

CITY COUNCIL
CITY OF NEW YORK

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

Of the

COMMITTEE ON PARKS AND RECREATION
JOINTLY WITH THE COMMITTEE ON FIRE
AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

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JANUARY 30, 2025
Start: 1:25 p.m.
Recess: 3:50 p.m.

HELD AT: 250 Broadway - Committee Room, 16th
Floor

B E F O R E: Shekar Krishnan,
Chairperson for the Committee on
Parks and Recreation

Joann Ariola,
Chairperson for the Committee on
Fire and Emergency Management

COUNCIL MEMBERS:

- David M. Carr
- Oswald Feliz
- De La Rosa
- James Gennaro
- Robert F. Holden
- Linda Lee
- Julie Menin
- Mercedes Narcisse
- Vickie Paladino
- Sandra Ung
- Nantasha Williams
- Susan Zhuang

A P P E A R A N C E S (CONTINUED)

John Esposito
Chief of Fire Department

Kevin Woods
Chief of Fire Operations

Marit Larson
Assistant Commissioner of Natural Resources and
Planning New York Parks Department

Matt Drury
Chief of Legislative Affairs

Norman Chan
Director of Emergency Management

Benjamin Osborne
Assistant Commissioner of Forestry and
Horticulture

Kristy King
Chief of Parks Departments Natural Sources

Daniel Abram
New Yorkers for Parks

Deaunte Johnson
NYCLV

Leila Mougoui Bakhtiari
Prospect Park Alliance

Emily Walker
Natural Area Conservancy

Scott Middleton
Marine Park Alliance

Marshall Lee Weimer
Kristina Taylor

A P P E A R A N C E S (CONTINUED)

Jack Spillane
Uniformed Fire Officers Association

Fay Hill
Self

Christopher Leon Johnson
Self

Catherine Laferty
Self

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3 SERGEANT AT ARMS: This is a microphone test for
4 the Committees on Fire and Criminal Justice Service
5 together with Parks and Recreation, being recorded by
6 Dain Hope on the 16th Floor. Today's date is
7 January 30, 2025.

8 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Quiet please. Thank you.
9 Good afternoon and welcome to the New York City
10 Hybrid Hearing on the Committee on Parks and
11 Recreation jointly with the Committee on Fire and
12 Emergency Management. Please silence all electronic
13 devices at this time and also please do not approach
14 the dais. If you have any questions, please raise
15 your hand and one of us, the Sergeant at Arms, will
16 kindly assist you. Chairs, we are ready to begin.

17 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Good afternoon everyone.
18 Thank you so much Sergeant. I'm Council Member
19 Shekar Krishnan, Chair of the New York City's Council
20 of the Committee on Parks and Recreation and I want
21 to welcome you all to our hearing today on preventing
22 brush fires in parks and legislation we're hearing as
23 well.

24 I'd like to thank my colleague Council Member
25 Joann Ariola, Chair of the Committee on Fire and
Emergency Management for agreeing to hold this

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3 hearing jointly on an extremely important issue for
4 our city.

5 Today's hearing will examine the issue, which I
6 am sad to say needs to be addressed and is becoming
7 only increasingly urgent. And that is on how we can
8 mitigate the threat of brush and wild fires from
9 occurring in our New York City's Parks.

10 We've unfortunately seen the incredible
11 devastation brought most recently by wild fires in
12 the Los Angeles area and the increasing prevalence of
13 wild fires overall in more areas of the country,
14 largely due to the effects of the rapidly changing
15 climate. And bear in mind as we're sadly seeing in
16 LA, it's not just limited to forest and trees that
17 are being destroyed but also peoples lives abandoned,
18 displaced overnight from their homes. Their home
19 burnt down. Truly emergency situations. I'm sure
20 that even though all New Yorkers sympathize with the
21 plight of all that have had endure the threat and
22 experience of wild fires. As very few of us would
23 have thought that wild fires would be something that
24 we living in the so-called concrete jungle would have
25 ever experienced. But now we are faced with having

3 to find solutions to a new in increasingly urgent
4 challenge.

5 Shockingly, the idea that wild fires can occur in
6 our back yard is no longer a foreign concept but an
7 actual lived experience for many in the city and the
8 extended region. It is still fresh in our memory but
9 as a brief recap, last fall the city went through
10 almost 30 days within measurable rainfall, which was
11 the second largest dry streak in city weather records
12 dating back to 1869.

13 Then on November 2, 2024, Mayor Adams issued a
14 citywide drought watch, ordering city agencies to
15 implement water conservation plans. This was
16 elevated to a drought warning on November 18th as the
17 dry spell continued, just one step below a drought
18 emergency.

19 On January 3, 2025, after precipitation levels
20 were 20 percent above average in the watershed during
21 the end of November and December 2024, Mayor Adams
22 lifted the city's drought watch as favorable weather
23 conditions contributed to the replenishment of the
24 city's reservoir system. During this, FDNY responded
25 to 271 brush fires throughout the city. This
represents the highest amount of brush fires ever

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3 dealt with during and two week period in the city's
4 history and we owe a great deal of gratitude to our
5 FDNY service members, to our Parks Department, all
6 who came together under such dire conditions in an
7 emergency way to make sure these fires were
8 addressed. Thank you all very much.

9 Now some of the larger more serious fires
10 included four brush fires in Van Cortlandt Park,
11 which took over five hours to put out due to the lack
12 of water access on November 4th. A two acre brush
13 fire located in a heavily wooded area of Prospect
14 Park on November 8th that needed 120 fire fighters to
15 contain. Two brush fires in Highbridge Park on
16 November 12th and on November 13th, a brush fire at
17 Alley Pond Park in Queens, and a brush fire that
18 damaged nearly four acres of brush in Inwood Park
19 needing 140 fire fighters to extinguish it.

20 FDNY needed to use water from the Harlem River
21 due to a lack of fire hydrants in that specific area
22 of the park in order to neutralize the threat and as
23 you see, all of this is connected. One fire could
24 have so many secondary effects and do far more
25 extensive damage than simply the geographic area where
the fire is located. We seem to be entering

3 unchartered territory here, which is why Chair Ariola
4 and I felt we needed to convene this hearing, so that
5 we can make sure the entire city is treating this
6 threat as the priority that we both see that it is.
7 We are clearly indebted to all the fire fighters and
8 emergency workers who are so successful in using
9 their determination and ingenuity to contain these
10 fires but we have to get to a point where these
11 threats are addressed before they become harmful to
12 more people or they are beyond safe containment.

13 That's why I have sponsored a Preconsidered Bill
14 that we are hearing today. This bill would require
15 the Parks Department in consultation with FDNY and
16 other appropriate city agencies to develop a specific
17 plan to mitigate the occurrences of wild fires in
18 parks.

19 It would require the city to analyze how we can
20 be even better equipped to prevent these fires and
21 contain them quickly should they even occur. Some of
22 what would be part of this plan would involve
23 analyzing how we can increase response times.
24 Increase fire prevention training for city workers,
25 conduct better surveillance over fire prone areas of
park land, and improve enforcement against activities

3 in parks that contribute to fires occurring in the
4 first place. The plan would have to be posted on the
5 Parks website according to our legislation and be
6 updated regularly.

7 It is my hope that this bill will help to get the
8 city ahead of the game in addressing what is a
9 growing threat to the wellbeing of New Yorkers, to
10 our climate, and to ensure that this threat is
11 something we can contain before it's too late.

12 On a slightly different note, we will also be
13 considering hearing another bill today, Intro. Number
14 800 sponsored by my colleague Council Member Nantasha
15 Williams. This bill would require the Parks
16 Department to develop criteria by which they
17 prioritize tree maintenance by considering the
18 likelihood of potential harm to persons or property
19 whether a tree or limb that has already fallen is
20 still capable of causing harm and the proximity of a
21 damaged tree or limb to nearby buildings.

22 As we all know and I speak I think for our entire
23 City Council, we are very concerned about tree
24 maintenance and care in our city and we need to make
25 sure that it's addressed in a timely way and in a
safe way. I know the Parks Department feels the same

3 way too and I think this legislation will help to get
4 us there and to make sure that we can address tree
5 safety and tree maintenance in a comprehensive way.

6 Parks pursuant to this legislation would also be
7 required to post this criteria on its website. I
8 look forward to examining this further today and I
9 applaud my colleague for introducing this and being
10 tuned into how important the health of our trees are
11 to the life of our city and to our communities. I
12 look forward to engaging with everyone at this
13 hearing today. Before turning it over to my Co-
14 Chair, I just wanted to note all the Council Members
15 who have joined today. We are joined in addition to
16 of course Chair Ariola and myself, Council Member
17 Paladino, Council Member Williams, Council Member
18 Menin, Council Member Ung, Council Member Carr,
19 Council Member Feliz, Council Member Holden, and by
20 Zoom, Council Member Gennaro.

21 And now, I'd like to turn it over to my Co-Chair
22 Council Member Ariola for an opening statement,
23 followed by Council Member Williams who will make a
24 statement on Intro. 800. Thank you.

25 CHAIRPERSON ARIOLA: Thank you Chair Krishnan. I
am proud to Co-Chair this hearing with you today. As

3 stated, my name is Joann Ariola, I am a Council
4 Member and Chairperson of the Committee on Fire and
5 Emergency Management.

6 As we saw during recent tragedies that unfolded
7 in California, fast spreading brush fires present
8 unique challenges to fire fighters and other
9 emergency responders. We witness the extreme damage
10 to life and property that can occur and thanks to our
11 brave first responders who valiantly overcame harsh
12 conditions to contain the fires covering large swaths
13 of area in Los Angeles, they were under control.

14 Here in New York City, brush fires occurring this
15 fall in city parks demonstrated that even here in a
16 largely dense urban environment, the risk of brush
17 fires are real and must be taken seriously during
18 periods of extreme drought. I'm eager to explore how
19 the city can best prepare for preventing and fighting
20 brush fires that can occur in our city parks and
21 other wooded areas throughout the city.

22 Specifically, I'm interested in hearing more about
23 the FDNY's operations to combat brush fires that have
24 occurred recently in our city parks and examine the
25 preventative measures we can take during periods of
drought to mitigate fire risks.

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2 We look forward to hearing the testimony from the
3 Administration. Thank you all for coming.

4 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you so much Chair
5 Ariola and I appreciate this joint hearing together
6 on this important issue. Before going further into
7 it, I'd also like to recognize that we've been joined
8 by Council Members Zhuang and now, I'm going to turn
9 it over to Council Member Williams for her statement
10 on her bill that we're hearing today.

11 COUNCIL MEMBER WILLIAMS: Thank you. I don't
12 have a formal statement. I just want to thank the
13 Chair for hearing the bill. When I first got
14 elected, people would ask like what is the top issue
15 in the district? And I would say trees and people
16 would laugh because they were like, why are trees a
17 problem? And trees are a problem because we have a
18 lot of old trees. Trees that are not properly
19 maintained. The calendar of maintaining trees. The
20 process of that is like significantly like also like
21 delayed and I understand we have millions of trees in
22 New York City but for individuals who live in
23 residential communities, the trees become a quality
24 of life issue and the turnaround time for the Parks
25 Department to address the tree related issue is

3 extensively long. And while I understand I already
4 perused the testimony, while I understand that the
5 Parks Department I suppose does this work internally
6 as agency policy, it is my view that this should be
7 public information. It should be transparent.

8 People should understand how you prioritize street
9 maintenance because most folks do not know. It's

10 like a black hole. I have a lot of other opinions
11 about how we maintain trees and how we rate trees

12 because the tree pretty much has to be about to kill
13 someone for the Parks Department to come out and do

14 something, which again is just truly a problem for

15 me. So, I just want to thank everyone who sponsored
16 the bill. It is a bipartisan bill. I have like over

17 30 plus sponsors, so this is a wide range issue

18 across New York City and I just look forward to it

19 passing. Thank you.

20 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you so much Council
21 Member Williams and appreciate you calling attention

22 to this important issue that we all care very much

23 about. Now, we'll turn it over to Administration to

24 testify. I just wanted to let everyone know who is

25 here today from the Administration. We have the

Chief of our Fire Department, Chief John Esposito,

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3 who is here. We have the Chief of Fire Operations,
4 Chief Kevin Woods. We have the Assistant
5 Commissioner of Natural Resources and Planning, Marit
6 Larson from New York City Parks Department. We have
7 Chief of Legislative Affairs for New York City Parks
8 Matt Drury. We have the Director of Emergency
9 Management for the Parks Department Norman Chan and
10 we have the Assistant Commissioner of Forestry and
11 Horticulture from Parks Department Benjamin Osborne.
12 And also, the Chief of Parks Departments Natural
13 Resources Kristy King.

14 And now, I will turn it over to Committee Counsel
15 to swear in the witnesses prior to their testimony.

16 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you Chair. Please
17 raise your right hand if you are able. Do you affirm
18 to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but
19 the truth in your testimony before these Committees
20 and to respond honestly to Council Member questions?

21 Thank you.

22 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: And before we begin, I
23 just want to note that we've also been joined by
24 Council Member De La Rosa as well. And I'll turn it
25 over to you all to negotiate Parks, FDNY, who goes
first?

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3 JOHN ESPOSITO: Good afternoon Chair Ariola,
4 Chair Krishnan and members of the Fire and Emergency
5 Management Committee and the Committee on Parks and
6 Recreation. My name is John Esposito and I am the
7 Chief of Department for the New York City Fire
8 Department. I am joined today by Kevin Woods, our
9 Chief of Fire Operations. I am grateful for the
10 opportunity to speak with you today about the
11 important topic of preventing brush fires in New York
12 City Parks.

13 Recent events have highlighted the dangerous and
14 destructive nature of brush fires. In Los Angeles,
15 at least 28 people died as multiple fires swept
16 across more than 45 square miles of that city and
17 county. I spent a portion of last week traveling to
18 California to see firsthand how fire fighters on the
19 West Coast are responding to these fires. It is a
20 tragic situation but we're making sure that the FDNY
21 learns the lessons from their experience. We learned
22 about best practices, about equipment, and about the
23 ways that wildfires behave.

24 In New York, we experienced a historic surge in
25 brush fires last fall. To give you a sense of the
increase, in October and November of 2023, the city

3 experienced roughly 120 brush fires. In October and
4 November of 2024, that number jumped to more than
5 500. More than half of those came during a single
6 two-week period. The scale of the brush fires
7 increased as well. Whereas most fires in previous
8 years were small and relatively easy to contain, some
9 of the fires in 2024 grew quite large very quickly.
10 We were fortunate to avoid any loss of life or any
11 residential or commercial property damage. But these
12 fires destroyed parkland and endangered the fire
13 fighters who responded to them. We cannot afford to
14 underestimate the threat of brush fires and the
15 possibility they could become more dangerous for
16 people and property in the future.

17 The bulk of the brush fires last fall took place
18 during a severe extended drought. A significant lack
19 of rainfall created conditions in which dry
20 vegetation ignited easier than usual, and persistent
21 winds rendered the fires challenging to suppress.
22 Many of the fires took place in isolated locations,
23 requiring fire fighters to transport hoses and
24 equipment long distances into remote areas. They are
25 often operating in treacherous terrain, dealing with
hills and dense forest. Access to water was

3 sometimes an issue, given a lack of fire hydrants in
4 some areas.

