



City of New York Parks & Recreation



New York City Council Committee on Finance Committee on Parks & Recreation

Fiscal Year 2010 Executive Budget

May 19, 2009

Testimony by
Adrian Benepe
Commissioner

INTRODUCTION

In March, we appeared before the Council to talk about how our agency would be doing more with less. Our approach was to avoid causing significant service impacts to the public by becoming more efficient, embracing technology, and leveraging the help of all our resources to keep our parks clean and safe. Now, while planning for our busy summer season, we want to ensure that you and your constituents understand that, even with the budget reductions, our park programs are thriving, and it is a great time to come out to parks.

Like every other agency, we are facing these budget reductions and as an agency we are pulling together to minimize the areas in which they are noticeably affected. The majority of our reductions will take place in three areas. First, we decreased our budget for new vehicle purchases, and complied with a citywide directive to make fewer purchases. In addition, we reduced our budget for forestry services, including funding to remove stumps and to prune trees, and reduced our workforce. Although our budget reductions have been designed to avoid layoffs, we will be losing about 220 fulltime staff members in Fiscal Year 2010 through attrition. We also reduced our overtime budget by 30 percent, a \$1 million reduction, which will cause the elimination of our greeter program in parks. We will be eliminating the budget line that has allowed us to hire some of our temporary Job Training Program (JTP) participants for additional 6 months, which costs us the equivalent of 242 fulltime jobs. However, the budget for our full time JTPs remains intact, and in fact, our April headcount of 2,556 participants is ahead of last year's total. We will also be adding more welfare-to-work participants this year through our Work Employment Program, or WEP, process. Lastly, through \$2 million in federal stimulus funding allocated to us by DYCD, we will offer 200 members of our city's "disconnected youth," young people aged 18 through 24 who are neither working nor in school, the chance to transition into the workforce and learn valuable job and life skills. They will supplement our workforce while receiving on-the-job training and tools to achieve self-sufficiency.

More generally, when considering these reductions, it's important to keep them in perspective. Our Fiscal Year 2010 Executive Budget is smaller than last year's, true, but it's also much larger than the budget from the year this administration first took office in 2002. If you had told us

then that we'd eventually have the funding that we have this year, we would have been delighted but dubious. We believe that thanks to our ability to find cost efficiencies early on in our first few rounds of budget reductions, we expect to be able to provide uninterrupted service in most cases.

CUTTING WASTE

And just as we are making our own agency more efficient to cope with lean times, we are doing our best to curb waste outside of our budget. As I said during our last budget hearing, it is imperative that we make sure New Yorkers have the same high quality of life that they are used to.

Litter Initiative

We have noticed that despite the increased presence of trash cans and our regular cleaning, that some of our less considerate park users continue to throw their litter on the ground. We are looking for ways to change the culture of litter in our parks. My hope is to make sure that all New Yorkers understand that they should treat our parks, and the earth, with respect. Certainly, any help you can provide us in making your constituents more aware of their need to keep their parks clean will be appreciated.

Canine Waste

Similarly, I testified a few weeks ago about our mission to ensure a high quality-of-life for our park users and to combat the increase in dog owners who choose to leave these blights on our otherwise clean and safe parks.

We have stepped up enforcement of this issue and we issued 98 summonses for "Failure to Remove Canine Waste" in April 2009, and 10 more in May, up from a record of 71 summonses in the month of March. We have partnered with the Department of Sanitation to analyze patterns of violations from citizen calls to 3-1-1, and just finished working with the Environmental Control Board to raise the fines from \$100 to \$250 per violation, to be consistent with the state's Health Code. This new fine will go into effect in June and we hope will further deter dog owners from not stooping to scoop.

INNOVATIVE RECREATION

To begin to make the summer great, we must first take care of basic quality-of-life issues. But beyond that, we must provide the best and newest programming, to get people out to the parks. Ever since the first North American playgrounds were built at Seward Park, New York has been at the cutting edge of the play movement. As we get ready for summer, we are making sure that our children have the best places to play, limited only by the extent of their own imaginations.

