



April 22, 2022
Committee on Parks & Recreation
Oversight – The Effect of COVID-19 on Park Equity / Int. 173 re: Park Inspection Reporting

Testimony By: Sue Donoghue, Commissioner, NYC Parks

Good afternoon, Chair Krishnan, and members of the Parks Committee. I am Sue Donoghue, Commissioner of the Department of Parks and Recreation and I am joined by members of our senior staff, including Mark Focht, our Deputy Commissioner/Chief Operating Officer, David Cerron, our Assistant Commissioner for Planning and Development, Alex Butler, Director of the Parks Inspection Program, and Matt Drury, our Director of Government Relations. We are very pleased to be here today to discuss equity as it relates to our city parks and open spaces, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. As you'll hear, equity is a centrally vital principle that informs all of our strategic and operational decisions, and we thank the Council for convening this important hearing.

It's especially fitting that this hearing is being held on Earth Day, a time when we commemorate the creation of the modern environmental movement and recognize the importance of working together to protect our planet. NYC Parks is the primary steward of over 30,000 acres of city parkland – 14 percent of New York City's landmass – including 10,000 acres of natural areas. We oversee thousands of individual properties, including parks, playgrounds, community gardens and beaches, all of which are incredibly important spaces for New Yorkers and their physical, mental and emotional well-being.

From our agency's perspective, the concept of equity is simple – is every New Yorker being treated fairly when it comes to their access to parks and open space, and regarding the resources being allocated to those spaces? Our agency prioritizes equity in every aspect of our strategic efforts, and well over half a billion dollars has been invested in recent years into several major capital and expense initiatives dedicated to improving park equity. We also utilize a data-driven approach regarding resource allocation and have developed creative strategies to increase access to park and playground amenities across the city. The agency continues to advance its major equity efforts, most notably the Community Parks Initiative, which has already directed over \$300 million dollars in capital reconstruction funds for parks in neighborhoods that had seen perpetual under-investment for decades.



Historically, not all New Yorkers have enjoyed equal access to parks and open space, and we're dedicated to doing everything we can to change that. The agency is always exploring creative approaches that will increase access to green and open space for neighborhoods that are underserved, which can happen in a variety of fashions. We use Open Space Ratios and Walk To A Park metrics to guide our planning efforts and identify neighborhoods that are in the greatest need of green space. We have partnered with other City agencies like the Department of Education and the New York City Housing Authority to improve and increase access to some of their recreational spaces for the public, through the Schoolyards To Playgrounds program, or various NYCHA campus improvements. Vacant and underutilized land is extremely scarce, and the complexity and duration of the City's land use review process for each parcel often discourages property owners who might otherwise be willing to sell to the City. However, we remain dedicated to exploring every opportunity to add new sites to our portfolio, and have successfully done so in recent years, including Brookfield Park in Staten Island, Chelsea Green in Manhattan, and additional portions of Bushwick Inlet Park in Brooklyn.

Our agency is laser-focused on making our parks the best they can be, and we are privileged and blessed to have the support of New Yorkers all over the city, many of whom have formed local park groups that help provide tremendous added value to our parks, providing stewardship and volunteer care, as well as programming that helps activate our parks in vibrant and fun ways for everyone to enjoy. Our Partnerships For Parks team, which is a unique joint program with City Parks Foundation, cultivates and supports a growing network of local, grassroots groups of all sizes - over 500 community groups and more than 25,000 volunteers. These New Yorkers care for, advocate for, and activate parks, particularly in high-need areas, and they engage an immense array of individuals, along with larger organizations and businesses in this important effort. Our Partnerships For Parks team provides a wide range of resources to local groups that care for parks, including workshops and coaching, supplies and materials, small grants, and on-the-ground logistical support to make sure these groups meet their potential, which ensures our parks can meet their potential.

Our commitment to equity also shapes our daily maintenance efforts, as we are dedicated to keeping all of our parks and playgrounds in the best condition possible. Over the years, we are proud to have consistently exceeded our performance indicator targets in the Mayor's



Management Report (MMR) for Overall Park Condition and Overall Park Cleanliness, even in the face of tremendous challenges.

To help make that a reality, our staff uses a variety of tools and approaches to ensure that all of our properties are getting the resources they need in a fair and equitable manner. Firstly, I have to recognize the incredible hard work of our dedicated Parks staff who are responsible for the maintenance of our green spaces. There are a wide variety of maintenance staff roles, including full time year-round staff, seasonal staff, as well as positions filled through our Parks Opportunity Program, administered in coordination with our fellow City agency, the Human Resources Administration. Some of our maintenance staff serve on fixed-post crews, who primarily maintain a given park or playground, along with its comfort station and other amenities. Others work as part of mobile crews, cleaning parks and playgrounds along a pre-assigned route, traveling from site to site as a team. On a daily basis, our park workers are able to observe conditions in the spaces they care for, address issues as they arise, and report serious concerns to their supervisors.

Turning to the topic of the legislation being formally heard today, we actively monitor and inspect the condition of our parks in several ways, including the Parks Inspection Program, or PIP, which is independently administered by our Operations and Management Planning (OMP) division. PIP is a detailed, objective Quality Assurance program, which is conducted independently from the agency's Maintenance and Operations staff. For close to four decades, PIP has helped to ensure that our parks are well-maintained and welcoming for New Yorkers and visitors alike. Created in 1984, PIP initially focused on small parks and playgrounds, but has expanded and evolved over the years, growing to become comprehensive and flexible enough to apply to all varieties of Parks properties – from small sitting areas to our largest wooded areas. The ratings developed by this rigorous and independent inspection program are a valuable management tool, in addition to 311 reports, day-to-day monitoring by our maintenance staff and regular inspections conducted by our Park Supervisors.

