



Hearing before the New York City Council
Committee on Parks & Recreation
An Examination of the City's Parks Without Borders Initiative

December 3, 2015

Testimony By: Mitchell J. Silver, FAICP, Commissioner for New York City Department of Parks and Recreation

Good afternoon, Chair Levine, and members of the Committee on Parks & Recreation. I am Mitchell Silver, Commissioner for the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation. Joining me on this panel are Steven Lenard, Deputy Director at our Planning division, and Matt Drury, Director of Government Relations. Thank you for inviting me to testify today regarding Parks Without Borders (PWB), which is NYC Parks' exciting new initiative to connect parks with their surrounding communities in stronger and more meaningful ways.

Before we discuss that, I wanted to provide some context about NYC Parks' major strategic priorities. Park **Equity** has been a major focus of our agency and this administration that has been best represented by the Community Parks Initiative. All New Yorkers need access to green and open space as well as a voice in how they are used. We're working to make sure that resources are invested fairly and we're including local communities in the decisions that affect their neighborhoods and their parks.

It's one thing for an agency to "maintain" its property by checking items off of a checklist, but we are striving to instill a culture of "**caring**" for our parks and green spaces as well. We understand the emotional attachment and dedication that the word "care" implies. This strong sense of caring is also reflected in the passionate dedication and involvement of our thousands of volunteer stewards and organizations that donate innumerable hours, nights and weekends to help take care of their community parks, gardens and street trees.

We continue to focus on **Innovation & Technology** because we want to make the most efficient use of taxpayer dollars and provide services in way that is smart and efficient. We will continue to find ways to streamline the capital process and help our dedicated maintenance staff do the best job possible keeping our parks clean.

Our parks are the settings for our experiences and memories, which is why we are strengthening our focus on **Planning and Placemaking**. Our city's parks, streets & sidewalks make up more than 40 percent of New York City's land area. We want to plan our parks and recreational spaces with imagination and awareness of how they impact their broader neighborhoods. Which is a perfect lead-in for a discussion regarding our new Parks Without Borders initiative.

This initiative starts from the idea that neighborhoods should have greater access and connectivity to our beloved public spaces. Parks without Borders seeks to achieve this through three main goals:

- Create more welcoming, accessible parks by opening up entrances and edges;
- Beautify neighborhoods by expanding the pleasing aesthetic of parks into the neighborhood; and
- Activating vibrant community spaces by transforming underutilized spaces into centers of community activity.

Parks Without Borders was first announced earlier this year in the Mayor's comprehensive planning document "*OneNYC: The Plan for a Just and Strong City*," which calls for greater access to parks. Parks Without Borders is a key strategy to achieve this important goal, and \$50 million in Mayoral funding has been set aside to make it a reality.

So what is Parks Without Borders? It is a new approach to park design that focuses on three main areas within parks: entrances, edges, and adjacent park spaces. These are the places where parks and neighborhoods interact most directly. And unfortunately, our parks are not always designed to encourage those interactions -- instead they sometimes seal the park off and isolate it from its surroundings. All of us have seen parks like this—with big walls and tall gates that block views into the park. Sometimes you can walk past a city park without even recognizing there's one there!

As this design approach considers park entrances, we are looking to widen entrances and add them to corners or other areas that better align with locations where people naturally tend to approach the park. We are improving sight lines into the park, and adding amenities such as entry plazas, seating, and decoration to help make entrances places in their own right and to make them more visible from further away. These changes will help make parks more welcoming and draw more people into our open spaces. Parks Without Borders is not an initiative to remove perimeter fences.

Along park edges, we are looking to improve visibility into and out of the park using various strategies, including lowering fences and improved lighting. We also want to add seating, street trees, and other amenities along park edges to activate them and bring the beauty of the park out into the neighborhood. These changes will help create a "front porch" at certain parks and make neighborhoods more beautiful and safer by improving natural surveillance of park spaces by local residents.

For park adjacent spaces, which are sections of parkland that hundreds of people walk by every day but currently aren't used for anything. We are looking to open these spaces up where they are fenced off or paved over and incorporate them into the larger park design, add amenities to activate these spaces and encourage people to use them. For these efforts, we hope to target spaces with close proximity to existing concentrations of activity, such as popular commercial streets or popular public institutions such as libraries or museums.

We will apply this new design approach in two ways: we'll apply \$10 million in mayoral funding to existing projects already in process, and set aside \$40 million for a set of eight signature park projects that will receive large-scale capital redesigns, which will be specially selected by utilizing public input.

Where feasible and appropriate, these goals and principles will be applied to the approximately 450 projects that are already in the Capital project pipeline. We have already incorporated Parks Without Borders design concepts into dozens of capital projects across the five boroughs, within the existing scope and budget of those projects. So when we are reconstructing a playground or redesigning a set of basketball courts, we are looking for opportunities to open up those parks and make them more connected to the surrounding neighborhood. It won't work on every site, but we expect to impact hundreds of additional existing projects across the city in this fashion over the course of this initiative, utilizing \$10 million of the Mayoral funds that have been provided.