5 Despite these complications, I am proud to report
6 that the members of the FDNY rose to the occasion.
7 We used the full complement of FDNY tools to respond.
8 During the Inwood Hill Park fire, we used our Marine
9 units, those are our fire boats, to draft water from
10 the river. We also used technology in innovative
11 ways. We relied on our drones, part of our robotics
12 unit to create situational awareness. Drone
13 technology allows for real-time information for
14 incident commanders who would otherwise be unable to
15 see and understand the span of the fire. It also
16 allows the FDNY to identify hotspots, which was
17 integral to understanding and preventing spread. The
18 task force also uses drones preventatively to
19 identify risk when inspecting fire sites and
20 potential fire risk locations.

21 In response to last fall's surge in brush fires,
22 we created the Department's first ever Brush Fire
23 Task Force. In announcing the task force,
24 Commissioner Tucker emphasized the Department's
25 commitment to protecting New Yorkers and keeping our
members safe as they combat these fires. This will

3 include enhancing training that focuses specifically
4 on brush fires; exploring the acquisition of new and
5 additional apparatus that is geared towards brush
6 fires; and testing more specialized tools and
7 equipment for members. One of the lessons that we've
8 learned is the importance of wildland firefighter
9 personal protective equipment or PPE. Some of the
10 gear used in structural fire fighting is heavy and
11 cumbersome, whereas wildland firefighting equipment
12 is lighter and more flexible.

13 We've also expanded our coordination with our
14 fellow city agencies. In addition to our ongoing
15 work with the Parks Department, we have been working
16 with the New York City Police Department about
17 expanding our options for fighting brush fires. The
18 Fire Department does not have a helicopter, but we
19 have been training with the police on ways to use
20 their helicopter in conjunction with fire operations.

21 We've been fighting brush fires for a long time
22 but the nature and extent of the fires last fall
23 indicates a new level of threat. The Fire
24 Department, working with our colleagues in government
25 and with the support of the City Council, is up to
the challenge. We will continue learning and

3 evolving on this issue so that we can provide the
4 best possible protection for the people of New York.

5 I thank the Council for your partnership and your
6 attention to this critical issue. At this time, I
7 will turn it over to my colleagues from the Parks
8 Department.

9 Thank you. Good afternoon Chair Krishnan, Chair
10 Ariola, Members of the Parks Committee and Fire and
11 Emergency Management Committee and other members of
12 the City Council. I'm Marit Larson, Assistant
13 Commissioner of Natural Resources and Planning for
14 New York City Parks and I'm pleased to be joined
15 today by members of our senior staff, including Ben
16 Osborne, Assistant Commissioner of Forestry and
17 Horticulture, Kristy King, Chief of Natural
18 Resources, Norman Chan, Director of Emergency
19 Management and Matt Drury, our Chief of Citywide
20 Legislative Affairs.

21 To echo the sentiments just expressed by Chief
22 Esposito in his testimony, protecting New Yorkers
23 along with our vital natural areas and green spaces,
24 it is of the utmost importance to New York City
25 Parks. Brush fires in our parks and natural areas
can be dangerous and damaging and we work closely

3 with FDNY to ensure that fires in city parks are
4 extinguished as quickly as possible. Of course FDNY
5 is primarily responsible for all fire response in the
6 city including parks and we're grateful for the
7 bravery and responsiveness of our city fire fighters
8 and for FDNY's incredible partnership.

9 Upon observing fire in a park or natural area,
10 New York City Park staff are trained to immediately
11 contact the FDNY to ensure the fire can be dealt with
12 as quickly as possible and then to also contact our
13 central communications, who send prod cast
14 notifications to key parks managers and staff so we
15 can monitor and coordinate additional assistance as
16 needed.

17 As FDNY Fire Fighters work to extinguish flames
18 during fire incidents, our dedicated staffers are
19 available to provide operational support in a variety
20 of ways, including assisting with crowd control if
21 necessary and the removal of standing or fallen trees
22 to facilitate the FDNY's access to impacted areas if
23 necessary.

24 By definition, all natural vegetated areas can be
25 susceptible to fires and brush fires have occurred in
parks to various degrees over the years but

3 thankfully widespread large scale brush fires have
4 not been especially common in recent decades.

5 However, in late 2024, New York City experienced
6 a historic drought which was contributed to a
7 significant increase in brush fires in the city,
8 particularly in natural areas. We coordinated
9 closely with FDNY to ensure public safety in near
10 effected areas and worked diligently to inspect and
11 remove known tree hazards along paths, trails, and
12 heavily trafficked areas after fires were
13 extinguished.

14 Our natural resources crews quantified and mapped
15 the fire extent, which totaled over 41 acres out of
16 6,800 acres of parks, forest and natural areas
17 citywide. The largest fires occurred in ten
18 different parks in four boroughs on 13 different
19 dates from mid-October to mid-November. This was the
20 most significant set of brush fires impacting
21 forested parklands dating back decades.

22 Following the recent brush fires leave the gun a
23 dedicated internal effort to detail lessons learned
24 to refine and approve our fire response protocols and
25 communication guidelines, and we're participating in
the Brush Fire Taskforce at recently created by FDNY.

3 We are also pleased to report that to assist with
4 recovery efforts following the dissipation of the
5 fires, the New York City Green Fund has generously
6 allocated funding for direct, noncompetitive grants
7 available to partner organizations to care for
8 natural areas, which were impacted by the fires. In
9 consultation with Parks and the Natural Areas
10 Conservancy, the New York City Green Fund is
11 reviewing applications for the grants, which will
12 fund forest recovery activities in those parks,
13 including seeding, native ground cover and replanting
14 trees and shrubs.

15 We're very grateful for New York City Green Funds
16 incredible support and look forward to being able to
17 share more details about these grants in the future.

18 Regarding our proactive efforts, we strive to
19 manage and maintain the 14,000 acres of our natural
20 areas around the city in a manner that helps minimize
21 occurrences of brush fires. Our agencies forest
22 management framework, a 25 year plan jointly
23 developed by New York City Parks Natural Resources
24 Group and our partners at the Natural Area
25 Conservancy guides the management and restoration of
our city forest, including brush fire prevention

3 measures. Strategies described within this framework
4 include removal of overabundant and fast growing
5 species, such as phragmites and mug wart, which cause
6 fires to spread faster and burn longer. As well as
7 planting appropriate trees and scrubs to increase
8 species diversity and improve the overall ecosystem
9 health.

10 We also work to restore degraded habitats to
11 native plant communities that are less prone to fire,
12 such as coastal forest and emergent wetlands where
13 appropriate. We appreciate the Council's strong
14 support for these efforts over the years and look
15 forward to continuing that partnership.

16 As one might imagine, it's exceedingly difficult
17 to identify precise cost for any given brush fire in
18 a natural area, but human activities are typically
19 the cause. We'd like to remind all New Yorkers of
20 the importance of following parks rules and acting
21 responsibly while enjoying our parks because
22 discarded cigarettes, campfires, flammable debris and
23 fireworks can ignite brush fires that can cause
24 tremendous damage.

25 A park visitor should report any sign of smoke
fire immediately to 911 and they can subscribe to

3 Notify NYC for important fire related safety updates.

4 Of course our division does everything in its power
5 to educate park visitors about our rules and address
6 dangerous behavior and our park enforcement patrol
7 officers, urban park rangers and other staff caring
8 for our parks all play a vital role in keeping our
9 parks safe from brush fires, but we cannot do it
10 alone.

11 Turning to the legislation being heard today,
12 Preconsidered 3015 would require New York City Parks
13 in consultation with other appropriate city agencies
14 to develop a plan to mitigate the occurrences of
15 wildfires in parks and report annually on wildfires
16 that occur in parks under its jurisdiction. We
17 appreciate the intent of this legislation and look
18 forward to working with Council and FDNY to further
19 discuss the most effective ways to achieve our shared
20 goals of minimizing brush fire damage to our natural
21 areas be it through legislation or similarly themed
22 efforts underway.

23 Introduction 800 would codify the criteria by
24 which New York City prioritizes tree maintenance work
25 and post a description of the criteria used to
prioritize tree maintenance on its website. As the

3 stewards of New York City's urban forest, we care for
4 our city's street and park trees and respond to more
5 than 100,000 forestry related service requests from
6 concerned New Yorkers each year. To help keep our
7 tree canopy healthy and safe and ensure that the
8 highest priority tree work is addressed as quickly as
9 possible, we've integrated modern tree risk
10 management practices into the way we care for our
11 urban forest.

12 Since 2017, we formally incorporated industry
13 standards for tree risk management established by the
14 International Society of Arboriculture and the
15 American National Standards Institute into our tree
16 work management approach. By applying professional
17 expertise in risk management, we're able to address
18 the conditions that present the highest risk to
19 public safety and property before other work.

20 As part of our dedicated commitment to public
21 transparency, this prioritized approach to tree
22 maintenance is clearly outlined on our agency
23 website, as well as through communication with
24 constituents and other stakeholders regarding tree
25 work service requests.

3 Though we already conduct our operations in a
4 manner corresponding to the spirit of this
5 legislation, it's important to note we generally
6 advise against codifying operational practices via
7 local law because agencies require flexibility to
8 innovate and adopt new industry standards and best
9 practices as they evolve overtime.

10 As such, we opposed to the bill as it is
11 currently drafted but would welcome the chance to
12 work with Council to identify how we can best achieve
13 our shared goals of preserving the city's tree canopy
14 while protecting New Yorkers and their property.

15 We'd like to thank the Council for this
16 opportunity to testify and for your support for our
17 city's parks and open spaces. If there are any
18 questions, we're happy to join our partners at FDNY
19 in answering those at this time.

20 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you so much both to
21 FDNY and Parks for your testimony. I'm going to ask
22 some questions and then I'll turn it over to my Co-
23 Chair to ask questions as well and then I'll open it
24 up to Council Members to ask their questions too.

25 So, my first question and I appreciate you know
the testimony from both of the agencies about the

3 responsiveness to the fires. I think you all moved
4 very quickly given the unexpected nature of them to
5 try to address it and contain it and we're very
6 grateful for your work. My first question is in a
7 very simplified way is while there have been forest
8 fires before, obviously last fall was a very
9 challenging time because of the drought and the
10 extent of the fires. I know the FDNY too in the past
11 has addressed the issues of forest fires too but what
12 would you say are some of the lessons learned from
13 both agencies? And in both in terms of things that
14 came up while battling those forest fires and then
15 things that we can do going forward as a city. The
16 circumstances were unique in that sense but sadly, I
17 don't think they're going to be unique going forward.
18 So, as we deal with the outer climate, possibly
19 likely more droughts in the future, less rainfall,
20 what would you all say were the lessons that each of
21 you drew as agencies from the experience this past
22 fall? We'll start with FDNY first.

23 JOHN ESPOSITO: Thank you for that question. So,
24 one of the things we realized is the brush fire
25 apparatus that we have. So, we currently have ten or
twelve situated in the city. Mostly in the areas

3 that historically have had the most brush fires,
4 South Queens, South Brooklyn, and Staten Island. We
5 realize that we don't have many of them situated up
6 where we had some of our fires this year up in Van
7 Cortlandt Park and Inwood Park and there's different
8 types of brush fire apparatus that we could use as
9 well.

10 So, we're in the process of looking into small or
11 agile apparatus that can get in down those pathways
12 in the city parks that would allow us to get water
13 and stretch hose lines quicker. Additionally, many
14 of our engine companies carry forestry hose, which is
15 smaller in diameter than the regular hose we use for
16 building fires and we would look to expand that to
17 all of our engine companies. So, that's more
18 appropriate for this type of fire.

19 MERIT LARSON: Yes, thank you for the question.
20 I think one of the things that we learned was just
21 the importance of continuing good communications with
22 FDNY and with our - internally within our agency,
23 making sure that everyone knows their roles and
24 responsibilities. We prioritize the safety of New
25 Yorkers in maintaining and protecting the condition
of our natural areas and are very appreciative of

3 FDNY's important role in responding to fires,
4 including in Parks and we're very grateful for their
5 response.

6 We are training and have trained our staff to
7 immediately contact, call 911 as well as contacting
8 our central communications office. As I mentioned,
9 getting the information out to Park Managers and
10 staff and making sure that we monitor it and assist
11 as needed in the response. So, I think those are the
12 areas that we're going to continue to strengthen.

13 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: That was my next question
14 actually was about the training. So, how often are
15 you all having trainings with Parks Department staff
16 and while FDNY also looks at you know new equipment
17 to help with the narrow paths within the you know
18 forest fires? Does Parks Department have any
19 equipment itself for fighting fires and how have you
20 all thought about that you know in light of what
21 happened this fall?

22 MERIT LARSON: No, Parks is not responsible for
23 responding to the fires itself. We really defer to
24 the expertise of FDNY and that won't change. We
25 continue to train focused on responding with
communication and assistance.

3 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: And just to my prior
4 question, so how often are the trainings happening
5 with Parks Department staff and what are they
6 covering, rapid response type situations where the
7 fire you know having unexpected leave and spread
8 quickly? How are the trainings being structured and
9 how often are they happening?

10 MARIT LARSON: Well, training around general
11 protocol and communication happens with all new staff
12 and happens you know with all seasonal staff, so we
13 have - it happens relatively frequently for workers
14 that are in the field. With respect to any
15 particular emergency response, I will defer to my
16 colleague Norman Chan on that, if he'd like to add
17 anything with respect to trainings.

18 NORMAN CHAN: Good afternoon everyone, Council
19 Chairs and thank you for giving us the opportunity to
20 testify here today and answer your questions.
21 Regarding the question about training for staff, in
22 general, when staff are onboarded and when staff are
23 working in the districts, both full time and seasonal
24 staff, they are giving briefings in terms of how to
25 respond to certain acute type of situations. A
medical emergency in the park, a crime happening

3 within the park, a fire within the park and in many
4 of these cases, the staff are directed to call 911 to
5 reach out to our emergency responders that are part
6 of agencies to handle these types of situations.

7 Like, we are definitely not subject matter experts on
8 fighting fires or responding to medical emergencies.

9 So, in many cases, it's just really the communication
10 and getting the word out there that's something is
11 taken place within our parks to get the proper help
12 and resources there as quickly as possible. That is
13 what we stress when we train our staff and bring them
14 out into the field.

15 In terms of the frequencies trainings, it depends
16 on how recently you staff onboard and so on. There's
17 no specific time table as how it is constructed but
18 seasonally we deal with many different things,
19 emergencies within parks. Like right now, during the
20 winter season, we're currently facing issues
21 regarding ice safety. So, we currently reiterate to
22 staff, during cold temperatures, people may be apt to
23 wonder onto ice, so right now the current reminder to
24 all staff out in the field is to survey our lakes and
25 ponds, ensure that the public stays off of it and so
on. So, it's all very seasonally based as well.

3 Once again stressing that communication is key and
4 that we need to reach out to party agencies as soon
5 as possible if you discover something out there.

6 So, number one, call 911 and number two, reach
7 out to our central communications division to ensure
8 that everyone else knows what's going on out there so
9 that we can respond accordingly.