In line with our agency's standing commitment to transparency, historic PIP inspection details for individual parks are available on our public website, in addition to citywide and borough performance data. More detailed line-item inspection data is also available on the NYC OpenData portal. Lastly, our PIP inspection results serve as the source data that helps inform



our key maintenance indicators in Parks' section of the Mayor's Management Report (MMR), which is updated biannually and available online. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss the legislation further with the Council, alongside a more expansive briefing on our inspection program.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing struggle for racial justice have brought many important related social issues to the forefront of public dialogue, including the importance of access to parks and open space. In New York City, parks have always been our backyards, but in the past two years they became our everything - our classrooms, our gyms, our places of quiet reflection, and our spaces to safely reconnect with friends and family. At the height of the COVID pandemic in 2020, many Parks properties and facilities served a direct operational role in public health efforts, including testing, vaccination, and food distribution. NYC Parks has risen to the challenge during the pandemic, and it has strengthened our commitment to care for all of the parks in our system, especially those in neighborhoods identified by the Taskforce on Racial Inclusion & Equity (TRIE) in response to the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on communities of color.

As you have heard today, a data-driven approach to fairness and equity informs and shapes every aspect of our strategic and operational decision-making. The condition and cleanliness of our parks is a top priority of this agency, and we have worked to make sure those resources are distributed in a strategic and thoughtful manner. Of course, we are constantly looking for opportunities to improve our practices and protocols and look forward to working with the Council as we continue to care for our City's park system, to benefit all New Yorkers. I would like to thank the Council for giving us the opportunity to discuss this topic today. After our panel convenes, our staff will continue to watch the public's testimony via the Council's livestream, but first, my colleagues and I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.

NYC Council Parks Committee Oversight Hearing
The Effect of COVID-19 on Park Equity: April 22, 2022

Good morning, Chair Krishnan and members of the Committee and Happy Earth Day. I'm Heather Lubov, Executive Director of City Parks Foundation, a citywide nonprofit that uses programming to bring New Yorkers into and to care for their neighborhood parks to create thriving communities. We reach 310,000 New Yorkers in 350 parks through SummerStage, the Swedish Cottage Marionette Theatre and its traveling PuppetMobile, free sports, arts and environmental education programs, and Partnerships for Parks, a community-building program that we co-manage with NYC Parks and that is the central broker in our city's civic stewardship system.

Parks are the most democratic public resources. Each community starts at a different place and needs different resources, and equity is achieved when communities that have historically been under-resourced get more. Initially, the Council's Parks Equity Initiative matched the administration's investment in community outreach on the NYC Parks' side of Partnerships for Parks by funding City Parks Foundation staff to conduct more intensive engagement, and to provide training, grants, coaching, and fiscal sponsorship that now empowers more than 500 park groups and 25,000 volunteers to address local needs that are meaningful to their neighborhoods.

The Initiative also provides each councilmember with funds to address hyperlocal programming needs in parks. Our surveys show how important this funding is: the overwhelming concerns of park groups today are "funding and fundraising." As well, the most common goal is the desire to "engage their community in more public events" - a need laid bare during the pandemic when parks were essential in reducing isolation, improving mental health, and offering space for recreation.

During the pandemic, we saw a decline of nearly 100 park groups and thousands of individual volunteers, many of whom live in the hardest hit neighborhoods, and corporate volunteerism all but disappeared as employees stayed home. As the city recovers and launches the next phase of the Community Parks Initiative to renovate 100 neglected parks, we are seeking increased support through the Parks Equity Initiative to hire staff for Partnerships for Parks to prioritize outreach in these and other historically under-resourced parks and expand our ability to reach communities in languages other than English.

During the pandemic, we encouraged resource sharing, facilitated collaboration between funded conservancies and unfunded volunteer groups, and administered a \$7 million private relief fund to help mitigate the impact of cuts to parks nonprofits during a time of increased usage. But the private sector cannot replace public support. The Mayor's Budget would result in the loss of thousands of indispensable parks jobs, threatening livelihoods and the conditions of our parks. Our NYC Parks-supported Partnerships for Parks team is already facing freezes of 8% of its staff through PEGs. As a member of the Play Fair Coalition, we call on the City to recognize parks as essential infrastructure by keeping the promise of 1% for parks, increasing funding for the Parks Equity Initiative, and leading the way towards true equity in our open space ecosystem.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.



**New York City Council
Parks and Recreation Oversight Hearing: How COVID Impacted Park Equity
April 22, 2022**

Testimony By: Aaron Sanders, Natural Areas Conservancy, Associate Director of Advocacy & Policy

My name is Aaron Sanders and I am the Associate Director of Advocacy and Policy at the Natural Areas Conservancy. Thank you Chair Krishnan for the opportunity to provide testimony today. The Natural Areas Conservancy is a nonprofit organization that was formed in 2012 with the goal of increasing the capacity of NYC Parks and its partners to restore and manage the 10,000 acres of forests and wetlands under the agency's jurisdiction. Today, I represent our organization and the Forest for All coalition. I am testifying today to highlight the importance of NYC's urban forest, parks, and open spaces, and how they continue to provide innumerable benefits for New York during the pandemic. I also want to discuss tangible ways that improve our parkland after the COVID crisis.

The COVID-19 crisis highlighted many of the inequalities that many New Yorkers face. Uneven access to parks and open spaces is one important example of this issue. A recent study from the Trust for Public Land found that poorer neighborhoods have less than 21 percent less access to parks than wealthier neighborhoods. The disparity is more pronounced among racial lines: communities of color nearly have access to 33 percent less access to parks than non-communities of color. According to our own research conducted by 12 other cities, we partner within the Forest In Cities network, the Natural Areas Conservancy determined that only 17 percent of the organizations that we partner with locally and nationally felt that they could adequately fund and support natural area forests and wetlands during the pandemic.. These findings underscore how the pandemic has disproportionately impacted the New York City park system - the primary means of access to nature and recreation for millions of New Yorkers. Parks become even more important and essential to New Yorkers during the height of the pandemic - when so many public places closed. Parks were the only places where New Yorkers could safely gather outdoors.