A great example is Travers Park, in Queens. This project will take down a 12-ft high chain link fence and open up the park boundaries. It will also add seating areas and planting along the edges to help integrate the park into the neighborhood, welcoming more users and greater activation of this great public resource.

But to help us choose eight signature redesign projects, for the first time in NYC Parks' history, we are seeking direct input from New Yorkers about the parks they think would benefit most from this new design philosophy. We have launched a dynamic interactive website, www.nyc.gov/parks/pwb, that will allow people not only to suggest parks for consideration, but also to zoom in on any park and suggest specific improvements. If your

constituents have always wanted a new entrance where they walk by the park every day, they can tell us. If you have always wanted park benches under the shade trees across from your favorite deli or coffee shop, you can tell us directly. The website has already been a great success, garnering more than 1,100 park suggestions.

Any park nominees that you or your constituents believe can be better connected to the surrounding neighborhood will be considered as a signature redesign project-- the more constructive feedback we receive about a certain site, the more likely that site is to be selected. This website is the centerpiece of a comprehensive outreach effort that will help NYC Parks connect with all New Yorkers, including those with limited access to the internet. We are currently holding community board forums in each borough to speak directly with Community Board representatives and we will be holding presentations in libraries, our Computer Resource Centers, and other places where people who don't have home internet access can get onto the website.

In addition, we have developed a table-top exercise for use at these meetings that replicates the interactive map, so we can get input from those who don't feel comfortable on a computer. We would love to partner with you and other community leaders in publicizing these sessions, to encourage as much participation as possible. We welcome your input regarding language access and other issues, so we can be as inclusive as possible. We are also interested in hearing from community and cultural organizations who want to support and activate these spaces. So if you know of a group that has a particular interest in a park, please direct them to the Parks Without Borders website, or one of these community meetings between now and the end of February.

After the nomination period closes, we will then select – and fund – the best eight parks to make truly transformative impacts where the potential is greatest, utilizing \$40 million in Mayoral funding. To explain in a little more detail how the eight new Parks Without Borders projects will be selected, there are three main criteria:

- Community support as reflected through the website and other outreach efforts, will be strongly considered.
- Projects that can help advance this administration's goal of bringing more than 85 percent of New Yorkers within a walk to a park will also be strongly considered.
- Lastly, because this is fundamentally a design strategy, it will rely on certain physical conditions and contexts to work effectively. While it is a broad and adaptable strategy, it will have better results in some locations than in others.

NYC Parks will evaluate each candidate site for its potential to benefit from this approach. We'll also work in close partnership with our sister agencies, such as the Department of Transportation and the Department of Environmental Protection, regarding potential design elements, such as sidewalk improvements and green infrastructure, and are working with the NYPD to address safety concerns or other impacts.

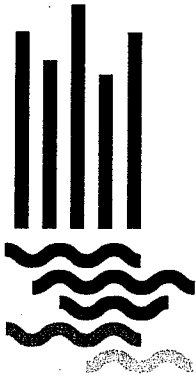
Because physical conditions are so important to the success of this approach, I want to go over in a little more detail what kinds of things we are looking for. This will help you to understand the approach and also what kind of sites might be worth suggesting through the website or other means:

- Parks close to areas of activity like commercial strips or public institutions.
- Parks surrounded by high fences or other barriers that block views into the park, particularly barriers above eye-level so that you can't see over them.
- Parks with narrow entrances with high gates that are hard to find; lacking entrances at desired locations; lacking street trees; or featuring empty spaces next to park edges that could be used for community activities.

Before I conclude, I want to leave you with a comment from a very famous person who said that "the sidewalk next to the park should be considered the outer park." And that person was Frederick Law Olmstead.

I look forward to working with all of you as we solicit feedback from the community during the nominating process for Parks Without Borders. Please encourage your constituents to check out the Parks Without Borders website, www.nyc.gov/parks/pwb or contact us for more info. Thank you for allowing me to testify before you today and for all your great advocacy for Parks via your work on this committee. I will be happy to answer any questions that you may have.

**Testimony of Roland Lewis, President & CEO, Waterfront Alliance
New York City Council Committee on Parks - Oversight Hearing
Re: Parks Without Borders
December 3, 2015**



The Waterfront Alliance is a coalition of nearly 900 community and recreational groups, educational institutions, businesses, and other stakeholders committed to restoring and revitalizing the New York and New Jersey waterways. Our waterways have been revitalized with active recreation, environmental education, and waterborne transportation, and more and more New Yorkers are interested in getting not only to the water's edge, but onto and into the water. As New Yorkers reengage with the water's edge, public parks have been a vital component of that revitalization.