10 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you and I hope also
11 in addition to training new staff to your point about
12 seasonal training too, that of course I mean you
13 already maybe thinking about this as well but in
14 leading up to this summer and the fall, increasing
15 the frequency of the trainings around this issue in
16 particular both for new and experienced staff I think
17 could be very important as well and something I would
18 recommend.

19 Now, do Parks Department and Horticultural Staff
20 and Park Rangers actively maintain the area,
21 especially natural areas that may be prone to brush
22 fires?

23 MARIT LARSON: Yes, thank you for the question.
24 In particular the New York City Parks Natural
25 Resources group is responsible for management across
our 14,000 acres of natural area and we do that with

3 an eye to fire prevention when and where possible in
4 locations where there might be vegetation prone to
5 fire.

6 As I mentioned in our testimony, areas that have
7 large extensive phragmites or mug wart or fast
8 growing spreading grasses that can contribute to
9 those risks are areas where we try to develop
10 projects where we can conduct removal of that kind of
11 vegetation and where possible, restore negative
12 ecosystems that are less prone to fire and also have
13 other ecological benefits.

14 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Are you seeing if there
15 are areas in particular that are more vulnerable than
16 others to these kinds of fires? And then how are you
17 all changing your plan now to protect those
18 vulnerable areas?

19 MARIT LARSON: Well, generally going back to our
20 participation with other agencies including of course
21 FDNY, in Staten Island, fires in past decades have
22 been a particular concern. So, that has been on our
23 radar for a long time. For example, we have a
24 community wildfire protection plan in Staten Island
25 and resources actually through that plan devoted
towards reducing fuel load in those areas. So, we

3 really focus on looking at the concerns and balancing
4 both a concern about you know potentially fire risk
5 but also overall maintaining the health of our
6 natural areas. And as I also mentioned in the
7 testimony, we have a forest management framework that
8 helps us - helps determine where we are prioritizing
9 our work and taking in a lot of different
10 considerations.

11 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: And just my final two
12 questions. One was, you know one thing that I
13 mentioned before in the opening statement, I think it
14 was in Inwood where there was a lack of access to
15 fire hydrants to help with the situation and I asked
16 for FDNY too. How have you all thought about you
17 know are there certain areas that you clearly need
18 more fire hydrants placed? How do you address this
19 issue of you know these will happen unexpectedly but
20 then of course the complication of not having fire
21 hydrant access could exacerbate the issue. How have
22 you all thought about that?

23 JOHN ESPOSITO: So, ideally the closer the water
24 source is to the fire, the easier it is but our
25 people are very well trained in relaying water. In
Inwood Park, we were able to draft from the river and

3 use water on the fire. It's not uncommon that the
4 closest source of water is - we're not able to use.
5 Earlier this week in Queens, we had a fire where the
6 two closest hydrants were frozen and we were able to
7 quickly access another hydrant and then put water on
8 that fire.

9 So, obviously the closer the hydrant is to the
10 fire, the better that is but our people are very well
11 trained to get water however we can get it. We draft
12 water. We can relay water and then pump it a long
13 way if we need to.

14 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: And for the Parks
15 Department, my final question is just you know
16 obviously now with what's happened, you all I'm sure
17 done in the past too, but tracking the frequency of
18 the fires, where they're occurring, the vulnerability
19 of the areas is important as is getting a sense also
20 of you know what weather conditions become
21 problematic enough to increase surveillance in
22 certain areas. And so, I'm wondering from a
23 preventative standpoint, how has tracking's data
24 helped you? Are you increasing your tracking of it?
25 And also, is there some sort of threshold at some
point where with the weather the way it is, that

3 would have caused you all to preventatively increase
4 the amount of surveillance of a certain vulnerable
5 area for a fire?

6 MARIT LARSON Thank you for the question. First
7 regarding tracking wildfires or brush fires, we don't
8 do that in great detail but we do it every year when
9 we get the information about a fire, so that's just
10 sort of a standard practice. We do out and map the
11 extent of the area and determine whether there are
12 any actions that we need to take thereafter and that
13 will continue and we've done that to various degrees
14 for decades. There can be some years where it's
15 obviously more of a concern than others like last
16 year.

17 With respect to changing our response or programs
18 and when there's a change in weather conditions, we
19 are always alert seasonally to all sorts of changes
20 in weather conditions. We have people in the field
21 and whether it's you know extreme heat or cold, we
22 respond accordingly and our work across our divisions
23 to make sure that we have eyes on the ground and
24 communicate across our division, so whether it's PEP
25 officers or Rangers, we make use - or staff that are
located in various parks, we make sure that we are

3 sharing information and maximizing the staff that we
4 do have to keep eyes on the ground, especially when
5 there are periods of high temperature, low
6 precipitation and high winds.

7 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Hmm, hmm, thank you and I
8 do think just like with the trainings, increasing the
9 amount of tracking you all are doing, that data will
10 be important and that's exactly why we've introduced
11 this legislation to find ways where you all should
12 track this more carefully. Increase the amount of
13 interagency coordination on it but I think these
14 situations are out of our control to a large

15 degree but there are some preventative tools that
16 we can use to more carefully surveil the areas and be
17 attune to which areas in particular are vulnerable.

18 I'm going to turn it over to my Co-Chair now for
19 her questions.

20 CHAIRPERSON ARIOLA: Thank you so much Chair.
21 I'll start with the Fire Department. In your
22 testimony, you said that there's been a surge in
23 brush fires and in October, November of 2024, the
24 number jumped to more than 500. Could you just give
25 us a location, approximate locations of where they
were those fires?

3 JOHN ESPOSITO: I don't have the exact locations.
4 We can get that.

5 CHAIRPERSON ARIOLA: Were they all in Parks?

6 JOHN ESPOSITO: Not all of them were in parks.
7 They were pretty evenly spread out, distributed
8 throughout the city.

9 CHAIRPERSON ARIOLA: And do you have any idea how
10 many were in parks?

11 JOHN ESPOSITO: I don't have that at all. We can
12 get that for you though.

13 CHAIRPERSON ARIOLA: Okay, and I appreciate that
14 and you always do get the information to us and I
15 want to thank you for that. Also, when talking about
16 the newly created Brush Fire Taskforce, which I think
17 is a tremendous idea since we're having all these
18 issues. What is that going to mean budget wise?
19 Like, just an example, if you have as to what type of
20 money you would need from us as a body during the
21 budget process to really fund and get you that
22 smaller equipment that you spoke about and actually
23 have more of these locations where the brush fire
24 response teams can be located in other parts of the
25 city?

3 KEVIN WOODS: Thank you for that question. So, t
4 here are three phases to this taskforce. There's
5 pre-fire, post-fire, and then ongoing operations.
6 So, pre-fire is more of an education and a
7 surveillance. Education through our prior safety
8 education unit and social media and post fire of
9 course is cause for an investigation. The ongoing
10 operations is what we're talking about here. Our
11 fire operations for brush fires, so we need more
12 brush fire units throughout the city. Five of them
13 are on Staten Island, the other three or four are
14 scattered throughout the city. We had to activate
15 multiple reserve pumpers to handle the amount of
16 brush fires that we had and as Chief Esposito already
17 mentioned, we uhm, not everybody has this one inch
18 forestry hose. We're using structural firefighting
19 hose to extinguish brush fires.

20 Now, if we have to stretch that hose from a
21 distance, it's very labor intensive. We're pulling
22 not only brush fires, we have second alarm, third
23 alarm brush fires. We are pulling multiple engine
24 and ladder companies from throughout the city to
25 fight this fire and it's taking longer and it's

3 effecting coverage in other areas of the city with
4 this apparatus.

5 So, absolutely Council Member, we need additional
6 brush fire units or at least look at the technology
7 that's out there and also the brush fire hose and
8 light weight equipment. Our members are fighting
9 fires in bunker gear, so we need lighter equipment as
10 well, so yes, any funding would be appreciated.

11 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: And just to jump in with a
12 question too, thanks Chair Ariola is similarly for
13 the Parks Department. What do you all need from a
14 budgetary standpoint to help you? And the one thing
15 that I want to call particular attention to is that
16 City Hall and our last budget cut the funding to the
17 forestry division and natural areas in particular.

18 And I'd like to know what impact that reduced
19 funding had on the ability of the Parks Department
20 and in the natural areas unit in particular to
21 address this situation of forest fires and then what
22 do you all need budgetarily going forward to help you
23 within a resource standpoint to address these fires?

24 MARIT LARSON: Thank you for the question. We
25 are used to at the Parks Department and in the
Natural Resources group as well, adjusting our work

3 to the finite resources of a given year. We are used
4 to fluctuations, so we look at our long term planning
5 and our forest management framework and in our other
6 natural resource planning frameworks and strategies
7 to really allocate our staff to the projects that we
8 have given the resources that we have.

9 We always appreciate more resources to cover our
10 14,000 acres of natural areas. In this particular
11 case, last fall for example, we don't really see that
12 there was a particular resource shortage or change in
13 staffing that would have made a difference in
14 responding. Again, we don't respond to fires
15 ourselves but in terms of having managed those areas
16 or been able to prevent those particular occurrences.
17 It's always very hard to predict what is the
18 instigation of a fire and we end up focusing on again
19 those areas where we know that we can reduce fuel
20 load and focus on those projects and management areas
21 where we can anticipate both having a benefit
22 potentially of reducing fire risk but also having
23 that co-benefit of contributing to our overall
24 ecosystem health.

25 CHAIRPERSON ARIOLA: Fire Department, how does
the Fire Department evaluate potential risk for brush

3 fires occurring in the city? Are they established
4 standards for weather or environment or conditions
5 that warrant specific measures to prevent the
6 occurrence of brush fires?

7 JOHN ESPOSITO: So, that was one of the tasks of
8 our Brush Fire Taskforce was with our drone
9 technology to be able to look at certain areas during
10 the drought while it was very dry to see the
11 likelihood of a brush fire and what the impact that
12 would have but our people going out there and taking
13 a look in conjunction with the Parks Department just
14 to determine the likelihood and the impact of a fire.

15 CHAIRPERSON ARIOLA: I see, good, okay and what
16 would you say is the more common causes of these
17 fires? Are they illegal or otherwise? What starts
18 most of these fire occurrences in parks?

19 JOHN ESPOSITO: So, we did have our Bureau of
20 Fire Investigation come out and look at each of these
21 and try to determine the cause. It is very difficult
22 to determine the cause of a brush fire. We can
23 generally hone in on the area where it started but
24 the exact cause is difficult to determine. There's
25 generally not witnesses or cameras or other people in
the area. It could be anything from careless smoking

3 to sparks from if there's a train nearby, you know a
4 train line. Sparks from overhead wires. There are
5 an awful lot of potential causes, especially when
6 it's dry in the very dry drought that we had.

7 CHAIRPERSON ARIOLA: Alright, thank you. This
8 past fall in response to existing brush fires, FDNY
9 prohibited the use of fireworks and open flames
10 citywide. Can you discuss this decision further and
11 what conditions trigger such prohibitions and how
12 frequently does the FDNY issue such prohibitions?

13 JOHN ESPOSITO: So, as we had said earlier, we
14 had almost 30 days with very little rainfall. It was
15 very dry. We experienced a significant number of
16 brush fires. The prohibition on barbeque and in
17 fireworks, I believe was beneficial. I don't know
18 that we have done that in its been years at least if
19 we have done that before but knowing that all that
20 parkland was so dry, we had those wind conditions. I
21 believe that it was beneficial even though we like
22 our firework shows and things like that that you know
23 it had a benefit and hopefully prevented some other
24 fires.

25 CHAIRPERSON ARIOLA: And given what happened, do
you think that there is a reason for increased

3 enforcement efforts against such activities from the
4 Department of Parks and Recreation, FDNY or the
5 Police Department?

6 JOHN ESPOSITO: So we did, the Fire Department
7 did proactively go out into parks to remind people of
8 the barbequing and open flame van. We did put it out
9 on the social media. Our fire safety education was
10 out talking about it. We did events in all five
11 boroughs. I believe that there was great benefit to
12 that and that's something we should continue to get
13 that word out. We, similar to the lithium ion
14 battery public safety education that we've done,
15 we've seen pretty good results with that and the
16 education that we've done getting that message out.

17 CHAIRPERSON ARIOLA: And the Parks Department
18 mentioned phragmites and many people may not know
19 about what phragmites are but in natural preserves
20 like gateway preserve and spring creek preserve,
21 which is very large and goes through Brooklyn and
22 Queens and there are tons of phragmites and they
23 often times go on fire because we have people who are
24 going up and fishing there and it is illegal to fish
25 up there and enforcement is difficult. And I want to
thank you for your assistance to the National Park

3 Service. When those fires do happen, the Fire
4 Department responds right away and the fire is put
5 out expeditiously. So, thank you for that.

6 JOHN ESPOSITO: You're welcome.

7 CHAIRPERSON ARIOLA: Just a couple of questions
8 for the Parks Department. First, I want to say that
9 you're very lucky, both of your departments have
10 amazing Commissioners and First Deputy Commissioners
11 and they really do work well and the Borough
12 Commissioners, like everybody, wants to do the right
13 thing and I appreciate that.

14 So, years ago, there was a lot of signage in
15 parks and I'll go back to Smokey the Bear, right?
16 Only you can prevent a forest fire. Is there any
17 such type of outreach or some type of advertisement
18 or something catchy or signage that we can put in our
19 parks that like that? That people 30 years later
20 remember what Smokey the Bear said.

21 KEVIN WOODS: Thanks Council Member, we
22 appreciate the question and you know I think we've
23 engaged in a variety of different public education
24 sort of efforts, whether it's through social media
25 you know now these days. Nothing quite as iconic,
recently as Smokey for example but I know for example

3 our Urban Park Rangers are chiefly responsible for
4 providing really fantastic nature themed education
5 for school kids and adults throughout the city and
6 especially in - so for example, during the sort of
7 the drought warning period, we were incorporating
8 fire prevention and you know common sense practice
9 sort of into that education.

10 So, we'd love to partner on more creative sort of
11 colorful ideas on how to continue this idea. In
12 terms of the prohibitions on smoking and a lot of
13 these other things that's incorporated generally
14 speaking into our sort of standard rule signage, we
15 found over the years, you can kind of over sign
16 certain spaces and people sort of - it turns into
17 sign blindness a little bit so we're a little
18 cautious about that. We want to make sure it's you
19 know it's thoughtful and people can know what the
20 rules are in any given space but you make a good
21 point that there have been colorful reminders over
22 the years that still you know, people still remember
23 to this day and we'd be happy to kind of you know
24 work with you to kind of think of some creative
25 angles on that.

3 CHAIRPERSON ARIOLA: That's great. I'm just
4 going to yield to Council Member Paladino because she
5 does have another hearing. She has a question.

6 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: This is for Parks. We
7 know what caused the fires in California. My sister
8 lives in California. I've been to California many
9 times. As far as Parks go, you are failing miserably
10 in cleaning up the parks. I know you're short
11 staffed. How many people work in your forestry
12 division? I have parks in my district, beautiful
13 parks. Thank the good Lord nothing there has gone
14 wrong. However, when you do not clean out the
15 underbrush and you do not clean out leaves and these
16 places are not maintained as they should be, for
17 example, Alley Pond Park is huge, okay. Cunningham
18 Park, that's not my park but I know the parks,
19 Kissena Park. These are huge parks that need
20 attention that are being neglected.