Imagination Playground

This past month, we broke ground on Imagination Playground, designed by world-renowned architect David Rockwell. This playground breaks free from traditional design and allows for flexible and unbounded play. Children will have the chance to build something, tear it down, and start all over again, which is great news for any little Godzillas in the audience. The design for Imagination Playground has been granted to the people of New York pro bono, and Rockwell Group has raised a \$2 million endowment fund to support the playground's maintenance and its Play Associates. Once complete, the playground will join our already-existing program offering the "Imagination Playground in a BOX," a mobile container of play equipment that is bringing the concept of "free play" to recreation centers and parks throughout the city. This summer, we'll be adding 10 more boxes.

And we have good news that the Mayor, continuing to expand on his investment in our city's future, has baselined \$5.25 million annually for recreation across all our five boroughs. This is truly a wise investment that will benefit generations of New Yorkers to come.

Accessibility

We are also continuing to be an industry leader in bringing accessible recreation to our park users. We have created at least one wheelchair football and softball field in every borough that can host practices and competitions for city teams, as well as clinics for kids from neighboring schools and hospitals. Parks offers aquatic therapy instruction, wheelchair sports clinics, and accessible fitness equipment. We are also partnering with organizations such as the United States Paralympics' to provide disabled sports programming.

And as we make major improvements to our recreational facilities or build new facilities like our recently completed Al Oerter Recreation Center and Flushing Meadows Corona Park Aquatic Center and World Ice Arena, we make sure that these areas are equipped with exercise equipment with swing out seats for wheelchair users and cardiovascular equipment with high contrast and Braille controls, for people with visual impairments. When replacing existing equipment in our recreation centers, we are always sure to consider accessibility.

And now, as we get ready for the summer, we are making sure that all New Yorkers have the ability to enjoy beach and pool season. Over the past two summers, Parks installed specially designed mats at beaches to allow mobility-impaired New Yorkers to experience the beach first-hand. This summer, we will be adding another Queens location which will bring our total number of beach mat locations to nine. These mats have also allowed us to make some of our special events accessible such as the Winter Jam event at East River Park this past winter. And with pool openings just around the corner, we have installed pool lifts for all of our Olympic size outdoor pools that will allow people with disabilities to swim for free.

SUMMER SEASON

As you can see, we're doing our best to make sure that beaches and pools are ready for everyone. We're getting ready for "stay-cation" season, and we expect unprecedented crowds to enjoy our beaches, pools, and other summer activities. As I said earlier, we don't expect the budget

reductions to significantly hamper our summer operations, whether at parks, playgrounds, or beaches, and we are well-prepared.

Summer Programs

We will continue to offer an array of summer programs. Our Summer Sports Experience will return for its fourth year, teaching children fundamental skills in many sports, and encouraging them to pursue sports training and physical fitness training. We also already have nearly 1,000 children enrolled in our summer day camps, where children can spend their day working with arts & crafts, playing sports, taking field trips, and more.

Beaches and Pools opening

We will be opening our beaches and pools this coming Memorial Day weekend to welcome those who love the sun, sand, water and fresh air, or simply want to get away from the day-to-day grind. We invite you to the ceremonial preview for Orchard Beach in the Bronx on May 20, Coney Island beaches on May 21, and Rockaway Beach in Queens on May 22. I'm sure each of you will try on your favorite swimsuit as soon as you get back to your office.

If that's not enough enticement to get outside, our 54 outdoor pools will open for the season on June 27. Our beautiful Floating Pool Lady will be returning for her third season, and her second on the banks of Barretto Point Park in the Bronx.

Coney Island and Rockaway Beach Update

Of course, Coney Island and Rockaway Beaches wouldn't be nearly the same without their boardwalks. These national treasures need to be protected and maintained as world-famous symbols of our magnificent coastline. And in recognition of that, we have been fortunate to be the recipient of \$10 million secured by Assembly Members Brooks-Krasny and Cymbowitz, as well as \$30 million in displaced Federal stimulus funding for both Coney Island and Rockaway boardwalks. With this influx of money, we will soon be installing demonstration projects to help us determine the next iterations of sustainable building material that will ensure our boardwalks will last another hundred years.