The objectives of The Parks Without Borders initiative are strongly applicable to many waterfront parks. Better placement and design (or the removal) of fencing and walls, and new gates, plantings, and water fountains may be necessary in both inland and waterfront parks. The parks that border Hallets Cove in Astoria, Queens offer a great opportunity, where a small beach is surrounded by three separate Parks. Improvements in gates and fencing can not only open up the parks, they can open up the waterfront. Council Member Costa Constantinides and Borough President Katz have allocated capital funding to NYCEDC for improved waterfront access. In Sunset Park, Bush Terminal Piers Park currently lacks a southern entrance and signage to connect it with the community, though there are plans in place to address these challenges. This initiative should serve as a reference point as these projects proceed.

This initiative should be seen as an important tool for not only improving upland amenities, but also for unlocking the waterways in waterfront parks. Parks with waterfront "borders," while providing sweeping views and passive recreational areas, in many locations do not facilitate full engagement with the waterways. New York's 520 miles of coastline remain largely unwelcoming to many types of vessels, offering limited opportunities for communities to enjoy and utilize the waterways. The historic, educational, and cultural vessels that call the harbor home have very few places to berth, particularly outside of Manhattan. Piers are too often designed without maritime access in mind. The New York City Parks Department has led the way through the development of the New York City Water Trail for recreational boating. Despite significant progress, there are still numerous opportunities to identify and address capital improvements that increase the public's growing call for on-water activity.

A new model for public waterfront access, Community Eco Docks, is the result of a partnership between NYC Parks and the Waterfront Alliance to plan, build, and program floating docks that unlock the waterways for people and vessels. Eco Docks reconnect residents with the city's maritime tradition; welcome kayaks, sailing ships, and historic boats; and provide floating classrooms for local schools and educational institutions. Thanks to the generous support of Council Member Vincent Gentile, the creativity and tireless effort of NYC Parks marine division, and the participation of the maritime and education communities, residents of Bay Ridge and surrounding neighborhoods have enjoyed free weekly programs and events at the Bay Ridge Community Eco Dock, which last year unlocked the waterways at American Veterans Memorial Pier at 69th Street.

Residents of Staten Island, the South Bronx, northern Manhattan, northeast Queens, and all across the city deserve these same opportunities. New York still needs a true regional network of waterfront access points, to break the "fourth wall" and exponentially increase the utility and enjoyment of the overall parks experience. The Waterfront Alliance looks forward to continuing to work with the Council, NYC Parks, and other civic partners to truly open New York's waterfront borders to all.



**New York City Council Committee on Parks & Recreation
Testimony on An Examination of the City's Parks without Borders
Initiative
December 3, 2015
Tupper Thomas, Executive Director**

Good morning. I am Tupper Thomas, Executive Director of New Yorkers for Parks. I want to thank the Committee on Parks and Recreation for inviting me to speak today.

NY4P supports the Parks without Borders initiative. The value of a park to the surrounding community is greatly reduced if community members are unable to easily access a park, and proximity does not necessarily mean accessibility. The city will now measure accessibility using the same metric we have long endorsed: residents should be within a one-quarter mile sidewalk route to a park entrance, not just the park itself. By creating new entrances, the city will encourage usership and make the park more inviting and safer.

We also applaud the inclusion of \$10 million for parks projects currently in the capital pipeline that need more funding, and are good candidates for edge redesign. Many parks projects fall short of achieving all necessary improvements because of a lack of funding. We hope Parks without Borders will continue for a number of years, giving the Parks Commissioner flexibility to address the needs of parks in all neighborhoods.

We were so pleased with the Community Parks Initiative because it was the first time that the Parks Department chose specific parks in low-income neighborhoods, based on targeted and tangible criteria. We hope that the public input process for Parks without Borders will generate great ideas, but without excluding those communities with less ability to organize and advocate for their parks. Permanent funding of increased staff for Partnerships for Parks would help the formation of friends groups, and provide training that will improve the ability of new groups to apply to this program.

We expect that the Parks without Borders Initiative will bring much-needed improvements to existing parks. However, once these parks are fixed we have to make sure that they receive funding for long-term maintenance.

Not to sound like a broken record, but the administration must add additional full time staff to the NYC Parks budget. The Council has been a champion for this cause but can only fund annual additions, not permanent staff. In order for capital programs like Parks without Borders to have a true impact there must be more staff, without which we the risk of undoing the important work completed by the Parks Department.

Thank you.

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Parks w/o Borders

Date: 12-3-15

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Name: Christopher Rizzo

Address: 2 Wall St. CLM LLP

I represent: Friends of Van Cortlandt

Address: Park

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I represent: New Yorkers 4 Parks

Address: _____

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Address: 830 Fifth Ave RM 317, NY, NY 10065

I represent: NYC Parks

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Name: Steven Lenard (Dep. Director ^{of} Planning)

Address: 830 Fifth Ave, NY, NY 10065

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