At its core, a discussion about how COVID affected park equity comes down to New York City's \$90+ billion dollar budget. NYC Parks have been underfunded for decades and that lack of investment in communities across New York City became even glaring during the pandemic - when park use soared. Unfortunately, NYC parks receive less than 1 percent of the budget. In addition to the COVID-related budget cuts, historically, low public funding allocations for NYC Parks have exacerbated the issue of maintenance and access to open spaces. Addressing this inequity is why the Natural Areas Conservancy is a proud supporter of the Play Fair coalition -



advocating for 1% for parks - and the Forests For All coalition - advocating to achieve thirty percent tree cover in NYC by 2035.

At the height of the pandemic parkland including parks and natural areas were vital resources that helped maintain the physical and mental health of New Yorkers. In 2020, visitation to natural areas increased by 65% which indicates the importance of forests for respite and recreation. Research has shown there is a direct correlation between access to green space and and better mental health outcomes.

For these reasons, the Natural Areas Conservancy is supporting 1% baseline funding for the NYC Parks. New York City parks cover 14% of NYC, but the NYC Parks budget is just 0.5% of the total City budget – even with the FY22 NYC Parks budget being the largest ever adopted by the city. NYC’s parks are critical infrastructure that has been overlooked and underfunded for too long. The pandemic laid bare the inequities in NYC’s park system and highlighted the dire need to fund and build more parks to ensure equitable access for all New Yorkers. The FY23 proposed budget by the current mayoral administration would hinder the department’s ability to support and maintain parks and open spaces. NYC Parks funding in FY22 supported many climate resilience projects.

New York City’s urban forest provides a multitude of benefits— they mitigate extreme heat, improve air quality, support biodiversity, increase property values, and provide exceptional access to nature. A signature project of our organization was the publishing of the [Forest Management Framework for New York City](#), which we released in partnership with NYC Parks in spring 2018. This plan includes ecological and social metrics for the care of the city’s natural area forests and calls for an investment of \$385 million to manage them over the next 25 years. In order to ensure that NYC’s urban forest, including our natural areas, thrives and provides benefits to residents now and in the future, NYC Parks needs at least 1% of the total city budget to support its maintenance and operations.

We support complementary initiatives that can improve access to parks and open spaces. As a leading member of the Forest for All coalition, the Natural Areas Conservancy is a supporter of the [Urban Forest Agenda](#). I would like to highlight a key focal area of this agenda and that is the 30 x 35 goal. This initiative will promote and foster support for a citywide benchmark of achieving at least 30 percent tree canopy cover by 2035. Many communities of color have very little tree canopy cover which increases the heat island effect and other negatives and can pose a public health threat to New York residents. Urban heat is a leading cause of death in cities, and trees and forests are important investments to cool neighborhoods. Our coalition is supporting this goal because trees enhance the quality of life and improve health and wellbeing for people by cleaning and cooling the air and reducing heat-related illnesses. We encourage the New York City Council and Mayor Adams’ administration to adopt this goal and support this plan. The recent announcement of the Million More Trees campaign is aligned with our citywide



30x35 tree canopy goal. Each of the five borough presidents is in support of these goals, but we need adequate funding from City Council to expand the tree canopy in underserved areas.

These accomplishments exemplify the importance of 1 percent funding for NYC Parks. Without adequate funding, NYC Parks' progress would be negatively affected, and this would impact NYC Parks' ability to continue these vital projects.

In closing, we recognize the impact COVID has on our parks and open spaces. Despite this challenge, New Yorkers utilize them more than ever. Our urban forest and park system is a recreational and ecological benefit that we must recommit to supporting to committing long-term.

Thank you again for your leadership and for the opportunity to express our support for NYC's urban forest.

Respectfully Submitted,
Aaron Sanders

NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL
COMMITTEE ON PARKS AND RECREATION

April 22, 2022

Testimony of Carter H. Strickland, Jr.
VP, Mid-Atlantic and New York State Director, Trust for Public Land

Thank you, Chairperson Krishnan and Members of the Committee, for the opportunity to testify on the topic of improving the equity of green space throughout the City in light of the COVID-19 epidemic.

My name is Carter Strickland and I am the VP, Mid-Atlantic, and New York State Director of Trust for Public Land, a national non-profit organization that creates parks and protects land for people, ensuring healthy, livable communities for generations to come. One of The Trust for Public Land's guiding principles – supported by numerous studies – is that parks and open space are critical infrastructure that make cities and their residents healthier, happier, more prosperous, cleaner, greener, and more resilient. Since 1978, The Trust for Public Land has worked with New York City residents to improve their neighborhoods by creating public spaces where they can safely play, connect with nature and each other, and create resilient communities.