DEP has also given us \$700,000 in funding to hire seasonal crews, who will be out on the beaches every day over the next two summer seasons, combing our beaches and cleaning them. Not only will these new crews help us clean areas of Coney Island and Rockaway Beaches, but they will also spend this month cleaning beaches throughout Jamaica Bay that are prone to collecting tidal debris and driftwood.

Lifeguard update

And what would a swim in our oceans be without the able-bodied men and women of our municipal life saving force? These men and women, whether from New York City, Lithuania, or even New Jersey, comprise the strongest and most dedicated swimming armada in the United States, maybe in the world. Baywatch has nothing on this crew!

For first-year lifeguards, 514 out of 1,402 candidates passed the qualifying test this year, compared to 397 of 1,108 last year. We will have to see how many of them complete the training and pass their tests before we will know how many new lifeguards we will have (last year we had 220 new lifeguards). In most years, 75 percent of the previous year's lifeguards will return. Since we had a record number of lifeguards last year (1,148), we hope to have a record number of returning guards. There is also a chance that we will have less attrition than usual, due to the poor job market. Lifeguards who are graduating from school may come back for one more summer before starting their careers. In addition, we have 125 international candidates who are currently applying for visas. This is much higher than ever before (we've had around 25 over the past few years). Since not all of them will get visas, and some may fail the test when they get here, we're hoping this will ultimately translate into about 50 new beach lifeguards from other countries.

All these numbers mean that we are optimistic that for the first time ever, we will reach and even surpass our recruitment goal of 1,200 lifeguards for the 2009 summer season! With a better trained staff, and more eyes on the waters of our beaches and pools, New Yorkers can feel safe to take a dip and dive into the clean waters of our city's beaches and pools.

TREES

Finally, we have been working to make sure that this summer, more blocks than ever before will feature ribbons of green, and parks and natural areas will feature even more canopy cover. In March, we told you that MillionTrees Month was set to begin. The verdant verdict is in, and more than 38,000 trees were planted in April, most by your constituents and fellow volunteers. And, since the inception of MillionTreesNYC, over 202,000 trees have been planted, which is quite an accomplishment.

With a \$1 million reduction to our street tree pruning contracts, we will be relying more heavily on our citizen pruners and non-profit partners for day-to-day care of our 600,000 plus street trees. Yet, in doing more with less, we hope to continue to be as responsive as we were in flush economic times, and protect our citizens, their property and maintain their safety by pruning on-demand and adhering to continued vigilance in pruning trees, bushes and other vegetation obstructing a traffic signal or device in accordance with Local Law 12 of 2008.

CONCLUSION

Thank you again for allowing me to share with you today a little about what we're doing at Parks to keep our city lean, green and a great place to live and play. We look forward to continuing to build on our great relationship with all 51 Council Members, and we'll see you at our beaches and pools this Memorial Day weekend.



City Council Executive Budget Hearing
Fiscal Year 2010

New Yorkers for Parks Testimony
May 19, 2009

Hello. My name is Cheryl Huber and I am Director of Research & Planning for New Yorkers for Parks, the only independent watchdog and advocate for New York City parks, beaches and playgrounds. NY4P is committed to ensuring that every neighborhood in every borough receives green, clean, and safe parks.

Overview

In the Executive Budget for FY 2010, the Mayor has proposed only \$256 million allotted for the Parks Department. Although the Parks Department's budget has increased *slightly* since the Preliminary Budget was released, this additional funding only covers collective bargaining and increases for gasoline, etc. None of the essential programs that were cut in January's budget like seasonal staffing and tree pruning have been restored; in fact, the cuts have worsened since the January plan.

If the Mayor's Executive Budget is passed, the Parks Department will have lost \$25 million in operations funding since 2007, with this year's projected cut at \$13 million. We have not seen consecutive cuts of this magnitude in more than 15 years. Unfortunately, the gains in funding that Parks has seen under this administration are being lost. Without restoration of maintenance programs, the improvements that our parks have seen will be endangered.

Restorations

We ask the City Council to restore the following essential programs:

Seasonals: The Department has proposed to reduce funding for six-month seasonal staffing in FY 2010 by \$10 million, 100% worse than January's Preliminary Budget projected. This would result in the elimination of 250 seasonal positions – employees that are vital to providing sufficient maintenance and programming during the busiest season for parks. The lack of seasonal staffing during the summer, when parks see the highest number of visitors, will jeopardize any gains made in our parks over the last 5 years. This funding must be restored.