21 Now, what Parks needs to do if we want to help
22 prevent fires, we not only need to give our Fire
23 Fighters the equipment, the high tech equipment
24 because in California, if there's a fire and there
25 was a short little brush fire, two helicopters bam.

2 Two guys came down. The fire was put out
3 immediately.

4 You guys need what you need as far as a
5 helicopter to circumvent the area without leaning on
6 the cops to do that. You need your own but Parks,
7 you need to do your job. How many people work in
8 forestry?

9 MARIT LARSON: Thank you for the question. Right
10 now, we have this year about 60 in our natural
11 resources group. That's just on the natural area
12 side of things. My colleague from forestry is also
13 here of course and of those we cover, you know all of
14 our natural areas of course in stewardship. About
15 half are in some way involved in forest care.

16 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Preventative always
17 works. This did not have to happen in California.
18 California also has a law where you can't flip a
19 cigarette out a window because there are drought
20 conditions. They're dry constantly. With an ocean
21 right there, we won't get into that and in reservoirs
22 that could have been filled that were not. Hydrants
23 that were empty. We don't have that problem. What
24 we need to do is make sure that someday, somehow,
25 parks is able to hire a significant amount of people

3 which you're not. You're short staffed and I meet
4 with Parks; like I said, I love your Commissioner but
5 you guys are just like, you're between a rock and a
6 hard place because you're not able to do the jobs
7 that you know you need to do. So, there's different
8 ways there, we need to figure that out because once
9 we are able to prevent, not so much about signage.
10 People ignore signs. People could care less about
11 signs especially today. Alright, so the
12 carelessness, people coming barbequing in parks where
13 they know they're not allowed to barbeque and if you
14 don't have a parkee in the park to tell them to put
15 out the barbeque, guess what? They don't care
16 anymore either.

17 So, there's a mountain of things to help prevent
18 this from happening and I think getting you the staff
19 that you need, it all sounds wonderful doesn't it?
20 Like it could happen in a blink of an eye. The funny
21 thing it is, it can. If the money was spent in the
22 right places. Thank you very much everybody, I got
23 to get to my Small Business hearing. Have a great
24 day.

25 CHAIRPERSON ARIOLA: Thank you Council Member.
Council Member Paladino brings up a very good point

1 COMMITTEE ON PARKS AND RECREATION JOINTLY WITH THE
2 COMMITTEE ON FIRE AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT 50

3 and just a couple of more questions and then I will
4 yield to my colleagues.

5 So, you said there's 14 acres on parks. 14,000
6 I'm sorry, like I didn't see the K. 14,000 acres and
7 how many employees? Was that the 60 that you're
8 talking about?

9 MARIT LARSON: Yeah, Parks Department has 30,000
10 acres of parkland and 14,000 of those, we
11 characterize as natural areas. Within our natural
12 areas group, we have usually it fluctuates of course
13 around 60.

14 CHAIRPERSON ARIOLA: And what's the total of
15 employees?

16 MARIT LARSON: In the Parks Department.

17 CHAIRPERSON ARIOLA: No, that address parks and
18 natural resources.

19 MARIT LARSON: Yeah, within our Natural Resources
20 group, it's about 60.

21 CHAIRPERSON ARIOLA: 60 is the number?

22 MARIT LARSON: Yeah.

23 CHAIRPERSON ARIOLA: Wow, okay, so that's
24 certainly not enough especially with the issues we
25 have now. So, I will be working with Chair Shekar
Krishnan and the rest of the Committee Members to

3 make sure that we address these during our budget
4 rounds.

5 The other thing is, is why when we call over to
6 Parks for forestry, why is that forestry does not
7 answer to the Borough Commissioners?

8 KEVIN WOODS: Okay, sorry, no that's an
9 interesting question. So, in terms of your chart at
10 the agency, so the Borough Commissioners are
11 extremely important and work very, very closely but
12 in terms of your chart, I believe yes, so the
13 forestry directors would report to Assistant
14 Commissioner Osborne who then reports in turn to our
15 Deputy Commissioner Jennifer Greenfeld for
16 environment and planning. So, but having said that,
17 there are very, very close relationships with the
18 borough commissioners who know sort of conditions
19 sort of out there in the neighborhoods and with key
20 stakeholders, such as elected officials and they are
21 a core, core part of the conversations that happen in
22 terms of you know how to prioritize our efforts and
23 how to communicate about those efforts.

24 But in terms of the reporting structure, you're
25 correct that the forestry staff is sort of at

3 vertical if you will, is through the environment and
4 planning division.

5 CHAIRPERSON ARIOLA: And that's why I think
6 Intro. 0800 is so very important and I'm proud to be
7 a cosponsor. Thank you.

8 Okay, I will now yield to Council Member Williams
9 then De La Rosa and Holden. Thank you for your
10 answers.

11 COUNCIL MEMBER WILLIAMS: Thanks Chair. So,
12 based on your expertise, how does delayed tree
13 maintenance impact urban infrastructure and public
14 safety? What are the potential risks of not
15 addressing tree related issues such as leaning trees,
16 overgrown branches, or root damage in a timely
17 manner?

18 KEVIN WOODS: Thanks for the question Council
19 Member. I'll call upon our Assistant Commissioner
20 Ben Osborne to provide a little more context here.

21 BENJAMIN OSBORNE: Good afternoon. Thank you for
22 the question Council Member Williams. So, you know
23 when we look at concerns about trees you know we do
24 respond to - uh, we receive over 100,000 service
25 requests a year for tree related issues. So, it's a
tremendous number and we look at a variety of factors

3 with an eye to public safety whenever we perform a
4 tree inspection. So, we look at the likelihood of
5 tree or tree park failing and causing harm to people
6 or property. And you know as you know, we have a
7 rating system that helps us prioritize the work that
8 may result from those inspections.

9 So, you know that's integral to our process and
10 it's integral in determining how we prioritize the
11 work that we do.

12 COUNCIL MEMBER WILLIAMS: Okay, can you explain
13 how a prioritization system might help mitigate the
14 risk that you just mentioned?

15 BENJAMIN OSBORNE: Yeah, our prioritization
16 system is designed specifically to help mitigate
17 those risks and that's exactly why we developed that
18 system. You know we are very innovative in
19 developing the system that we have now, this tree
20 risk management approach. I think you know the first
21 municipality to adopt an approach like that and one
22 of the largest still to have an approach like that.

23 So, yeah, so this approach to tree management is
24 designed to identify the conditions that present the
25 highest risk and get to those conditions that present
the highest risk and get to those conditions that

3 present the highest risk first because there's always
4 going to more work that we could do that we have
5 resources for. So, this system allows us to get to
6 the worst conditions first with the resources we
7 have.

8 COUNCIL MEMBER WILLIAMS: Okay so Queens makes up
9 about 30 percent, 36 percent of the city's street
10 trees, the highest of any borough as noted on the New
11 York City tree map. What measures can be taken to
12 ensure Queens extensive tree coverage is properly
13 maintained so constituents are not continually
14 burdened by issues stemming from inadequate tree
15 maintenance?

16 BENJAMIN OSBORNE: Sure yeah, Queens is our
17 largest borough and it does make up the largest
18 portion of the work that we do as well as the service
19 requests that we receive.

20 Chair Ariola alluded to our work structure, in
21 fact we did undergo a reorganization last year
22 consolidating the five borough forestry units in the
23 environment and planning division and one of the
24 reasons for doing so is to provide more nimble
25 reallocations of resources across the city depending
on where the needs are at any given time. So, if we

3 have a storm that impacts one borough specifically
4 and that does tend to be Queens fairly often, we're
5 able to shift resources to respond quickly to that
6 storm and you know we're also able to do that
7 throughout our routine operations as we adjust our
8 resource levels across the city to target the needs
9 where they are.

10 COUNCIL MEMBER WILLIAMS: I had a conversation
11 maybe about a year and a half ago with someone from
12 the forestry division about the fact that that
13 staffing has not achieved like I guess prepandemic
14 levels. So, can you just talk a little bit about the
15 staffing in the forestry division? I know it's very
16 difficult to also like recruit people because it's
17 New York City. So who actually like is arborist and
18 can actually work on trees but if you can just talk a
19 little bit about the staffing and the shortages.

20 BENJAMIN OSBORNE: Sure, yeah so as you
21 mentioned, you know the pandemic created challenges
22 for staffing everywhere and hiring has been a problem
23 across many industries. You know the two key titles
24 that we employ are for forestry work are climber and
25 pruner and forester and we have experienced climber
and pruner shortages difficulty in recruiting

3 climbers and pruners for several years. And to
4 respond to that, we developed an in-house training
5 program. We have a 15 month long training program
6 where we train existing park staff from other titles.
7 City Park worker, gardener, associate park service
8 worker and some other titles to become climbers and
9 pruners and we graduated the first class of that
10 program this past October. I believe we have 17
11 graduates at that program who are now climbers and
12 pruners adding to our workforce across the city and
13 we started the second cohort of that class just a few
14 weeks later at this past November.

15 So, you know come you know a little over a year
16 from now, we'll have another you know dozen and a
17 half or so to add to the workforce. So, that's a big
18 investment but an important one in bringing
19 additional personnel into this really technical job
20 that requires you know specialized training.

21 COUNCIL MEMBER WILLIAMS: Can you talk a little
22 bit about - I just had my question and completely
23 lost it. The mind is a terrible thing to waste.
24 I'll go back to my other questions and hopefully I'll
25 remember that one. It had to do with the tree
climbing. Okay, so I have like a whole bunch of

3 constituents so like there's an issue with the
4 constituents since like 2018. Mr. Sidney, he's been
5 dealing with a tree leaning dangerously against his
6 house. The roots of this tree have also clogged the
7 sewer system, creating ongoing maintenance and
8 financial burdens despite repeated outreach to 311
9 and other city resources. No permanent resolution
10 has been provided.

11 Then I have another constituent Mr. Weaks, who
12 reported that an old tree fell on his car causing
13 extensive damage. After contacting 311 he was
14 informed to a 30 days for a response. Even after the
15 waiting period, he did not receive any follow up or
16 resolution. The lack of timely action highlights
17 inefficiencies in addressing urgent tree related
18 incidents.

19 I had Ms. Brit who contacted our office about
20 tree roots growing in a way that threatened to damage
21 the sewer line and I understand I've had folks
22 explain it to me, it's not that the roots get into
23 the sewer line. There was probably cracks but either
24 way, like if there is a crack in the sewer line the
25 trees tend to grow there. Despite the tree being
planted by the city, she was told she would need to

3 cover the cost for the removal. This left here
4 feeling very overwhelmed.

5 I had Ms. Sturham(SP?) who reported an overgrown
6 tree in her home since 2022. The trees branches have
7 grown to the point of touching her solar panels,
8 risking damage to her property and its energy system.
9 The branches also extended over the sidewalk posing a
10 physical hazard to pedestrians, despite multiple
11 calls to 311. No action has been taken to address
12 the issue, obviously leaving her frustrated.

13 So, could you explain how the criteria described
14 in this bill might have prevented or mitigated some
15 of the specific issues raised by our constituents,
16 such as falling trees or root damage? And would you
17 agree that a transparent system for tree maintenance
18 prioritization would help to reduce the number of
19 complaints received by Council Members and 311?

20 BENJAMIN OSBORNE: Okay.

21 COUNCIL MEMBER WILLIAMS: And I remembered my
22 other question, which was if you could share the
23 current schedule for tree maintenance? Because I
24 know that it was delayed, so if you could share like
25 what the current delay is in the tree maintenance
calendar?

3 BENJAMIN OSBORNE: Okay, I think I will take that
4 most recent question first if that's alright. So, I
5 wouldn't say that we currently have a delay in tree
6 maintenance but maybe I can just kind of give an
7 overview of how we maintain our trees.

8 You know it's basically two different components.
9 One is in response to the public service requests
10 which I touched on earlier and the other is our
11 routine maintenance. Our block pruning program which
12 operates on a seven year cycle. We do have baselined
13 funding for this and it allows us to prune one
14 seventh of the trees in each community board in all
15 five boroughs every year.

16 We did have some delays through COVID you know
17 with contract stoppages and then you know it took
18 some time to get new contracts into place but I would
19 not characterize that program is delayed at this
20 point. You know when it comes to public service
21 requests you know understandably, you know we're
22 managing you know over 666,000 trees across the city
23 but somebody makes the request about a tree, you
24 know the 666,000 trees don't matter to them. They
25 care about the tree in front of their home.

3 And so, while we need to prioritize the most
4 urgent work first, it's understandable that that may
5 not be satisfactory to every resident, every property
6 owner. So, we hear that and we do try to be
7 transparent and provide, get information about the
8 overall approach, so at least people can understand
9 that we are dealing with a bigger picture and we do
10 have very good information on our website about our
11 Tree Risk Management Program, the criteria involved
12 in you know exactly as described in this bill. That
13 is on our website now.

14 The piece that we do not have clear criteria on
15 and which would be added through this bill is
16 building clearance pruning requests. So, we do take
17 requests for building clearance pruning and we do
18 inspect those and our inspectors use their judgement
19 to determine if you know if a tree is causing harm to
20 the building or likely to do so in the near future
21 but you know as your staff pointed out, you pointed
22 over discussions over the last year, there's not a
23 codified system for that as of yet. So, we heard
24 that request loud and clear and we're sort of
25 developing a system and it is planned for - it's
going to be incorporated into the new data base, the

3 new Forestry Management System that we are working on
4 identifying a contractor to develop, so you know
5 we're pretty far along in that contract procurement
6 process and that's scope of work is going to be
7 included in the new system. So, with that, we will
8 be able to have a systematic methodology for
9 assessing building clearance requests. Identifying a
10 priority rating for that, just like we do for our
11 risk to people in property from trees or branches
12 falling and it will be much easier for us to
13 transparently communicate the level of priority
14 associated with you know what we find in response to
15 any of those requests.

16 COUNCIL MEMBER WILLIAMS: Thank you. I know that
17 in the testimony, you know you stated that you want
18 to be able to have like stability and you don't
19 necessarily think things like this should be codified
20 into law, but I just wanted to reiterate that I think
21 it's like good governance to have these things be
22 readily available to the public and for them to be
23 able to understand the ways in which you all assess
24 and prioritize tree maintenance because for many
25 people, it's quite a frustrating experience to and
then you can't touch the tree because if you touch

3 the tree, you know you're going to be in big trouble
4 but these trees pose like a significant quality of
5 life issues, particularly for homeowners. And I know
6 again that you have thousands of trees in New York
7 City but I do think trees that are in residential
8 communities is completely different than trees that
9 may be in a park or trees that even may be along
10 commercial corridors because this is you know, you're
11 talking about people's like personal property. I
12 think people have their little territorial over
13 things that they buy and own and then they have these
14 trees that disrupt that whole thing. So, you know I
15 have a few more bills about trees because I do want
16 to figure out a way to one, make the process be
17 mystified like the tree maintenance process for
18 constituents but also like improve upon the process.
19 And I know it isn't just through legislation but
20 through resources as well because clearly, it's
21 really expensive and very hard to maintain all of the
22 trees you know in a big city, so. I hope that you
23 guys take another look at the bill and we can work
24 towards to getting to some resolution to passing.
25 Thank you. Thank you Chair.