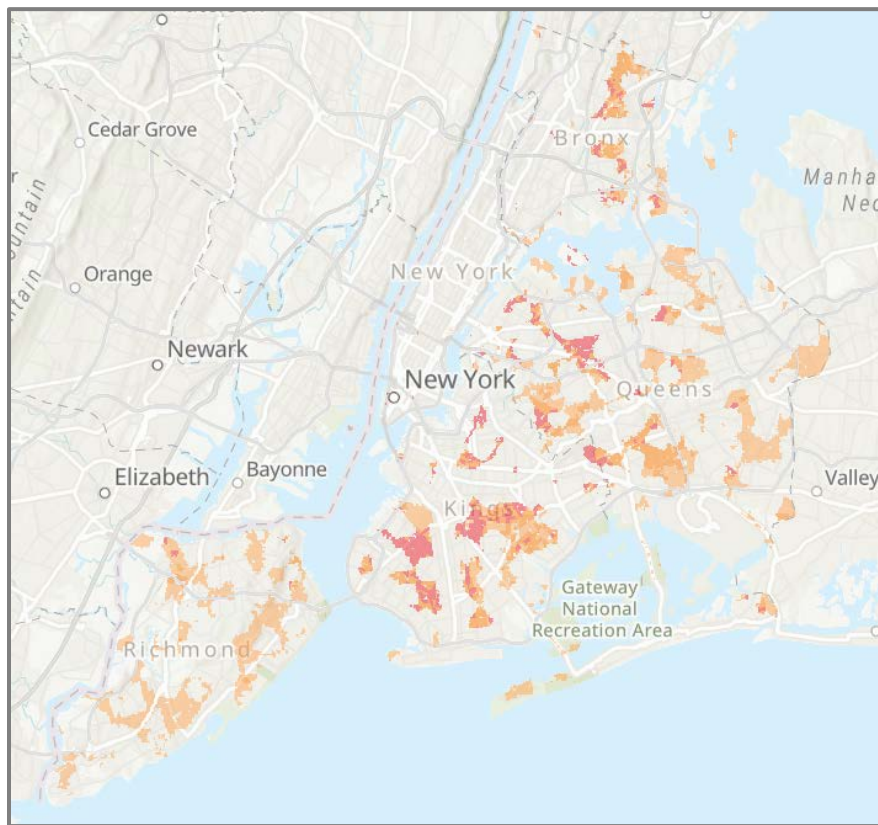
During the COVID pandemic parks and open spaces have been critical gathering spaces for New Yorkers when cafes, museums, art galleries, gyms, movie theaters, restaurants, and many other business were closed for months. Remaining open and free, parks played a critical role in allowing New Yorkers to get out of their apartments and see their friends, family, and fellow citizens outside while maintaining the appropriate social distance. Parks helped people deal with anxiety, stress, and loneliness, and also move and exercise, and most parks saw record visitors at all hours of the day. It is not an exaggeration to say that parks were critical infrastructure to help the city through this crisis.

The Committee is doing a great public service by holding this hearing to examine whether the benefits of parks are flowing to all New Yorkers in an equitable way. As you may know, The Trust for Public Land rates the park systems of the 100 largest cities in the United States in our annual ParkScore index. One indicator we use is the number of residents who live within a 10-minute walk of a park, and on that metric New York City does very well with 99% of its residents living near a park – in a normal year. However, that seemingly equitable distribution of parks is vulnerable for two reasons.

First, the best-available knowledge about COVID-19 pandemic led the city to close schoolyards and playgrounds from approximately April 1 to June 23 of 2020. That decision was based on the initial assumption that a pathway for coronavirus infection was through contact with contaminated surfaces. Not long after the closure decision was made, there was a growing awareness that the pathway of transmission was not

through surface contact but rather through airborne transmission indoors, and that there were few if any cases of transmission outdoors. Nevertheless, the city took a conservative approach and kept playgrounds closed for several months.

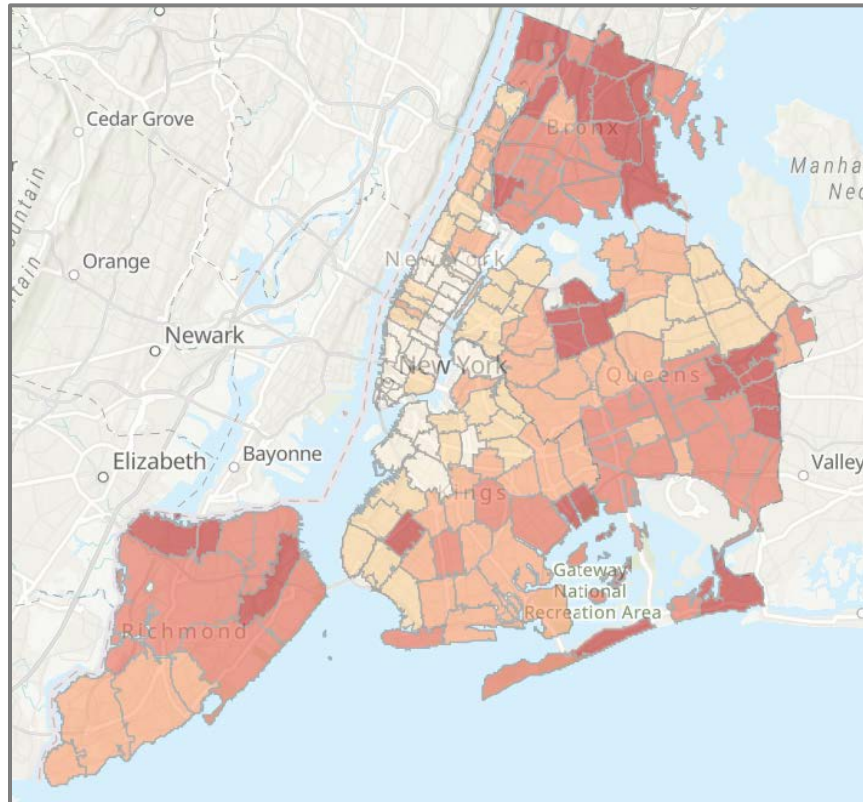
That effectively eliminated park access in those communities. The Trust for Public Land's research team mapped the impact of schoolyard, playground, and other closures and found that the closures resulted in the loss of park access for one million New Yorkers during this critical period – dropping the citywide access score from 99% to 86%. Many places lost access as a result of playground, schoolyard, and other closures, such as Central Brooklyn, Eastern and Southern Queens, Eastern Bronx, and Central Staten Island. The park deficit areas in the closure period are shown in the spatial analysis below, where orange indicates high park need and red the highest park need:



We have made our spatial analysis available online so visitors can explore the data (the analysis and maps are at the website <https://tpl.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=4d082c62efb44e56b105366fb92335b3> (The screenshot above is produced by turning on only the data layer for park need during early summer 2020).