Tree Pruning: Funding for tree pruning will be reduced by \$3.5 million in FY 2010. Citizens and agency staff have planted more than 200,000 trees in the last two years to reach the city's goal of one million trees by 2010. Street tree maintenance is an ongoing concern and is the most common parks-related call to 311. This program must be fully funded to ensure we meet the demands for this

service. We are grateful that the Council has historically restored cuts to tree pruning and hope that this year will be no different.

Conclusion

Among many benefits, urban parks help relieve stress, provide free recreation opportunities for families, and offer solace and comfort, all benefits that are even more pronounced during a time of lay-offs and fiscal stress in the city. We respectfully ask that the City Council sufficiently fund parks this year so that New Yorkers may continue to rely on public space that is clean, safe and green.

We ask that the Council restore funding for seasonal staffing at \$10 million and tree pruning at \$3.5 million in order to ensure that our public parks serve New Yorkers who need these spaces more than ever.

Thank you.

Testimony of Robert A. Cook, V.M.D., M.P.A.
Executive Vice President and General Director of Living Institutions
Wildlife Conservation Society
Before the New York City Council Committee for Parks
May 19, 2009

Good afternoon Madame Chairwoman, members of the Committee and the New York City Council. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify today regarding New York City's Executive Budget for FY'10. I am Dr. Robert Cook, Executive Vice President and General Director of the Living Institutions for the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS

Since 1980, the Wildlife Conservation Society and the New York City Parks Department, through a management agreement, have worked closely to ensure quality zoo management at The Prospect Park, Queens, and Central Park Zoos. Together we provide an important public good for nearly 1.5 million City residents annually, particularly in their boroughs. We provide our citizens with a vital link to the natural world through state-of-the art exhibits, affordable wholesome family recreation, informal science and environmental education, and economic stability and growth. Our environmental education extends beyond our fences reaching out into the local underserved neighborhoods of the Bronx with the creation of the Urban Assembly School for Wildlife Conservation (UASWC) now in its second year. We are educating the next generation of biologists, veterinarians, horticulturists, landscape artists and designers through a unique partnership with the Department of Education, Urban Assembly and Phipps Community

Development Corporation. In Brooklyn we are working with the Rachel Carson School for Coastal Studies to reach similar goals of teaching children in the hopes of creating future generations of conservation minded adults.

Through the continued support of Mayor Bloomberg, Speaker Quinn and the New York City Council the necessary operating funds to the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation in this year's Executive Budget will continue to provide general operating support for the three city zoos. This funding is critical to daily operations and maintaining the level of service our visitors expect. Especially now as the economic crisis continues to diminish salaries and jobs, New York City residents are looking for recreation venues closer to home. As a result the zoos are experiencing increases in attendance which we believe will continue throughout the summer. Compared to last year at this time attendance at Central Park Zoo has increased 4%, Queens Zoo 7% and Prospect Park Zoo 6%. Though Central Park's attendance may appear to be growing more slowly, it is just the opposite as we have experienced totals of over 1million guests for the last 3 years.

The Parks Department in collaboration with the Office of Management and Budget continue to provide essential capital infrastructure funds for our aging facilities. These funds support the refurbishment and maintenance of these parks which will improve the guest experience, increase attendance, protect the health of our animals and support the work of WCS. This collaboration exemplifies the

importance of these zoos to their respective boroughs, the diverse communities they serve and New York City as a whole.

We are happy to announce that the Snow Leopard exhibit at the Central Park Zoo will open to the public on June 11, 2009 and the Jaguar exhibit at the Queens Zoo is currently in design. Each of these cats is an endangered species and continues to be a focus of the Wildlife Conservation Society's Big Cats conservation program. These charismatic large cats, thanks to the support of our City partners, will be New York ambassadors for the protection of big cats worldwide.

We hope you will continue to champion the Prospect Park, Queens and Central Park Zoos by supporting future capital funding for new exhibits and by maintaining operating support for the Parks Department. These are terrific and iconic zoological parks which provide a unique and important service to our citizens and to our many visitors from around the world. New York City's continued investment is critical to the future of these zoos.