1 COMMITTEE ON PARKS AND RECREATION JOINTLY WITH THE
2 COMMITTEE ON FIRE AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT 63

3 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you so much Council
4 Member Williams. I want to recognize that we have
5 Council Member Narcisse who has joined us as well and
6 now I'll turn it over to Council Member Holden. Oh,
7 De La Rosa, sorry. De La Rosa and then Holden.

8 COUNCIL MEMBER DE LA ROSA: Okay thank you
9 Chairs. I'll be quick Bob I promise. So, I
10 represent in Woodhill Park. So, first let me start
11 by thanking you all for being first responders. It
12 was a scary moment for our community but thanks to
13 your swift actions, we did not have any major
14 property damage or any lives lost thankfully. So,
15 we're very grateful for your swift actions and you
16 know I think all of us have a goal of learning from
17 these incidents and making sure that things are
18 running smoothly. One of the questions that I have
19 is has there been an official cause for determining
20 what happened at Inwood Hill Park?

21 JOHN ESPOSITO: Although our Bureau of Fire
22 Investigation, Fire Marshals investigated, they don't
23 have a definitive cause for what started that fire.

24 COUNCIL MEMBER DE LA ROSA: Okay. What metrics
25 or monitoring systems are in place to assess the
likelihood of the fire reigniting? Because that's

3 something we saw here. The fire continued to
4 reignite across about five days.

5 JOHN ESPOSITO: So, ideally we would put enough
6 water on that fire to put it out so that it doesn't
7 reignite but as you see with brush fires, they spread
8 sometimes further beyond the containment area that we
9 realize it is and continues to burn and we don't
10 realize that.

11 COUNCIL MEMBER DE LA ROSA: Okay, so there isn't
12 like a monitoring system in place?

13 JOHN ESPOSITO: We do leave a watch line
14 accompany there and for Inwood, that's what we had
15 done and then as the fire flared up, they called more
16 companies back for us to continue to fight and
17 extinguish that fire.

18 COUNCIL MEMBER DE LA ROSA: It was announced in
19 November 2024 and obviously you testified to this
20 that the FDNY would be creating a taskforce to
21 address bush fires across the city. What budgetary
22 enhancements are necessary for, in your opinion, for
23 the taskforce to effectively prevent and respond to
24 fires?

25 KEVIN WOODS: So, again regarding the taskforce,
we would like to be very innovative in the FDNY

3 regarding our technology with our drones and of
4 course with our equipment and apparatus. The brush
5 fire apparatus, there are many new types of brush
6 fire apparatus models. Our brush fire apparatus
7 fleet is very old and uhm, our light weight hose, we
8 need additional light weight hose and we also need
9 possibly light weight brush fire gear. We are
10 fighting these fires in bunker gear and again, using
11 structural firefighting hose and it's very labor
12 intensive and it takes more staffing and it's
13 reducing the fire protection in the adjoining
14 communities as we're sending multiple units to these
15 brush fires that are expanding very quickly because
16 we can't get ahead of it in time.

17 COUNCIL MEMBER DE LA ROSA: I had a really good
18 meeting with Commissioner Tucker and it was very
19 refreshing to hear his take on some of the needs of
20 the Department. I do hope that you will get back to
21 us under the leadership of Chair Ariola and the Fire
22 Emergency Management side on what the actual numbers
23 are for the needs for the Department as we go into
24 the budget fights that are to come.

25 Will the Parks Department be included in the Fire
Prevention Response Planning through the Taskforce?

3 JOHN ESPOSITO: For our pre-fire planning we were
4 doing site surveys, the Brush Fire Taskforce does
5 coordinate with the Parks Department to get access to
6 different parts of the parks to survey those scenes.

7 COUNCIL MEMBER DE LA ROSA: Okay, uhm, I know
8 that there's a pre-fire phase, an active fire phase
9 and a post fire phase. Can you walk us quickly
10 through what those phases entail?

11 KEVIN WOODS: So again, the pre-fire phase is
12 basically education through our Fire Safety
13 Education, social media platforms, surveillance,
14 using the drone system and surveillance using our
15 brush fire units. Our brush fire unit- brush fires
16 mostly occur; the majority occur in October,
17 November, and March, April. So, we will conduct
18 surveillance during those times. When we had the
19 massive amount of brush fires in October, November,
20 we actually extended the hours for surveillance up to
21 10, 11 o'clock at night to try to prevent that.

22 So, we're going to double down on that with this
23 pre-fire taskforce. The post-fire is cause and
24 origin and that's mainly our Fire Marshals. Again,
25 they could identify the point of origin. They will
look at the wind patterns. They will look at the

1 perimeter. Very, very, very difficult to pinpoint
2 the cause of these fires. And then our ongoing
3 operations is basically our firefighting operations
4 using our engine company apparatus and our brush fire
5 apparatus and we try to use the lighter brush fire
6 apparatus. They have offroad capability, four wheel
7 drive, the terrain, the big red pumpers that you see,
8 they get stuck in the mud. So, uhm, again we have
9 many redundancies, whether there's hydrants or not to
10 overcome these obstacles.
11

12 COUNCIL MEMBER DE LA ROSA: Okay and does the
13 FDNY have the capacity at this time in your
14 assessment to do adequate inspection of hydrants?

15 KEVIN WOODS: Right now the New York City Fire
16 Department inspects every hydrant twice a year. We
17 always have.

18 COUNCIL MEMBER DE LA ROSA: Okay. Thank you so
19 much. Thank you Chair.

20 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you Council Member
21 and now Council Member Holden.

22 COUNCIL MEMBER HOLDEN: Thank you. Thanks so
23 much Chair. I'd like the uh, can I have the tree
24 Commissioner or whatever? Because yeah because I
25 have an issue and I want to bring some other issues

3 up too but the main issue since you centralized the
4 tree maintenance, it's gotten worse and I'll tell
5 you, I'll give you some examples. Now, I'm a big
6 proponent of planting trees. I was doing it 30, 40
7 years ago. We did hundreds around the neighborhood.
8 I have actually considered them mine because I
9 actually helped get them planted and went around to
10 all the locations. However, since you centralized
11 it, here's what happens and I want to tell you real
12 cases. A new tree was planted around the corner from
13 where I live, so I generally walk past it. I noticed
14 some guy, the homeowner probably put a vinyl covering
15 down because he didn't want weeds coming up. So, he
16 actually choked the tree. The tree died. I brought
17 this up to Parks. They had to go through Central. I
18 used to go to Phil Sparatio and I can't do that
19 anymore so I have to go to Central.

20 Central called up, apparently called up the
21 homeowner, you got to remove that vinyl sheet. Well,
22 the tree was dead. The tree was gone. You got to
23 remove the vinyl sheet. Oh and I called, so I called
24 Central and they said, oh he promised to remove it.
25 Well guess what? He didn't. Six months later he
didn't. I went by it again and I said this is

3 frustrating. This is stupid and this is killing
4 some, you know a tree. So, they follow, we're going
5 to go out and find the guy. They issued him a
6 summons. Again, months went by. By the way, to make
7 a long story short, it was about almost a year ago.
8 The vinyl is still covering. The tree is still dead.

9 I have stumps when I was five years old. Stumps
10 that haven't been removed. I put in extra money for
11 tree planting and stump removal and it's not removed
12 and no tree plantings. This is - and I'm not putting
13 any more money into parks period unless you guys get
14 your act together. Like Vicki Paladino said and
15 certainly Council Member Williams, tree maintenance
16 is a mystery. We don't know the standards. For
17 instance, I have one of the - beautiful tree in my
18 district, again three blocks away from my home.
19 Probably one of the oldest and largest and most
20 beautiful and it looked like the healthiest.

21 Central, I got put in and I said, why is this
22 tree being cut? It took like weeks to get an answer.
23 The tree was gone. They cut it down. There was a
24 tree right in front of the house that was actually
25 probably I'd like to use the term half dead, even
though that it's still alive. I understand it but

3 it's half of it's in terrible condition. That was in
4 the front of the house, so I thought they mixed it up
5 in the location because the same address, one was on
6 the side, one was in the front. They cut down the
7 majestic tree. I asked why? You know what they
8 said? Well, it had a disease. Can you tell me what
9 the disease was or is or? No, the person that called
10 me from Central couldn't tell me.

11 So, I knew that the owner of the home wanted the
12 tree gone. I knew it because I live in that area. I
13 know they were doing renovations and he wanted that
14 tree gone and they got their way. So, I suspect it's
15 something. I suspected foul play here and I put a
16 complaint in because I don't get - when you don't get
17 satisfactory answer and you get like, oh the tree was
18 diseased but no specifics. So, I'm still waiting and
19 that's about ten months ago.

20 It's a problem. I got tree limbs hanging.
21 There's no standard here and if you're going to come
22 up with a standard, that's what the bill's doing.
23 The bill has 36 sponsors, co-sponsors and yet you're
24 saying, we oppose it because we don't want to codify
25 it. Well, that's what we want by the way. The
Council wants it because it seems to go nowhere.

3 These trees complaints. I understand you have the
4 budget and we're fighting for the one percent budget
5 and we need that and we need certainly our trees
6 maintained because trees that are not maintained can
7 kill people and cause a lot of property damage and
8 they do.

9 So, that's why I'm suspect when you say you don't
10 want to codify. Then right away I say well, I know
11 why because then it could actually delay response and
12 it does. It's the most frustrating thing that we
13 deal with complaints from constituents and they don't
14 get answered and then we look bad. Councilman, I
15 complained five years ago about this tree and nothing
16 is being done and you've been the Council Member and
17 you can't get it done. Well, I can't cut down trees
18 but I need satisfactory answers, which we're not
19 getting and I need it when it's centralized and it
20 got even worse. So, I don't get - I'd just like some
21 response to what you're saying. How do we know the
22 classification of the tree, which this bill's trying
23 to do? Like is this you know on a scale of one to
24 ten, is this a two?

25 I have these little nails that are put in trees,
that they're going to come down it's going on years

3 and years and years and I get older and older and
4 older and now my shelf life in this Council is this
5 year and this is it and I want to solve problems
6 because people are going to bring it up. Like, you
7 know you didn't handle my trees, eight years, you
8 didn't get my tree pruned or maintained or fixed or
9 at least looked at.

10 BENJAMIN OSBORNE: Okay, so first of all I want
11 to thank you for all the support you have given to
12 the trees over the years. I think you put a lot of
13 funding into tree planting, tree maintenance, tree
14 care, things like that so your interest in that is
15 crystal clear.

16 COUNCIL MEMBER HOLDEN: Could you speak up a
17 little because I'm a little hard of hearing.

18 BENJAMIN OSBORNE: Yeah, sorry. Sorry, I must
19 just be a little further from the microphone than I
20 should be.

21 COUNCIL MEMBER HOLDEN: Yeah, yeah, that's good,
22 thank you.

23 BENJAMIN OSBORNE: You know I was just thanking
24 you for the support.

25 COUNCIL MEMBER HOLDEN: Yeah, I heard that part.

3 BENJAMIN OSBORNE: So, specifically on the bill.

4 So, you know as I mentioned before, when we developed
5 our tree risk management program nearly a decade ago,
6 we were the vanguard and in many way we still are and
7 you know the criteria for assessing trees for risk,
8 the standard is on our website so we are transparent
9 about that. And you know as I mentioned before, you
10 know -

11 COUNCIL MEMBER HOLDEN: Well, specifically though
12 the rating of a specific tree, you're against because
13 that's a lot of work, I get it but if you could
14 classify when we make a complaint whether that
15 there's you know like I'll put a complaint in,
16 there's carpenter ants all over the place. It looks
17 like there's a lot of debris around it. It looks
18 diseased. Certainly when it does come down in a
19 storm, it looks like it came down very easily and you
20 look at it it's hollowed rot and what I was told, I
21 don't know if this is still being done that when they
22 go out and look at the tree, they knock on it to see
23 if it is some kind of noise or hollow but how do they
24 assess the trees health and you know none of this is
25 - is this on the website how they assess the trees

3 health? How do they determine whether it's diseased
4 and what extent?

5 BENJAMIN OSBORNE: Yeah, some of it and there is
6 information about the you know the kind of most
7 present concerns about passing disease on our
8 website. The criteria for doing the risk assessment
9 on our website. You know as you mentioned sounding a
10 tree, as we calmly knock on it with a you know a soft
11 mallet that is part of the inspection process.

12 So, our opposition to this bill is not based on
13 really anything in the content of the bill itself.
14 The risk assessment component of the bill that is
15 exactly what we already do. The building clearance
16 assessment, we recognize that kind of formal
17 assessment of risk to property from trees growing
18 into them is missing from our system. So, we you
19 know we're developing exactly that type of system.
20 It doesn't exist out there in the industry. We have
21 to devolve that. It's being locked into that kind of
22 current state that concerns us because we developed
23 the tree risk management system that we use now based
24 on a standard that the industry had developed for
25 looking at one tree. And you know we apply that to

3 our entire population and that ability to innovate is
4 really key.

5 COUNCIL MEMBER HOLDEN: What I don't and I'll
6 just turn it back to the Chair in a second but what I
7 don't understand because I complained for a long
8 time, how Parks used to plant trees with putting
9 cobblestones or bricks, bricking it in and they did
10 that to my tree twice in front of my house and both
11 times it died and I said, why do you put these pavers
12 down? Why don't you give it enough air? Why don't
13 you give it enough soil? Why don't you open up the
14 tree pit a little bit more and then finally they did
15 it. But they're still doing - they're still not
16 giving enough. I know they expanded the tree pits
17 but this maintenance and I appreciate the program but
18 just telling people how to water a tree, just you
19 know I tell them you water your garden and then you
20 wonder why - you don't water the tree, so you wonder
21 why the sidewalks are getting picked up because
22 you're watering your garden. That's where the roots
23 are going I guess.

24 They're going for the water source and if you
25 don't water the tree, it's going to probably pick up
your sidewalk because you're only watering your

3 garden and that's happening over and over again. So,
4 we need education. If you're going to request a
5 tree, you got to sign on to an agreement, whether how
6 you could you know enforce that I understand but I
7 just don't - the central - my biggest complaint is
8 about when you centralized this tree maintenance and
9 tree planting and I get less trees. I get less you
10 know maintenance and I get less answers to my
11 complaint. Thank you Chairs.

12 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you so much Council
13 Member Holden. You know before I'm turning it over
14 to Council Member Narcisse, I just want to echo again
15 that I mean you're hearing these concerns because
16 across the Council, there's a real concern about tree
17 maintenance and care and you know the perception
18 between what's happening on the ground and the way
19 parks is approaching it. The one thing I will
20 continue to say is that parks really needs to expand
21 the pool of contractors that you all work with and
22 I've raised this before at prior hearings and you
23 know we can cover it again at another hearing on
24 trees but I will just say the contractors that parks
25 works with are not adequate. You have at the last
hearing; we talked about the Dragon Eddie contractor

3 plead guilty on a felony fraud charges. There's
4 another contractor that's as well, Griffen Landscape
5 that's also plead guilty on fraud charges. The
6 contractors that Parks works with on this issue are
7 problematic. The pool is not big enough and when
8 they have these criminal issues and they're convicted
9 of them, it effects their operations and business for
10 obvious reasons, and that in turn effects the amount
11 of tree care our city is getting and so Parks really
12 needs to look at this and expand that pool of
13 contractors that you all are using.