Our analysis also shows that there was great overlap between those areas that lost park access, as shown above, and those areas most affected by COVID-19 in the

early stages, through summer 2020 (the darker-shaded areas in the following map, which was prepared in August 2020):



(To replicate this map and also zoom into particular areas, go to the web address above and turn on the data layer for COVID-19 cases by ZIP code.)

Clearly, the normally high park access in New York City is highly vulnerable to disruption. We need to make our park system more resilient by building more parks with overlapping service areas, as we would do with other infrastructure systems in order to ensure continuity of operations.

Second, the overall amount of open space is not equitably distributed and is smallest in low-income and minority neighborhoods, regardless of population or need. Specifically, Trust for Public Land’s analysis of park size in New York City found that New York City’s legacy park system of numerous small parks—many not much more than a sitting area with a few benches—is neither spacious nor robust enough to meet the needs of the present population. Smaller parks have fewer features than larger parks, and New York City falls behind other large cities in terms of park amenities. In fact, New York City has fewer acres of green space per person than almost any other major U.S. city, the result of park construction not keeping pace with residential growth. The Trust for Public Land research finds that in New York City:

- communities of color have 33.5% less park space per person within a 10-minute walk compared to white communities, and

- low-income communities have 21.2% less park space per person within a 10-minute walk compared to high-income communities.ⁱ

This inequity has real consequences, from park overcrowding to making it difficult for residents to find cooling shade on hot days. The impact of these disparities was highlighted by the New York Times in several stories, including *New York City Has 2,300 Parks. But Poor Neighborhoods Lose Out* (July 15, 2020), found at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/15/nyregion/nyc-parks-access-governors-island.html>. Among other things, it is harder to maintain safe social distancing in smaller parks and with very little tree canopy, such parks do not provide the cooling effect of larger parks, leaving nearby residents more vulnerable to heat waves.

How can we improve park equity in New York City? We have to start by acknowledging that our legacy park system, while wonderful in many ways, does not fully address inequities of our present population. To fix this problem we need to build new parks that will address inequitable distribution of parks and park size. See Carter Strickland and Adam Ganser, *Build new parks where they're needed most*, New York Daily News (July 27, 2020), located at <https://www.nydailynews.com/opinion/ny-oped-build-new-parks-where-theyre-needed-most-20200727-lneuedoja5d5tbkl7j4aoud5e4-story.html>.

In fact, New York City lacks an overall master plan for its park system. Such a plan could have an overall goal of getting to 100% park access and increasing parkland area in neighborhoods where it is needed most. Trust for Public Land outlined the concepts of [NYC Park Equity Plan](#), which could be the framework for a more complete plan such as one we recently prepared for the [City of Buffalo Parks Master Plan](#). A parks master plan could include the kinds of data about parks users and visitors we developed in a recent report on the [Economic Benefits of Parks in New York City](#). Among other things, Trust for Public Land conducted a survey of New York City residents that found that there were 527 million visits every year to parks in the city from residents alone – that is 50% more than the total number of visits to National Parks and New York State Parks, combined.

In the meantime, the City can make targeted investments in high need areas is to create a program of investing in more green schoolyards. Every community has a public school and most of those schools have dedicated outdoor spaces that need renovation to be used as community parks. We estimate that there are at least 200 more schools that could receive a green schoolyard, with each one providing additional park access to 4,000 to 30,000 New Yorkers within a 10-minute-walk. And if we strengthen the funding for keeping the existing schoolyards open, as well as for new schoolyards, we can ensure that the next crisis will not eliminate park access for the neediest New Yorkers.

This investment will also benefit education. As part of the city's outdoor learning initiative more than 1,100 public schools recently received approval to spend a portion

of their school day outside, where the risk of COVID-19 transmission can be lower. Green schoolyards contain educational spaces that can be used for this very purpose.

Another way that the City can address inequities is to open up our streets for some park-like activities. Streets take up one-third of the city's land area and, like schools, are in every neighborhood. Similar to schools, we can target the Open Streets initiative to those areas that need them most. Unfortunately, the streets opened this summer do not address inequities fully. See *De Blasio's move to open NYC street to pedestrians leaves out low-income neighborhoods, map shows*, NY Daily News (May 21, 2020), located at <https://www.nydailynews.com/coronavirus/ny-coronavirus-open-streets-equity-map-20200521-ossiqlxhjc6ba6ymggqy576pi-story.html>, and *Mayor's 'Open Streets' Leave Out Neighborhoods That Need It Most*, StreetsBlog (May 21, 2020), located at <https://nyc.streetsblog.org/2020/05/21/mayors-open-streets-leave-out-neighborhoods-that-need-it-most/>. More streets have opened up since those articles were written, but the latest information from the Department of Transportation (map found at <https://www1.nyc.gov/html/dot/html/pedestrians/openstreets.shtml>) shows that there are significant gaps in coverage in high need areas.

In conclusion, New York City's park system is great but can be made more equitable by building more parks that will serve more New Yorkers. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this important issue.

ⁱ Our methodology was to measure the total park area within a 10-minute walk of compact census block groups of around 1,200 people, for neighborhoods of color (defined as the quintile of census block groups with the highest concentrations of residents self-identifying as non-white), majority-white neighborhoods (the quintile of census block groups with the highest concentration of residents identifying as white), low-income neighborhoods (top quintile of census block groups with the highest concentration of households where the median income is less than 75% of the metropolitan area Median Household Income (MHI)), and high-income neighborhoods (top quintile of census block groups with the highest concentration of households where the median income is greater than 125% of the MHI). Our findings are the median neighborhood of color has access to 28.8 acres of parkland per 1,000 people within a 10 minute walk, compared to 44.8 acres per 1,000 people within walking distance of the median majority-white neighborhood. Similarly, we found the median low-income neighborhood has access to 35.3 acres of parkland per 1,000 people within a 10-minute walk, compared to 44.8 acres per 1,000 people within walking distance of the typical high income neighborhood.