Thank you.



Testimony of David Rivel
Executive Director of City Parks Foundation
Tuesday, May 19, 2009

NYC Council Joint Parks and Finance Committee FY2010 Executive Budget Hearing

Good afternoon. Thank you, Chairperson Foster, Chairman Weprin, and members of the committees, for the opportunity to testify today. My name is David Rivel. I am the Executive Director of City Parks Foundation (CPF).

The City Council has a long tradition of supporting City Parks Foundation, and I am here to request your support for CPF's **\$200,000 Leadership Expense Request** to assist us in providing our free education, sports, and community organizing initiatives, as well as our **\$750,000 Leadership Capital Request** to create a *Junior Tennis Center* in Flushing Meadow Park in Queens and for the purchase of a new speaker system for *Central Park SummerStage*.

As you know, CPF works in over 750 parks city-wide and plays an indispensable role in sustaining parks as focal points of urban communities. Our free programs serve 600,000 New Yorkers of all ages, backgrounds and ethnicities, with a focus on low-income communities. We run *Partnerships for Parks* (with the Department of Parks and Recreation) to help citizens become a force for change in their parks on a local level.

We have an annual budget of \$9.5 million, and 90% of our income is raised privately from corporations, foundations, and individuals. Their generosity allowed us to provide free programming to communities all over New York City, with federal, state, and city support combined providing only 10% of our income. Some corporations and foundations that funded us in the past simply do not exist anymore. Individuals are giving less. If we ever needed government assistance, the time is now.

You all are familiar with our free programming and what we do to improve parks in New York City. During these tough economic times, New Yorkers need the free programs City Parks Foundation offers in neighborhoods around the city. Additionally, City Parks Foundation contributes to New York City's economic engine by employing up to 350 people every summer to conduct its free programming city-wide. CPF hires sports instructors for our free tennis, golf, and track & field programs; artists and performers for our cultural programs, Central Park SummerStage, CityParks Concerts, CityParks Dance, CityParks Theater and CityParks Kids; and dozens of production assistants, stagehands, security staff, clean-up crews, and street teams. Our programs also have a significant "multiplier effect" in neighborhoods all across the city, drawing citizens into their local parks and supporting vendors, restaurants, and other neighborhood businesses.

Capital Request

In light of the tremendous success of our *Junior Golf Center* in Brooklyn, which the Council helped to fund, we now want to develop a *Junior Tennis Center* in Flushing Meadows Park in Queens. Like our *Junior Golf Center*, the *Junior Tennis Center* would provide equipment and instruction free of charge to youth, ages 5 to 16. We are asking the Council for \$500,000 to purchase a bubble to be placed over four courts to create an indoor facility, the *Junior Tennis*

Center. The *Junior Tennis Center* will be operated in conjunction with the United States Tennis Association and the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation.

Central Park SummerStage is world-renowned and has entertained millions of people over the years, free of charge. As we look forward to the 25th Anniversary of *Central Park SummerStage* in 2010, we plan to purchase a new line-array speaker system. *Central Park SummerStage*, our flagship program, prides itself on showcasing new, up-and-coming talent, not just in the world of music, but also in film, dance, spoken word, and comedy. Our current system is 10 years old and is not compatible with current audio equipment. Having this out-of-date system limits our ability to work with artists using the newest technology. The line-array speaker system will also allow our technical department to focus the sound in the immediate area of Rumsey Playfield, preventing the sound from traveling into surrounding neighborhoods.

Sports Programs

Our sports programs promote physical fitness and healthy lifestyles by providing free, regularly scheduled sports lessons in neighborhood parks to over 12,000 kids and seniors.

- *CityParks Tennis*, one of the largest municipal tennis programs in the country, provides free lessons and an advanced training academy to children ages 5 to 16 in parks during the months of July and August. Hundreds of program graduates have earned college athletic scholarships and achieved regional and national rankings.
- *CityParks Track & Field* offers a variety of track and field events, including short distance running with hurdles, the javelin, and long jump, to youth ages 5 to 16. The program culminates with a citywide track meet held at Icahn Stadium, where our young athletes compete individually and in teams in six track and field events.
- *CityParks Golf* brings free instruction by golf professionals to kids ages 6 to 16 each year. In addition to beginner and intermediate lessons, we offer an advanced training program for 25 talented youth conducted by PGA professionals and instructional clinics with professional players. By offering instruction in neighborhood parks, CPF has been able to introduce thousands of kids to the game of golf, who would not have otherwise had the opportunity.
- *CityParks Senior Fitness* offers eight weeks of free tennis lessons, yoga instruction, and fitness walking to people ages 60 and over in the spring and fall.