14 MATT DRURY: We appreciate those sentiments
15 Council Member and in fact, I think the agency has
16 been dedicated to expanding the pool of contractors,
17 not just for tree but agencywide. I'm actually quite
18 proud of our - we've had great success in the MWBE's
19 here and others and everyone benefits when you expand
20 the universe of folks to get in there and do the
21 work. You know specific to tree work, there are you
22 know highly technical considerations and other
23 challenges but you know we are focused on that and
24 open for- and you've been a great champion on that
25 front and we appreciate that.

3 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Absolutely no, and I
4 appreciate that and I'd like to see more of it too.
5 You know I think one thing we have to get away is the
6 mindset that any of these contractors are - their
7 work is too essential and they're sort of too big to
8 fail. We can't have that here because then we keep
9 relying on the same problematic contractors. They're
10 not expanding it at a quick enough pace to broaden
11 that pool. So, it's an issue we have to keep working
12 on.

13 I have a few more questions on going back to
14 brush fires but I'll turn it over to Council Member
15 Narcisse. I also want to recognize that Council
16 Member Lee has joined us as well.

17 COUNCIL MEMBER NARCISSE: Good afternoon Chair
18 and good afternoon for being here. You know anyone
19 that knows that this area out here, we love parks and
20 you have Mr. Parks with you. Following on the
21 question of the hydrant. Who mending the hydrants by
22 the parks?

23 JOHN ESPOSITO: The hydrants in New York City are
24 maintained by the Department of Environmental
25 Protection and inside the parks, I guess it's a
combination of parks and DEP maintain fire hydrants.

3 COUNCIL MEMBER NARCISSE: The reason I asked that
4 question because many of the hydrants that I find by
5 the parks are not working. So, that's one of the
6 complaints and then -

7 JOHN ESPOSITO: If you could get us you know
8 those locations and we'll make sure that they get
9 reported to get inspected and repaired.

10 COUNCIL MEMBER NARCISSE: Thank you. In the
11 areas where we have high population of homeless
12 individuals, what enhanced monitoring or patrol are
13 in place to prevent the occurrence of brush fires
14 because lately we've been hit, so we have to learn
15 from our mistakes. How does the Parks Department
16 ensure these areas are checked frequently for
17 potential hazards?

18 MATT DRURY: Sure appreciate that. Thank you
19 Council Member. We have our Parks Enforcement Patrol
20 division which works really closely with NYPD, local
21 precincts, the NYPD homeless outreach unit, other
22 agencies, including Department of Homeless Services.
23 There's a broader Mayor's Homeless Taskforce. They
24 do schedule joint outreach, cleanup operations if
25 there is an encampment which can present obviously
some fire, you know risk of fire like in some cases

3 obviously. But that's alongside other efforts to
4 sort of monitor park land and make sure we're
5 addressing other violations that could be potentially
6 dangerous whether it's unauthorized smoking, you know
7 barbecuing in unauthorized areas right? So, it's
8 sort of a multipronged kind of effort but specific to
9 the encampment issue, there is sort of a citywide
10 effort largely steered by NYPD and Department of
11 Homeless Services and Parks is a part of that effort
12 as well.

13 You know, because it depends on the specific
14 location and if it's under Parks jurisdiction or not
15 and that can vary obviously.

16 COUNCIL MEMBER NARCISSE: And last time I had one
17 that had full support, so I want to say thank you for
18 that. How does the Park Department prioritize tree
19 maintenance in relation to fire prevention? Are
20 there specific trees or areas that are particularly
21 vulnerable to brush fires and how do we address those
22 risk?

23 MARIT LARSON: Thank you for the question. In
24 general, in natural areas, we have a prioritization
25 that looks at all sorts of factors with respect to
the benefit and the value of our natural areas.

3 Keeping in mind safety for the public but also the
4 conditions of those ecosystems. When we're looking
5 specifically at where there might be fire risk, it's
6 generally related to herbaceous or grass type
7 species, so phragmites or mug wart. Those are the
8 ones where we generally see the largest risk and
9 we've been able to focus with some funding that we've
10 had through as a result of our Community Wildfire
11 Protection Plan, particularly in Staten Island, on
12 mowing, which is basically fuel reduction.

13 So, that's what we do when and where we have
14 resources when it's the appropriate - when that's the
15 vegetation community that we see is a real risk, one
16 example.

17 COUNCIL MEMBER NARCISSE: I want to say thank you
18 but please follow up with the encampment in our parks
19 because lately we've been having a lot of that.
20 Thank you so much. Thank you Chair.

21 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you so much Council
22 Member Narcisse. Just to close out, you know I have
23 a few questions going back to my initial round
24 before. Isn't it a fact that if you all had an
25 increased budget for the Parks Department, you all

3 would have more resources and staff to address the
4 issue of forest fires as best as you can?

5 MARIT LARSON: That's certainly a fact, that if
6 we had more resources we would have more staff on the
7 ground to be able to participate in a range of both
8 preventative and you know education and responses.

9 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you and I would say
10 and we've heard about testimony today on this issue
11 but it seems to me there are two areas in particular
12 that we talked about a bunch today. Forestry and
13 PEP, both of which seem critical to addressing forest
14 fires and keeping our forest natural areas safe.
15 Both of those were also areas that either did not
16 receive any funding increase or got cut in this
17 budget, in this last budget because of City Hall's
18 failure to adequately fund the Parks Department.

19 Wouldn't you say that if you actually did not
20 have funding cuts but actually had a funding increase
21 in the forestry division, that you all would have
22 more resources in place to address the issue of
23 forest fires across the city?

24 MARIT LARSON: Thank you for the question. We -
25 given that fires occur in an unpredictable way, we
can never totally predict having you know a certain

3 amount of staff at each location on a one to one
4 basis but certainly in general if we had more people
5 on the ground and more resources, we could do more
6 things.

7 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: And that's exactly right.
8 I think that part of the issue is we're seeing these
9 fires pop up everywhere around the city and the staff
10 that you have seems stretched already thin in the
11 forestry division and natural areas in particular to
12 be able to address it, which is why it is shocking to
13 me that we saw from City Hall side it cut in the
14 forestry and natural areas budget in our last budget.
15 Wouldn't you also say that having an increase in
16 resources for PEP officers in our parks will help
17 keep our parks safer when you have incidents of
18 forest fires, help to deter activity that may
19 contribute to forest fires. Wouldn't you say an
20 increased resources for PEP would assist with that as
21 well?

22 MATT DRURY: Increased resources sort of by
23 definition wouldn't expand PEP's abilities to monitor
24 and patrol parks at large, which would have a variety
25 of benefits and you know I think we're a little wary
of sort of drawing the one to one sort of parallel in

3 terms of the outcomes, which are so unpredictable in
4 this case in terms of brush fires. But having said
5 that, you know there's sort of a logical truism that
6 you know more is more.

7 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: And it seems to me that
8 when we can't control the climate and the events, the
9 best we can do and we should do is from a
10 preventative standpoint take all the measures that we
11 can to protect ourselves and from a reactive
12 standpoint after it happens, all the measures we can
13 to contain it as safely as possible and I think you
14 all did a good job, a very good job with the
15 resources you have to address it despite limitations
16 like fire hydrant access or cuts to our natural areas
17 in forestry division overall. With limited PEP, I
18 think it's about 300 for across the entire city if
19 I'm not mistaking but that is nowhere near the level
20 we need to adequately prepare for these kinds of
21 incidents, especially because they're unpredictable.
22 I know we need to react to them and to contain them
23 especially seeing how quickly those fires spread in
24 Los Angeles too.

25 And so, in closing, I want to thank you all for
coming but also highlight and really underscore the

3 importance of having Parks Department resources in
4 place for these divisions in particular for the
5 Department overall to best position parks to address
6 these kinds of natural disasters.

7 Thank you all so much for your testimony,
8 appreciate it.

9 And before we turn over to public testimony,
10 again appreciate FDNY and Parks coming out today and
11 look forward to our continued work together on this
12 issue as well.

13 I'm now going to open up the hearing for public
14 testimony. I remind members of the public that this
15 is a formal government proceeding and that decorum
16 shall be observed at all times. As such, members of
17 the public shall remain silent at all times. The
18 witness table is reserved for people who wish to
19 testify. No video recording or photography is
20 allowed from the witness table. Further, members of
21 the public may not present audio or video recordings
22 as testimony but may submit transcripts of such
23 recordings to Sergeant at Arms for inclusion in the
24 hearing record. If you wish to speak at today's
25 hearing, please fill out an appearance card with the
Sergeant of Arms and wait to be recognized. When

3 recognized, you will have two minutes to speak on
4 today's hearing topics preventing brush fires and
5 parks and Intro. 800 and a Preconsidered Intro. to
6 that effect.

7 If you have a written statement or additional
8 written testimony you wish to submit for the record,
9 please provide a copy of that testimony to the
10 Sergeant at Arms. You may also email written
11 testimony to testimony@council.nyc.gov within 72
12 hours of this hearing. Audio and video recordings
13 will not be accepted.

14 And now, we'll call up our first in person panel
15 which is Daniel Abram, Deaunte Johnson, and Leila
16 Bakhtiari.

17 DANIEL ABRAM: Good afternoon Chair Krishnan,
18 Chair Ariola is not here but and members of the
19 Committees. My name is Daniel Abram, I am the
20 Director of Policy at New Yorkers for Parks. Thank
21 you for the opportunity today to testify to the
22 urgent need to prevent and mitigate brush fires in
23 our city's parks.

24 The fires that swept through 41 acres of our
25 natural areas last year exposed critical weaknesses
in the city's ability to protect and manage these

3 spaces. One of the most significant issues is the
4 severe underfunding of New York City Parks' Natural
5 Resources Group, which has lost 51 forest management
6 positions due to budget cuts. As a result, only 384
7 acres of 12,000 can be cared for by Natural Resources
8 Group in Fiscal Year 2026.

9 This staffing loss directly impacts the ability
10 of the Parks Department to remove fire prone invasive
11 species, maintain safe trails and support a rapid
12 response when fires do occur. The recent fires and
13 ongoing threats to our city's natural areas
14 underscore the urgent need for sustained investment
15 in park management and fire prevention.

16 To address these challenges, we urge the Mayor's
17 Office and the City Council to support restoration
18 and baselining of \$5 million to rehire 76 critical
19 staff for the Natural Resources Group to maintain
20 forests, reduce fire risks and formalize trails.
21 Invest \$20.5 million to hire 250 additional PEP
22 officers and baseline 50 urban park ranges. Increase
23 enforcement in staff presence are essential to
24 deterring unsafe activity in natural areas that can
25 lead to brush fires. And also ensuring a coordinated
interagency response by strengthening collaboration

3 between New York City Parks, FDNY and other agencies
4 to improve emergency response times and long term
5 restoration efforts.

6 While I appreciate the intent of legislation such
7 as Intro. 800 and the Preconsidered bill 3015 to
8 establish a wildfire mitigation plan, I urge the
9 Council to focus on securing stable baselined funding
10 for New York City Parks. Without proper resources,
11 legislative mandates risk becoming unfunded
12 requirements solely for transparency rather than
13 actionable solutions. Thank you.

14 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you.

15 LEILA MOUGOUI BAKHTIARI: Good afternoon
16 everyone. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.
17 My name is Leila Mougoui Bakhtiari and I serve as the
18 Director of Landscape Management for the Prospect
19 Park Alliance. The nonprofit partner of New York
20 City Parks that helps manage Brooklyn's Flagship
21 Park.

22 Prospect Park is home to 350 acres of natural
23 areas including Brooklyn's last remaining upland
24 forest. I oversee Prospect Park's dedicated team of
25 gardeners at colleges, forestry technicians and
26 arborists who preserve and restore the parks natural

3 areas. The importance of proactive and strategic
4 natural area management was made painfully clear on
5 Friday, November 8, 2024 when a tool alarm fire
6 devastated two acres of the roofing. Our parks need
7 dedicated city funding for natural area management
8 and ongoing maintenance to keep our forests healthy
9 and resilient to the risks of climate change.

10 New York City has 12,000 acres of natural areas
11 and 6,800 acres of that are forests on New York City
12 Parks property. Prospect Park has more than 10
13 million annual visits and 370,000 Brooklynites live
14 in the immediate vicinity of the park.

15 We're lucky a visitor spotted and reported the
16 fire so quickly or the devastation could have been
17 much more significant. Thanks to the swift response
18 of FDNY, the fire was contained and extinguished,
19 however, the damage to this critical habitat left us
20 with significant restoration challenges. Our team is
21 stabilizing the steep slopes in the effected area to
22 prevent erosion but full restoration will require
23 years of intensive work and long term monitoring.
24 Without sufficient funding to prioritize the care and
25 maintenance of our cherished parks, our ability to
prevent such disasters is significantly impaired.

3 Under funded parks face delayed maintenance making
4 them more susceptible to hazards such as tree
5 failures, erosion and as we've experienced,
6 devastating fires.

7 Parks are essential infrastructure and without
8 proper investment, there capacity to foster climate
9 resilience, biodiversity and public wellbeing is
10 deeply compromised. Thank you.

11 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thanks Leila for your
12 testimony and to all the workers at Prospect Parks
13 Alliance. I just have a couple questions. Can you
14 quantify how much damage was caused by the forest
15 fire?

16 LEILA BAKHTIARI: We're still assessing that
17 because of the time of the fire, the trees go into
18 dormancy, we need to wait for the spring to kind of
19 see, especially for the larger trees, how much the
20 damage was but the area, the two acre area had damage
21 to all three layers of the forest. So, it was not
22 just the you know herbaceous or the brush layer, it
23 was the mid-story, which is the shrubs and the
24 younger trees and also some of the large trees. This
25 was a protected area, part of the forever wild sites
of the park behind the fence and we are lucky enough

2 to have started some of the restoration work.

3 Specifically the erosion control to make sure that
4 when you know we get significant rain, all of this
5 area doesn't get washed off and eroded.

6 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: But the damage is still -
7 there's still recovery work happening?

8 LEILA BAKHTIARI: There's recovery work happening
9 and you know long term restoration and maintenance
10 takes years. This area was actually one of the first
11 areas that Prospect Park Alliance when we started in
12 the late 80's and early 90's. This area was restored
13 with capital funds. It was one of the first capital
14 forest restoration sites in the city that was done
15 with only with native plants and you know it takes a
16 long time for trees to grow.

17 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: And I know the Alliance
18 obviously had the staff in place to address the issue
19 too but how much natural areas or more broadly forest
20 division staff, forestry division staff in the Parks
21 Department did you have working with you all to
22 respond to the situation?

23 LEILA BAKHTIARI: So, the Alliance is a
24 partnership. We work together. For example, the
25 forestry division of parks helped us with any access

3 or any trees that needed to be removed the day after
4 the fire and most of the natural area restoration is
5 done by the Alliance staff.