New York City Environmental Justice Alliance Testimony on the effect of COVID-19 on parks equity to NYC Council Committee on Parks and Recreation

April 22, 2022

Founded in 1991, the New York City Environmental Justice Alliance (NYC-EJA) is a non-profit, 501(c)3 citywide membership network linking grassroots organizations from low-income communities of color in their struggle for environmental justice. NYC-EJA empowers its member organizations to advocate for improved environmental conditions and against inequitable environmental burdens by the coordination of campaigns to inform City and State policies. Through our efforts, member organizations coalesce around specific common issues that threaten the ability for low-income communities of color to thrive.

NYC-EJA is a member of the Forest for All NYC (FFANYC) Coalition which seeks to justly and equitably protect, maintain, expand, and promote the NYC urban forest, which is a key asset in climate adaptation and can help New York City's fight against climate change and its disproportionate impacts on disadvantaged communities. As things stand, the NYC urban forest is not distributed evenly or fairly across the many communities in NYC, meaning that its benefits are also not equitably enjoyed. Despite recent efforts to improve tree canopy cover, communities of color and low-income communities still have far less access to greenspace and its benefits than wealthier, whiter communities. Those inequitably distributed benefits include cooling the air, offering shady respite from heat, sequestering carbon, increasing energy efficiency, and contributing to New Yorkers' health and wellbeing. Climate frontline communities have reduced access to benefits of the urban forest and NYC's most heat vulnerable communities tend to have less canopy cover.

NYC-EJA's 2020 [COVID-19 factsheet](#) highlighted that in NYC, African Americans and Latinos represent higher rates of COVID-19 fatalities than their representation in the population. As of April 2020, Latinos made up 34 percent of people who died of the virus but only 29 percent of the City's population; African Americans made up 28 percent of those who died, but only 22 percent of the population. Preliminary early data demonstrated that the Bronx experienced 2x the fatalities compared to the rest of the city, with the South Bronx being particularly impacted by high numbers of cases. These disparity trends persisted through the duration of the pandemic, and continue to impact these overburdened communities.

The pandemic also highlighted the disparities in access to the city's sought-after green and natural spaces, clearly showing who in NYC lacks access to trees and their numerous benefits. In the summer of 2020, the capacity of City cooling centers was reduced to facilitate social distancing; thus, the effect of the urban forest in reducing local temperatures and providing shade and/or respite from the heat became particularly important for New Yorkers. All New Yorkers, particularly those who have been historically and systematically oppressed and deprived, should have access to this wide array of

benefits. COVID-19 underscored that access to green space is not a luxury, but rather a necessity for all communities. New Yorkers need walkable access to nature for overall health and well-being, especially individuals and families living in communities that grapple with environmental burdens, climate hazards, and social vulnerabilities. As health concerns increased during the pandemic and outdoor areas were deemed safer than indoors, green spaces became essential, providing a rare sense of relief and community during the city's darkest days. Yet not everyone could enjoy those benefits. Black and brown communities in New York have access to [33 percent less](#) park space than residents in largely white neighborhoods.

Composed of all 7 million trees in the city, the NYC urban forest spans both public and private property, as well as every neighborhood in NYC - from street trees to private backyards to NYC Parks. For the public portions, NYC Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) manages 53.5% of the total urban forest canopy in the City. Despite its laudable efforts, DPR is chronically underfunded especially for the urban forest. DPR experienced dramatic budget cuts under the COVID-19 constrained budget considering the crucial role parks play in providing safe and healthy respites for New Yorkers during the pandemic and the tiny percentage of the NYC budget for which DPR's budget accounts. DPR needs dedicated and consistent investment in the regular maintenance of parks and the urban forest under its care.

NYCHA's open spaces offer an important opportunity to improve, further green, protect, and enhance access to the benefits of the City's urban forest as they often serve as some of the limited open space in neighborhoods that have less trees and green space, and higher heat vulnerability. Additionally, [nature-based jobs](#) can play both a crucial role in providing safe and healthy employment for New Yorkers and in enhancing NYC parks and the urban forest overall improving quality of life during and after the pandemic. We at NYC-EJA are calling for 30% canopy cover by 2035 to achieve a more just city and encourage the Council to help realize this vision to ensure urban forest equity for New Yorkers. We also urge the Mayor and his administration to increase the budget for the Department of Parks and Recreation to \$1 Billion.

Investments to manage, protect and expand urban forest canopy are crucial to providing more equitable access to urban forest's benefits - from shade and cooling to mental health, all even more important in the COVID-19 era, particularly in the most heat vulnerable and frontline communities. These actions could also work to better protect environmental justice communities from heat-related co-morbidities and mortality, concerns we helped to uplift by pushing for [Int 1945-2020](#) (to amend annual reporting of heat vulnerability and mortality) and [Int 1960-2020](#) (to create comprehensive cooling and communication plans) to be passed. Improving tree equity could help to mitigate extreme heat impacts, improve air quality, and decrease the health disparities seen in disadvantaged communities.

It's time that New Yorkers living in communities without sufficient parks and green space have increased nature-based public investment and greater access to the benefits of our urban forest. Now is the moment for New York's leaders to advance the investments and policies needed to protect, maintain, and grow the urban forest - with a focus on environmental justice communities.



**Testimony of Carlos Castell Croke
Associate for NYC Programs
New York League of Conservation Voters**

**City Council Committee on Parks and Recreation
Hearing on the Effect of COVID-19 on Park Equity
April 22, 2022**

Good afternoon, my name is Carlos Castell Croke and I am the Associate for New York City Programs at the New York League of Conservation Voters (NYLCV). NYLCV represents over 30,000 members in New York City and we are committed to advancing a sustainability agenda that will make our people, our neighborhoods, and our economy healthier and more resilient. I would like to thank Chair Krishnan for the opportunity to testify today.