Education Programs

City Parks Foundation's free education programs help over 5,000 students meet state standards and connect teachers, students, and families with parks. CPF works in Title I schools that need educational support. Our education department works with teachers, providing development and training workshops, to equip educators with the skills to teach science and environmental classes in an outdoor setting. CPF works with special needs students, bi-lingual classes, and provides an alternative mechanism for children who may have difficulties learning in a traditional classroom setting.

- *Coastal Classroom* educates youth and adults about their waterfront and facilitates local action to improve it. The project uses the waterfront as an outdoor classroom, teaching

participants how to test water quality variables; allowing them to enter the water to carefully observe East River wildlife; and providing service learning opportunities, such as volunteer shoreline clean-up events.

- *Seeds to Trees* introduces New York City elementary and middle school children to nature in the urban environment, and empowering them to use city parks as an extension of the classroom. We have also launched an early childhood development version of the program, working with Head Start sites, to bring three and four year olds into parks for hands-on, exploratory lessons.
- *Learning Gardens* uses community gardens as environmental and social learning resources for 2,500 participants from local schools, youth programs, churches, and other community organizations. The program consists of structured lessons year-around at four locations across the city, and workshops, festivals, and family days open to all community members.
- *Green Girls Summer Institute* encourages middle school girls from minority backgrounds to excel in the sciences and realize their potential to create change within the natural environment and their own lives. Participants, ages 11 to 14, get hands-on lessons and field trips at various natural and institutional resources around the city culminating in an overnight trip to the Catskills to learn about the city's watershed.
- *Hook and Smith Productions*, based in the Red Hook Recreation Center in Brooklyn and the Al Smith Recreation Center in Manhattan, is CPF's technology-based after school program. It provides professional, state-of-the-art multimedia and technology training for youth in NYC, ages 13 to 21. *Hook & Smith Productions* introduces teens to video and sound production training, media literacy, and creative writing activities with academic support and life skills lessons. *Smith Productions'* documentary, "Gentrification of the Lower East Side," written, directed and produced by our summer participants, won Kodak's Excellence in Filmmaking Award, and won "best documentary" at the RECYouth's 4th Annual Multimedia Festival.
- *Reading and Racquets* provides children, ages 6 to 13, with homework assistance, intensive literacy instruction, health education workshops, and tennis instruction. This program, conducted at the Williamsbridge Oval Recreation Center in the Bronx, J. Hook Wright Recreation Center in Manhattan, and the Vic Hanson Recreation Center in Queens, combines literacy and tennis instruction to make learning fun.

Partnerships for Parks

- Through our community organizing program, *Partnerships for Parks*, we provide free capacity-building assistance, including small grants, outreach and organizational development assistance to support community groups working in parks citywide. We offer workshops free of charge, one-on-one consultations, offer practical training in tree care, and work with local groups to develop promotional materials such as park brochures and maps. Last year, *Partnerships* assisted over 4,000 community organizations in various capacities. Additionally, *Partnerships* is responsible for organizing the citywide It's My Park Days in each spring and fall.

- This year we embark on our third round of *Catalyst for Neighborhood Parks*, our multi-year initiative where we focus staff and resources to enhance parks and public spaces. Round three's focus, *Reclaiming the Waterfront*, will be reviving three waterfront sites, in historically underserved neighborhoods, across the city; Soundview Park, Kaiser and Calvert Vaux Parks, and East River Park. Partnerships will work to improve shoreline access for local residents and address huge gaps in city-wide waterfront revitalization.

Once again, thank you for hearing my testimony today. We hope we can count on the City Council's support for the free programming we provide in council districts all over the city. This year, with the Council's support, we can guarantee that the level of free programming we presented in the past will continue.