6 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Would you say that
7 increasing the budget for forestry and replacing,
8 putting the funding back that was cut for natural
9 areas and also increasing it would help address this
10 situation? Not just at Prospect Park but for
11 protected areas throughout the city?

12 LEILA BAKHTIARI: Absolutely, yes.

13 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you.

14 LEILA BAKHTIARI: Thank you.

15 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Oh, Council Member Holden.

16 COUNCIL MEMBER HOLDEN: Regarding Prospect Park,
17 in that area what fuels the fire? That means like I
18 would assume dead trees, fallen trees, dry wood. Was
19 that the case in this situation?

20 LEILA BAKHTIARI: It was but also October as it
21 was mentioned multiple times was the driest October,
22 second driest October in history of New York City.
23 So, pretty much -

24 COUNCIL MEMBER HOLDEN: I know we can't control
25 that but we can control maintenance, which if we had
the additional resources, we could remove like what

3 fuels the fire or makes it worse or makes it spread
4 you know because of lack of maintenance? That's my
5 question really.

6 LEILA BAKHTIARI: Yeah and I think inside natural
7 areas is the proper maintenance of those natural
8 areas and you know outside on the trails and access
9 and removing leaf off the path.

10 COUNCIL MEMBER HOLDEN: Or you know again, like
11 thinning the tree canopy or having a break so it
12 doesn't spread. You know things like that which they
13 tried in LA and it didn't work but I understand when
14 there's a drought, that's understandable. We can't
15 control that but we can control the spread of fire if
16 we figure it out. You know so maintenance is very
17 important I would assume because we have Forest Park,
18 it was in my district and you know you go in there
19 and there's a lot of dead trees. There's trees that
20 are fallen that are left for years. I'm just
21 wondering if that could contribute. You know we
22 didn't really have a widespread fire there but it's
23 possible.

24 LEILA BAKHTIARI: Dead trees that fall usually
25 are left because they're habitat for both pollinators
and for animals and they disintegrate but you are

3 right that maintenance of the landscape, of making
4 sure the correct biodiversity and correct plants are
5 there. That the layers are all held and the unwanted
6 very flammable plants like mug wart and phragmites
7 that was discussed.

8 COUNCIL MEMBER HOLDEN: Okay, thank you. Thanks
9 so much. Thanks Chair.

10 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you Council Member.

11 DEAUNTE JOHNSON: Good afternoon. My name is
12 Deaunte Johnson. I'm the Policy Fellow at the New
13 York League of Conservation Voters. NYLCV is a state
14 environmental advocacy organization representing over
15 30,000 members in New York City. Thank you Chairs
16 Krishnan and Ariola and the members of the committees
17 on Parks and Fire and Emergency Management for the
18 opportunity to comment.

19 As the effects of climate change continue to be
20 felt all across America, we must actively fight for
21 our environment and the people most vulnerable. Last
22 year between October 29th and November 14th, FDNY
23 responded to at least 229 brush fires. These fires
24 occurred in all five boroughs in our beloved parks as
25 temperatures soared about 7 degrees in the early days
of November. Well managed parks, trees and green

3 spaces are critical to combat the risk of brush fires
4 and other climate related problems in our city. A
5 lack of robust long term funding for our parks system
6 threatens New York City and it's strained workforce.
7 To thrive, we must invest in parks and parks workers
8 because when our parks flourish, so does our city.
9 The Parks budget is essential to making sure our
10 parks work for all New Yorkers.

11 New York City Parks was the only city agency to
12 not receive budget restorations impacting safety and
13 accessibility, especially in vulnerable,
14 environmental justice communities.

15 Last years parks budget cuts particularly in the
16 Parks Departments Natural Resources group increase
17 the likelihood of fires in our city's parks. Since
18 there was an overall lack of park maintenance with
19 fewer trails and less debris being cleared. As a
20 result, there weren't enough maintenance workers for
21 sufficient debris removal allowing the perfect
22 conditions for fires that were preventable.

23 For FY26, the Play Fair for Parks Coalition
24 requested a total of \$95 million for New York City
25 Parks including \$36.2 million for resilient parks.
This means 148 forestry staff for tree care on

3 streets and in parks and 76 natural areas staffed to
4 manage and maintain 12,000 acres of natural areas,
5 300 miles of trails, and increasing access and
6 protection against fires in our city parks.

7 The fight against climate change is one of the
8 requires the active and targeted action on all
9 aspects of our daily life. Our parks saves the lungs
10 of our city providing critical green space in every
11 borough, promoting community building, economic
12 growth and climate resiliency. Our parks deserve
13 investment because when our parks flourish so does
14 our city. Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

15 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you for your
16 testimony. Now our next panel and I'm going to
17 virtual are Emily Walker and Scott Middleton. You
18 may begin.

19 EMILY WALKER: Alright, good afternoon. My name
20 is Emily Walker, and I am the Senior Manager of
21 External Affairs at the Natural Areas Conservancy.
22 Thank you to Chairs for the opportunity to speak
23 today.

24 As champions for NYC's natural areas, we care
25 deeply about the care and condition of our forests
and were alarmed to see the devastating impacts of

3 drought conditions last fall, which led to the spate
4 of brush fires in parks and natural areas across the
5 five boroughs.

6 The timing of the drought as we've discussed, and
7 brush fires happened to coincide with the elimination
8 of 51 forest management positions for the Natural
9 Resources Group in the FY25 Adopted Budget for Parks.
10 These positions constituted approximately 80 percent
11 of the agency's workforce that care for the 14,000
12 acres of natural areas and forests in our city's
13 parks.

14 As a stopgap measure to keep critical staff in
15 place in the wake of the FY25 budget cuts, 22 of the
16 eliminated staff lines had been shifted onto Federal
17 grant funding via the Inflation Reduction Act. With
18 this week's freeze on Federal grants, these positions
19 are once again in peril. This precarious staffing
20 for the division of Parks that plays such a critical
21 role in contributing to the climate health of our
22 city reflects a shameful lack of urgency from our
23 decisionmakers, and we are here today to ask that the
24 Council take the strongest stand possible to ensure
25 that this funding is made whole in the FY26 budget.

3 The brush fires are a stark reminder of the
4 city's vulnerability to climate change, and of the
5 city's ongoing failure to invest critical funding for
6 natural areas management. We strongly believe that
7 better staffed and maintained natural areas are safer
8 for public access and more ecologically resilient.
9 While improved staffing wouldn't have prevented the
10 drought, Parks has for too long been operating with
11 minimal resources to do critical management,
12 restoration, and monitoring in our natural areas
13 during this era of climate instability. With
14 increased staffing, NRG would be able to do more work
15 to control and suppress the spread of invasive
16 species that leave our forests more vulnerable to
17 fire. Adequate staff is also no critically needed to
18 ensure that fire locations can be restored and
19 monitored appropriately.

20 The fires made clear that it is more urgent than
21 ever that our city's leaders take meaningful action
22 by adequately funding the care of our natural areas.
23 We know that healthier forests help create a
24 healthier climate and that failing to invest in our
25 natural areas will leave the city more vulnerable to
flooding, extreme heat, and now fire. Thank you.

3 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thanks so much for your
4 testimony Emily. You know and just I'm at that point
5 too I mean of course your testimony I think was very
6 strong about the importance of the natural areas
7 funding but it has to be the case that we are far
8 from adequately staffed to care for our natural
9 areas, whether it's the protect from fires that are
10 out of our control but that we can do a lot to
11 protect and prevent as much as possible and to care
12 for them in generally. It has to be the case that we
13 are deeply understaffed in general, right? As part
14 from the funding piece of this.

15 EMILY WALKER: That's correct and if I might add,
16 the Forest Management framework for New York City,
17 which was referenced by our colleagues at NYC Parks,
18 the Natural Areas Conservancy helped co-create that
19 plan a number of years ago. If you refer to the
20 management framework itself, you'll see that we're
21 actually far behind the ideal level of staffing and
22 funding that we should have if we were to be
23 following the spirit of that management framework,
24 which again was developed very thoughtfully and
25 intentionally with our colleagues and environment and
planning at parks. We just have not seen sufficient

3 baselined funding, any funding to speak of for
4 energy. You heard that they have 60 full-time staff
5 for 14,000 acres of wetlands, forests and marsh
6 lands. It's just not sufficient to meet the need and
7 it's one-third of our park system. So, we really
8 hope we can work with you all this year to really
9 ensure that we're getting a more sufficient level of
10 staffing for this division. Thank you so much.

11 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: A staff of 60 for 14,000
12 acres is ridiculous. And from the report that you
13 all did, if you remember, what was the ideal level of
14 staffing that's needed to maintain a park system
15 that's this large?

16 EMILY WALKER: I believe we would have at least
17 78 additional staff on the park side of things based
18 on the FMF or the Forest Management Framework. There
19 is also kind of - we're happy to follow up with your
20 offices after this to share that report. There is
21 kind of a 25 year time scale and budget that breaks
22 down what the capital investment would be needed and
23 what the expense budget needs would be. We're
24 falling well short of that. I was trying to look in
25 my phone on the tiny PDF. I think we should have at
least \$16 million in expense funding by this year and

3 implementation, we're near six of implementation
4 technically speaking.

5 We have as of this year, actually zero dollars
6 implemented for the FMF because of the FY25 budget
7 cuts. So, we're really well below the level that
8 should be needed to support the work that our
9 colleagues are doing. And I just want to emphasize
10 that our colleagues in NRG are doing incredible work
11 with like incredibly paltry amount of resources and we
12 want to make sure that that is uplifted and seen that
13 they have a tremendous workload that they just are
14 really trying to do incredible work with not enough
15 people.

16 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you for your
17 testimony.

18 SCOTT MIDDLETON: Good afternoon and thank you
19 for the opportunity to testify today. My name is
20 Scott Middleton and I'm the Executive Director of the
21 Marine Park Alliance. We're the friends of Group for
22 Brooklyn's biggest park, Marine Park.

23 Hundreds of acres of Marine Park wetlands were
24 used to dispose of nonhazardous solid waste between
25 1934 and 1964. Since that time, most of Marine Parks
landfilled uplands have become colonized by

3 monocultures of mug wart and phragmites, species that
4 have been discussed at length during today's hearing.
5 These plants become highly flammable when dry. Any
6 spark can set them off.

7 Last fall, New York City's severe drought caused
8 an unprecedented number of wildfires throughout the
9 city. The most frequent of these citywide were here
10 in Marine Park. Phragmites ignited in the parks salt
11 marsh areas and winds carried the flames up to
12 transitional native plantings and coastal forests in
13 the park, leading to individual burns of up to six
14 acres.

15 Up to 20 acres burned here annually, a great
16 concern to adjacent homeowners and to park visitors
17 alike. This year, fires occurred nearly daily
18 between October 1st and Thanksgiving. Marine Park
19 Alliance also leads a committee of concerned
20 nonprofits that use and care for the 530 acre forever
21 wild preserve here in Marine Park. One of our
22 committee members responds to each and every fire
23 reported, the Gerritsen Beach Volunteer Fire
24 Department. The valleys, as they are affectionately
25 called in our neck of the woods are outfitted with

3 equipment and vehicles specifically to handle these
4 frequent brushfires.

5 We also work with New York City's Parks Natural
6 Resources Group, NRG which has captured city, state
7 and federal funding over the last 40 years to perform
8 numerous salt marsh restorations including regrading,
9 planting, and transforming uplands dominated by non-
10 Native species into Native coastal grassland,
11 shrubland and forest. Sustaining these Native
12 habitats requires active management and with each
13 round of budget cuts, maintenance of natural areas is
14 unfortunately an early casualty.

15 Marine Park Alliance and its supporters are
16 committed to the preservation and resilience of
17 Gerritsen Creek's unique habitats in Marine Park.
18 Our efforts aim to curb future fires and vandalism by
19 demonstrating positive community stewardship of
20 natural areas in response to a high profile crisis
21 for New York City Parks. We are strongly supportive
22 of any effort to restore the budget so that natural
23 areas expert technicians can return to Brooklyn's
24 largest park. Thank you.

25 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you so much for your
testimony.

3 SCOTT MIDDLETON: Thank you.

4 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: And now we'll move to our
5 virtual panel. We have Marshall Lee Weimer followed
6 by Kristina Taylor.

7 MARSHALL LEE WEIMER: Hi, can you all hear me?

8 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Yes.

9 MARSHALL LEE WEIMER: Alright awesome, well thank
10 you Council Members. I appreciate having this
11 opportunity to speak. My name is Marshall Lee
12 Weimer, I'm a city forester with Manhattan Borough
13 Forestry at NYC Parks. I have listened to testimony
14 of all of today. Excuse me while I'm getting on the
15 bus right now but the issue - I was actually at the
16 Inwood Hill fire on November 15th. I responded to it
17 to look at the trees that were hazardous to the parks
18 there and I agree with all that has been said today
19 that there needs to be more funding and baseline of
20 staff to mitigate these wildfire concerns. These are
21 going to issues that we're going to face for the
22 foreseeable future within our natural areas and as
23 now, we do not have a preparation ready for that.
24 And so, before the Parks Department and the FDNY,
25 [INAUDIBLE 02:04:45] the support that they need from
the City Council in order to address these concerns.

3 In regard to Introduction 800, I do risk
4 assessments every day for trees throughout the city,
5 specifically in the Borough of Manhattan and while I
6 you know sympathize with concerns of all the
7 constituents and also the Council Members about tree
8 hazards not being addressed, the issue is not whether
9 or not the criteria is available to the folks. It is
10 the lack of staffing in order to address these
11 concerns. So, if there are not climber and pruners
12 on staff to mitigate these concerns, we have a
13 special education about how we do risk assessments
14 available but those tree risks will not be addressed.
15 So, what needs to happen is we need to have more
16 incentives and more pay for the climber pruners. The
17 in house training programs that Ben Osborne brought
18 up earlier was one of those great solutions to that
19 but there needs to be a higher pay for the city parks
20 workers to join that program in order to become
21 climber and pruners.

22 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Thank you. Your time is
23 expired.

24 MARSHALL LEE WEIMER: Okay, well thank you.

25 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: You can finish up and wrap
up if you have anything more you wanted to add.

3 MARSHALL LEE WEIMER: Oh, well yeah again the
4 staffing. If you want to have the tree risks
5 addressed you need to have the staff to do so and to
6 have the staff to do so, you need to have more pay
7 incentive for the climber and pruners. Thank you.
8 Have a nice day.

9 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you very much.
10 Next, we'll have Kristina Taylor.

11 KRISTINA TAYLOR: Good afternoon. Hi, I'm
12 Kristina Taylor, Deputy Director for the Van
13 Cortlandt Park Alliance. We are a member of the Play
14 Fair Coalition. Thank you for allowing me to testify
15 virtually. Once again, I was down at City Hall last
16 week for the Parks rally on the steps. I would
17 rather not add up the number of hours that I've spent
18 advocating for Parks funding over the last two
19 decades. It is extremely frustrating that we have to
20 continue to do this dance every year.

21 Last fall we had a new obstacle to overcome as
22 you guys have been discussing. We added drought and
23 brushfires to the list of climate change impacts on
24 our parks when New York City experienced a record
25 level drought.