Our advocacy through the Play Fair Campaign has exemplified the importance of parks to the health, resiliency and sustainability of our City. Every year we slowly see the worsening effects of climate change and dangerous carbon emissions on our daily lives. Right now we need our parks more than ever.

The 2.6 million trees in our City remove 1,300 tons of pollutants from the atmosphere and store one million tons of carbon each year. As a major source of the City's urban canopy, parks can reduce urban heat island effects by lowering temperatures up to nine degrees. Parks also contribute to resilience by fighting flooding, capturing almost 2 billion gallons of stormwater runoff and ensuring water quality by filtering out as much as 95% of major pollutants.

But not all communities benefit equally from parks. Just as environmental justice communities suffer from higher rates of pollution and adverse health problems, they also lack access to green spaces. [Poorer neighborhoods and neighborhoods populated by people of color have access to 21% and 33% less park space respectively. Parks serving primarily nonwhite populations are also half the size of parks that serve majority white populations and are five times more crowded.](#) This exemplifies the disparities environmental justice communities face daily.

COVID-19 has only exacerbated these disparities unfortunately. New Yorkers without access to adequate green space over the past few years haven't had the safe outdoor recreational spaces or cooling effects of parks that made the pandemic bearable for so many of us.

We need to expand access to green spaces to underserved communities and ensure that the parks we do have are properly funded and cared for. Investing 1% of the NYC budget in parks will ensure that our parks are safe, clean and accessible for all.

[Introduction 173](#) will continue to help us in the fight for parks equity. By highlighting parks that routinely fail inspection we can show which parks aren't fully serving their communities and make sure parks in underserved areas get the attention they deserve.

We look forward to a continued partnership with the Council to promote parks equity and fight for 1%.

Thank you.



April 22, 2022

Dear Chair Krishnan, Chairman of the Parks and Recreation Committee and Councilmembers:

As Executive Director of Friends of East River Esplanade, we would like to offer testimony for the *Effects of Covid-19 on Parks Equity Hearing*.

The pandemic was a period of uncertainty and isolation for many New Yorkers and our parks and waterfront greenspaces offered physical and mental refuge. When gyms and restaurants were closed, our Parks kept people sane and offered a safer alternative for socializing. More people including those who worked from home, sought out parks and they became a critical part of our daily routines to maintain sanity amid an unknown killer virus, which is why cutting the Parks budget funding at this time is counterproductive to the city's recovery efforts and a willful blindness of how they saved so many New Yorkers lives. We are facing a post Covid crisis of unprecedented rising mental health alarms and crime, much of which is due to the two years of pandemic isolation. When we closed our basketball courts at the beginning of the pandemic, crime increased.

Parks and greenspaces are not a supplemental part of our city's budget, it is an integral part to the key to our city's post Covid recovery and to decrease the meager budget is not only shortsighted, but also undercuts our vulnerable populations and communities.

Esplanade Friends offers its full support to the New York City Council Parks Committee and asks the Mayor and his Administration to restore the cuts to the Parks budget. Esplanade Friends is deeply appreciative of the nearly \$300 million in capital dollars that were allocated for the restoration and rebuilding of the East Harlem waterfront and the 107th St Pier. Yet funds were not allocated for a significant section of that waterfront to be redone and there is no funding for comfort stations or potable water/irrigation in that stretch. The funding for upkeep and maintenance is critical for the safety of the neighborhood. These additional dollars ensure that we have access to a safe and beautiful greenspace regardless of socioeconomic status.

Our organization will continue to advocate for the East Harlem portion of the waterfront that is under so much neglect and disrepair that it feels palpably unsafe. We owe this to our children and our neighbors. This is not the time to ignore our green spaces and cut off access to our underserved communities, and all the children who find moments of joy and relief in our concrete urban jungle. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Jean Kim

Executive Director

Friends of the East River Esplanade (60th-120th St)



**Fort Greene Park
Conservancy**
85 South Oxford st.
Brooklyn, NY 11217

April 24, 2022

Honorable Eric Adams
Mayor of the City of New York
New York City Hall
New York, New York 10007

Dear Mayor Adams, Speaker Adams, and NYC Council Members:

As Executive Director of the Fort Greene Park Conservancy, and on behalf of the community of park goers that use Fort Greene Park on a daily and frequent basis, I want to stress how much the pandemic increased park use.

Fort Greene Park, while only 30 acres, is intensely used by approximately 30,000 residents of Fort Greene, including many of the 12,000 residents of Ingersoll, Whitman and Farragut Houses, and close to 200,000 people and their dogs when factoring in adjacent neighborhood use, including rapidly growing Downtown Brooklyn. When Covid hit New York City, the Fort Greene Park became everyone's dining room, gym, and office. The resulting activity and trash put new pressures on the park, just as we lost one of our most reliable City Park Workers. This position, one of a handful of full-time positions at the park, went unfilled and has remained unfilled to date, and we lost 5 seasonal positions in 2020 and 2021. I am hopeful that this year's budget will allocate 1% to NYC Parks so these positions can be fill, and, in the future, expanded, given the increased use of parks.

I also want to share that the Parks Equity Initiative has been a critical source of funding for our work, including our volunteering programming, which has played an essential role in keeping our park clean and green during the last couple of years. We expanded our volunteering to include a Litter Ambassadors program and Monday morning cleanups—a response to excessive weekend trash from picnics and BBQs. The Initiative supported our volunteer staff position to leverage the value of community members time and care of the park – with the support of the Parks Equity Initiative, we were able to log nearly 4500 volunteer hours in 2021.

The City should continue to support the Parks Equity Initiative. New Yorkers, and particularly under-resourced New Yorkers, deserve a well-funded parks system that is safe, clean, and equitable.

Rosamond Fletcher
Executive Director
Fort Greene Park Conservancy



4/22/2022

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. As communications director for Marine Park Alliance, It is vital for me to share with you the concerns of my organization and the constituency it advocates for, specifically regarding the lack of resources and support parks receive to fulfill their critical role in our communities.

