors, showing New Yorkers
17 how and why to compost. Again, you'll never have
18 organics processing work if you don't preserve this
19 community composting force that's been a wonderful
20 force in this city for going on 30 years now.

21 Finally, the legislation should direct
22 that composting operations at these parks should
23 accept reasonable amounts of food scraps consistent
24 with agency best practices, provided that any such
25 food scraps meet acceptable standards for low

2 contamination and high-quality. Mixing food scraps
3 and yard waste gets you the best quality compost, and
4 there are other important reasons for incorporating
5 that, assuming it could be done in high-quality
6 operation, and that's exactly what Big Reuse in Lower
7 East Side have been doing for years.

8 Finally, passage of this legislation
9 should be accompanied by an FY25 budget allocation
10 that restores 7 million dollars of funding to the New
11 York Compost Project Organizations, these seven non-
12 profits and GrowNYC as well as small additional
13 funding to Parks so that they can administer and
14 operate this cost-effective composting program.

15 We're very sympathetic to Parks' needs in
16 the financial area. We've long supported the 1
17 Percent for Parks, but to shirk its responsibilities
18 and the legal requirements of law and not have
19 composting and be kicking out Big Reuse to literally
20 put up a parking lot is disgraceful, and this
21 Committee ought to be actively involved in getting
22 Parks to reverse that decision and to support
23 community composting. We appreciate all your good
24 work and your attention today.

2 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you so much
3 for your testimony. Thank you so much for
4 highlighting the importance of community composting
5 and the work that you all do at Big Reuse, the
6 National Resource and Defense Council, and look
7 forward to continuing to work with you all to make
8 sure we save and support community composting in this
9 city. Thank you very much.

10 That concludes, everyone, our hearing for
11 today on water safety with also a detour into
12 community composting. We cover it all in this Parks
13 Committee. I'm really grateful for everyone who
14 testified today too. Clearly, this is an issue when
15 it comes to water safety, as we've heard from all the
16 testimony, requires everyone to be at the table and
17 involved from agencies to organizations. That's the
18 only way we're going to solve this crisis. Thank you
19 all for your great work, for the ideas you raised
20 today, for your partnership and looking forward to
21 our continued collaboration to make sure that every
22 New Yorker can swim and has access to a pool or a
23 beach and feel safe in the water.

24 Thanks very much, everyone. Hearing is
25 now closed. [GAVEL]

C E R T I F I C A T E

World Wide Dictation certifies that the foregoing transcript is a true and accurate record of the proceedings. We further certify that there is no relation to any of the parties to this action by blood or marriage, and that there is interest in the outcome of this matter.



Date March 8, 2024