3 Lack of water combined with high winds resulted
4 in Van Cortlandt Parks experiencing numerous fires in
5 a concentrated period of time. We have three
6 locations in our parks forest severely impacted by
7 brush fires. We believe inconsistent funding for our
8 natural areas and for forest management staff,
9 directly increased the risk of brush and natural
10 areas forest fires and will lead to an insufficient
11 response and recovery plan. We are supportive of
12 Play Fair Coalitions request for funding in the FY26
13 budget.

14 Luckily for Van Cortlandt Park, we have a small
15 but dedicated park staff. We have a small but
16 dedicated land staff and a small but dedicated vital
17 volunteers who worked together prior, during and
18 after the brush fires to reduce the impact. While we
19 understand the desire for bills such as Intro. 800
20 2024 and the Preconsidered Bill, but we believe that
21 more consistent baseline funding for parks is what is
22 ultimately needed to advance the intent of these
23 bills. There is concern that further legislating
24 these processes will amount to unfunded mandate for
25 the agency. It is not fair to once again ask New
York City Parks to do more but with less funding.

3 New Yorkers deserve a fully funded, safe, clean,
4 green and resilient park system. The ongoing budget
5 cuts to New York City Parks in the proposed budget
6 for next fiscal year jeopardize the very heart of our
7 communities. These cuts will make it even more
8 difficult for the already understaffed, under
9 resourced Parks Department to carry out the basic
10 needs to ensure parks are equitable and accessible
11 for all New Yorkers.

12 Year after year, New York City Park staff does
13 more with less. The staff is already stretched too
14 thin. They are tired and frustrated and so are we.
15 We demand one percent of the city's budget for New
16 York City Parks. Thank you.

17 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you for your
18 testimony. We're going to jump back to in person and
19 call up Jack Spillane from Uniformed Fire Officers
20 Association.

21 JACK SPILLANE: How are you doing? Thank you
22 very much for allowing me to speak here today. My
23 name is Jack Spillane, I'm Recording Secretary for
24 Uniformed Fire Officers Association. I've been on
25 this job for a long time. I love Parks. I love the
Fire Department. I hate fires in parks. It's a big,

3 big problem. I was a captain at Staten Island for
4 over six years and we dealt with a lot of stuff in
5 Great Kills Park, Fresh Kills Park up on Lighthouse
6 Hill.

7 Where you find yourself nowadays is we are
8 dressed for interior firefighting. We're wearing
9 bunker gear. We're wearing 80 pounds of gear.
10 That's all well and good when you're going down a
11 hallway into an enclosed area, but either traverse or
12 of large swads of land up and down hill, a lot of
13 times a limited visibility, wearing clunky boots and
14 heavy equipment, it's very, very difficult. Also
15 carrying these five gallon Indian pumps. If you see
16 the guys in California, they spray the water and
17 stuff like that right. It's difficult and the hoses
18 we use in other parts of the city, they use of
19 interior firefighting. They use those in Prospect
20 Park. They use up in Inwood. They use those in Van
21 Cortlandt Park. We have to implement a better set of
22 gear for wild land firefighting. Something lighter,
23 something with like uh better boots for better
24 traction. Better walking around capabilities. We
25 need to implement more forestry hose. It's a one
inch diameter hose, very pliable. It's easy to

3 stretch and you can get - you can carry over 1,000
4 feet of that on a roll about that big. So, there's a
5 lot the Department can do. We should probably also
6 expand the use of the drones, the uses of the drone
7 unit. That's a great tool. They get in deeper into
8 the parks, see where the deep fires are. Maybe we'll
9 be able to send a certain amount of resources to that
10 one area to mitigate it with less people and less
11 cause for injury.

12 So, just going forward, it's a bigger problem.
13 It's a big problem, it's multifaceted and without the
14 proper training and equipment, fire fighters have to
15 perform for longer periods of time in tougher
16 conditions and open themselves up to injury. Thank
17 you very much. I appreciate your time.

18 CHAIRPERSON ARIOLA: Thank you so much for your
19 testimony and as we've spoken about many times, the
20 Fire Department for the last three years that I have
21 been the Chair has been baselined. There hasn't been
22 an increase in your budget at all and that's just not
23 acceptable. And we're seeing more fires and we're
24 seeing our fire houses breaking down, our fire
25 equipment breaking down. The equipment you are
mentioning that's needed. The heavy gear and

3 everything that needs to be changed. And because why
4 hasn't the Fire Department gotten additional money?
5 Because the Fire Department does their job no matter
6 what, no matter what whether you have the funding or
7 you don't but this year is different. The U is the
8 union here asking for money. The Fire Department
9 today ask for money. Me as your Chair will be
10 fighting for money. I just had a conversation with
11 Chair Krishnan about Parks Department and Fire
12 Department. We need your departments to be as well
13 funded as other first responding departments within
14 this City of New York. You're not a step child. You
15 are a very important agency that responds to fires
16 that save lives and I will do my best with my
17 colleagues in government to make sure that you get
18 what you need. I've already started with
19 conversations with the union, yourselves, with
20 Commissioner Tucker, with OMB and with the Mayor's
21 Office and we really won't stop until we have what we
22 need for the Parks Department, for the Fire
23 Department and for any other agency that has really
24 been a step child over the last number of budget
25 cycles.

3 So, thank you so much for taking the time to come
4 here today.

5 JACK SPILLANE: Thank you and one other thing if
6 I could. We get the gear; we can work quicker. We
7 can get less damage to these parks to it because as
8 the other people testified to damage occurs, it takes
9 a long time for that damage to be reversed. The
10 quicker we get in there, the better more proficient
11 we are with the training, the better off for the
12 parks too. Thank you.

13 CHAIRPERSON ARIOLA: Thank you.

14 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: I appreciate you saying, I
15 just want to echo what Chair Ariola said first of
16 all, thank you so much for your work every day from
17 the buildings to our parks but I couldn't agree more
18 and these are as I mentioned before to parks, there's
19 a lot we can do even for natural disasters to
20 prepare; to respond to them effectively and it
21 requires the budget for both agencies to support
22 that, including with the budget for better, more
23 efficient equipment for fires outdoors too. So, we
24 will keep pushing on that as well and it's clear to
25 me from today's hearing too how underfunded I think
for all of us, how underfunded both parks and FDNY

3 are and how much more funding both you agencies need
4 for these kinds of emergency situations. So, thank
5 you.

6 Now, we'll go back to virtual. We have Fay Hill.
7 Fay, are you there? Can you hear us? Are you ready
8 to testify? Are you ready to testify for our New
9 York City Council Parks and Fire Committee Hearing?

10 FAY HILL: Yes.

11 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Okay.

12 FAY HILL: Hello?

13 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Yup, you can begin.

14 CHAIRPERSON ARIOLA: We hear you.

15 FAY HILL: Did you say Fay Hill?

16 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Yup, we're ready if you're
17 ready.

18 FAY HILL: Oh I'm sorry, okay.

19 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: No worries. We're ready
20 if you are.

21 FAY HILL: Good evening, good day let's say City
22 Council Members. Thank you for allowing me to
23 testify in support of Intro. 0800-2024. My name is
24 Fay Hill, I'm a resident of Queens, Spring Cliff
25 Gardens for over 40 years, 48 years. I'm the Chair
of the Committee Board 13 Environmental for several

3 years and an advocate for the New York City Parks and
4 green space where I have testified on behalf of New
5 York for Parks rally on the steps of City Hall and
6 testified on various of New York City Council
7 Administration.

8 I'm here to testify once more on the critical
9 issue of why low tree maintenance is critical and
10 unsafe for my community and other areas of the city.
11 On several occasions when I hosted the Parks and
12 Environmental Committee, Community Board 13 meetings,
13 there are many concerns from the community in
14 reference to low maintenance of trees that are a
15 major problem and are a danger to people and their
16 property. This has been a long occurring problem at
17 our Committee meetings and no end is in sight. I
18 here to testify personally today. On January 9,
19 2025, at approximately 2:30, one of the city trees
20 fell down because of low maintenance. Luckily this
21 tree did not damage the roof of my home but I had to
22 replace an electrical pole to my home and the wires
23 on Edison. This tree has been reported several times
24 for over six years by my neighbor because of low
25 maintenance when falling branches were reported
breaking from the trees. The New York Parks

3 Department, Forestry Department, when they eventually
4 inspected the trees, they reported that the tree was
5 in good condition and they placed a pink tag on its
6 bark. There's another tree directly in front of my
7 home, which has the same condition which forestry
8 said the tree is in perfect condition. There's
9 several trees in our parks in Rosedale and Spring
10 Hill Gardens that need total maintenance. When a
11 tree fall in a park, broken limbs are likely to be
12 hazardous to people lives, they are left there for
13 several months before they're either removed or cut
14 down.

15 We do need trees to helps us breathe in oxygen,
16 clean the environment as well as the education of our
17 community but proper care and maintenance is also
18 vital. When trees are not properly maintained, they
19 pose a threat to harm you or property as a result of
20 on January 9th as stated above. When trees are not
21 maintained, they are a threat from falling limbs on
22 people, property and buildings. As I also mentioned
23 that the falling trees damaged my neighbors car that
24 was parked in front of their home when the neighbor
25 had just returned of minutes of shopping. This could
have injured or killed her. Her car is totaled.

3 I'm pleading to the Legislative Committee and our
4 City Council to vote to Intro. 0800-2024 into
5 legislation. Thank you for your time. Respectfully
6 submitted Fay Hill.

7 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you so much Ms. Hill
8 for your testimony. Now we have Christopher Leon
9 Johnson.

10 UNIDENTIFIED: Hello, my name is [INAUDIBLE
11 02:19:08].

12 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Yeah, go ahead.

13 CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: Hello, my name is
14 Christopher Leon Johnson. Thank you Chair Ariola and
15 Chair Krishnan for having this hearing today. So,
16 I'm opposed to Shekar Krishnan's T40, the Resolution
17 or the bill introduction to change the law to move
18 the mitigation of fires from the Fire Department to
19 the Parks Department and I'm going to explain why.

20 This is nothing but a union-ship because DC37 is
21 a union-ship and a nonprofit pack shift from the USA
22 and the UFOA to the New York League of Conservation
23 Voters which is ran by Julie Ty(SP?) and DC37 which
24 is run by Harry Garrido. Everybody knows that. The
25 DC37 has more power when it comes to the union power
than the UFOA and UFA and this is the reason why Mr.

3 Shekar you want to do this because you're trying to
4 strengthen the union that has the bigger GOT which is
5 DC37 when it comes to voter outreach and you're
6 trying to strengthen a nonprofit that does political
7 advocacy when it comes to environments and parks
8 where there's New York City League of Conservation
9 Voters. This bill is not for the sake of empowering
10 Parks Department. This is not empowering unions,
11 which is DC37 and the New York City League of
12 Conservation Voters.

13 The Parks people, they don't know anything about
14 mitigating fires at all. The people that know how to
15 mitigate fires are firefighters and they're trained
16 to do this. They go through a lot of trainings and
17 scenarios that mitigate any brush fire in the City of
18 New York. The Parks Department, all they know how to
19 do is clean stuff up and conserve things. That's all
20 they know how to do. These guys and gals in the
21 Parks Department who don't even have police powers,
22 real police powers, they can't even hold a
23 refrigerator. I'm not trying to defend them but it's
24 like they'll be scared to step into a fire. The
25 people that they hire for the Parks Department are

3 even scared to pick up dog poop. I mean they're
4 scared to pick up dog poop.

5 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Thank you. Your time is
6 expired.

7 CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: How will they be able
8 to mitigate a fire. So, I'm in here - one more
9 second, that I'm opposed to this thing that you put
10 up Shekar. It's all about empowering union -
11 empowering DC37 and trying to destroy UFOA because
12 UFOA and UFA can't give you guys any votes. And you
13 guys know it's not strong as DC37. So, this is what
14 it's about. You're trying to power a union that you
15 guys know that's going to get you guys elected and
16 reelected and your boys and gals reelected.

17 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you so much Mr.
18 Johnson. I'm going to finish up here.

19 CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: Thank you so much.
20 Enjoy your day.

21 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you. Next up is
22 Jennifer. Do we have a Jennifer? That concludes our
23 public portion of the testimony. Just to close out,
24 I want to thank everyone for coming for today's
25 hearing. Clearly a very important issue that we need
to do far more to address. Unfortunately what will

3 very likely be a reoccurring problem in our city.

4 And so, to our firefighters, to our Parks Department
5 workers, we thank you all and look forward to our
6 continued work together to ensure that we can respond
7 effectively to this issue and doing all we can to
8 prevent brush fires in parks and to contain them
9 should they occur. I want to pass it over to my
10 Chair in case you have any closing words to say as
11 well.

12 CHAIRPERSON ARIOLA: Yes, thank you all for
13 testifying and I'd also like to thank both of our
14 Committee Counsel's, our Chiefs of Staff, as well as
15 Legislative Division, and our Chief Analysts who
16 really help with these Committee meetings together
17 and of course our wonderful Sergeants at Arms.
18 Thanks so much.

19 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: And just when we thought
20 we were done, we got another testimony, so our
21 hearing will continue. Those are preclosing closing
22 words, Catherine Laferty.

23 CATHERINE LAFERTY: Hi, thank you. Good
24 afternoon Council Members. Thank you for allowing -
25 sorry?

3 Good afternoon Council Members, thank you for
4 allowing your constituents and representatives of
5 nonprofits to be here to testify. My name is
6 Catherine Kat Laferty, I'm a 25.5 year resident of
7 Hells Kitchen and a one year resident of Boerum Hill
8 Brooklyn before that. I am an avid community
9 gardener and environmentalist. I studied
10 international relations as an undergrad. When I was
11 an undergrad, I worked at Green Piece and helped to
12 get curbside recycling started in Washington DC in
13 1989, which started with newspaper pickup and for
14 those of you who are too young, there was a time when
15 cities did not have curbside recycling.

16 So, park issues are very important to me. I am a
17 community gardener in one of the original Green
18 Gorilla Parks, Hell's Kitchen, I mean -sorry. One of
19 the original Green Gorilla Community Gardens, which
20 is the Clinton Community Garden on West 48th between
21 9th and 10th and I also work with a small but very
22 committed group of tree stewards and community
23 gardeners in Hell's Kitchen Park and we have
24 programming for our community as well through the
25 West 47, 48th Block Association.

3 So, I am here today to address a couple of
4 issues. One is sidewalk buckling in front of
5 Community Gardens. Secondly and which I do not think
6 should be the responsibility of the Community Gardens
7 to pay for. Secondly, in terms of brushfire
8 mitigation, I just want to say that I am in favor of
9 the legislation that you're proposing.

10 Oh no uhm, but lastly I just want to say that
11 uhm, that I believe that the Mayor's Office, the City
12 Council and the Governor of New York should come up
13 with a five year plan to document New York City's
14 Parks assets both physical and cultural, such as
15 Keith Haring murals but also the assets under the
16 ground, which can sometimes impact park maintenance
17 because we need to protect our green spaces and
18 infrastructure that centuries literally of New
19 Yorkers have worked to protect and preserve. Thank
20 you.

21 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you so much Ms.
22 Laferty. We appreciate your testimony. Thanks
23 everyone. That now closes out our hearing. We
24 appreciate you all and look forward to continue
25 working together. This hearing is 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 February 14, 2025