The city's parks have been underfunded and unfairly funded for far too long now. Marine Park, the largest city park in Brooklyn has nearly 800 acres of green space across its natural grasslands, salt marshes and its recreational areas, yet it has nowhere near the needed amount of staffing and upkeep for a park of its size.

As things stand, even if it were to receive additional staffing and resources, this would likely come at the expense and to the detriment of another city park. Marine Park Alliance works hard to bridge this gap, providing volunteer programs to maintain the park and free recreational and cultural programming to enrich the experience of all park visitors. Yet this is merely a band-aid over a gaping wound and for a thriving, healthy green space, services like these should be ensured through the city's budget.

The mayor can begin to fix this by delivering on his promise to dedicate 1% of the budget to Parks. The Covid-19 pandemic has further underscored the need for parks and shown how stretched their already thin resources are.

As a vital point of connection between social service providers and the people who depend on those services, parks should have an ample budget, not face steep budget cuts that result in the loss of critical parks jobs and services.

A course correction is needed NOW, and the mayor MUST take action to give the city's parks the 1% of the budget that he promised. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Jonathan A. Robinson, Communications Director

**Testimony of Deborah Kirschner, Vice President of External Relations, Prospect Park Alliance
New York City Council Committee on Parks
Hearing on the Effect of COVID-19 on Park Equity
April 22, 2022**

I am Deborah Kirschner, Vice President of External Relations at Prospect Park Alliance, the non-profit organization that sustains Prospect Park in partnership with the City. I am here today to support Parks as essential infrastructure, particularly in the wake of the COVID pandemic, and the pressing need to create a more equitable and just park system, which can be accomplished by fulfilling the Mayor's campaign promise of 1% of the city budget for parks.

COVID-19 has made it resoundingly clear that parks and open spaces are essential to the well-being of our communities. Prospect Park is truly "Brooklyn's Backyard," and welcomes more than 10 million visits each year from every zip code in Brooklyn and beyond. As a community park, Prospect Park is a critical gathering space for family reunions, birthday parties and all manner of picnics and barbecues. Its 585 acres provide fresh air and respite to Brooklyn residents, who have the least amount of green space per capita in all of New York City. Making Prospect Park a welcoming and accessible space for the diverse communities of Brooklyn is a key part of our mission, and without the support of the City and our elected officials our work would not be possible.

Visitorship to city parks during the pandemic has increased significantly: in Prospect Park we saw a record number of visitors in the park, and the resulting impact in terms of significant wear and tear in the park. At the same time, NYC Parks experienced significant budget cuts, and Prospect Park Alliance relies on its partnership with the New York City Parks Department for essential maintenance, trash management and general upkeep.

Parks are essential infrastructure that are critical to our health and well being, and are drivers of social equity. NYC Parks have been operating with an austerity budget for more than 40 years, with just 0.5% of the city budget allocated to parks despite the fact that parks comprise 14% of city land. This chronic underfunding, with additional loss of staff and a hiring freeze in recent years, has been devastating for our parks. In 2020, the care of our parks by NYC Parks was the most challenged on record since NYC Parks began recording their condition in 2004. The biggest issues were accessibility (for example: comfort station closures), safety and park conditions (for example: trash management). There are not nearly enough City Park Workers, Gardeners, Urban Park Rangers and PEP officers to care for our parks. 300+ PEP officers are expected to patrol 14% of NYC land, and in the summer, they're pulled to pools and waterfront parks, while the remainder of our parks suffer from lack of enforcement during our busiest time of year.

The proposed budget neither commits 1% of the City's budget to Parks, nor returns NYC Parks funding to pre-pandemic levels, but actually makes further cuts to the NYC Parks by \$60M: the agency will lose PEP Officers, City Parks Workers, Gardeners, and thousands of Cleaning Corps workers. We applaud the City Council for considering the critical need to increase funding for city parks in the upcoming budget cycle to address equity issues and the post-COVID landscape, and recognizing our parks as essential infrastructure by not only restoring budget cuts, but moving beyond a cycle-to-cycle funding model: 1% of our city budget must be for parks.

Sara Roosevelt Park Community Coalition

<http://sdrpc.mkgarden.org/>

My name is K Webster I am the current President of the Sara Roosevelt Park Community Coalition that began in the early 80's.

New Yorkers deserve a well-funded parks system that is safe, clean, and equitable. We firmly believe in the healing powers of green spaces and the right of everyone to share in such spaces. Parks are the last democratic meeting spaces where everyone has a welcomed. Vital in a democracy.

NYC's parks system has been underfunded and inequitably funded for 40 years.

Many of us who are involved in Sara Roosevelt are volunteers and organizations who share plants, labor, resources and expertise. We do a lot with a little. There is an array of volunteers and organizations here: M'Finda Kalunga gardeners, the former ED of the Battery Park Conservancy, the 'Father' of the LEED concept, Pam Ito and the Horticultural Society, The Hua Mei birders, Tenement Museum staffers. Homeless volunteers built a memorial garden for 'Uncle Kwok' and others, the 5th Precinct's Youth Explorers, our local High Schools, individual neighbors and our local non-profit organizations and small businesses all contribute.

Covid 19 made very clear how important parks are for our collective public health and safety. In the early days of the pandemic we plastered the park with "standing with our Asian neighbors" signs - created out of the effort of every race in the park. We posted COVID information for homeless people who slept here to avoid unsafe congregate shelters. This parks serves as a vital point of connection between social service providers and the people who depend on those services.

Current budget cuts and the Mayor's Preliminary Budget would result in the loss of thousands of indispensable parks jobs, threatening the livelihoods of City Park Workers, Gardeners, Urban Park Rangers, and PEP officers and the conditions of our parks.

An adequately staffed PEP program is essential to maintaining a safe environment for all parkgoers but especially the elderly Asian community, women, the homeless and young people. Recently the brutal killings of a 51 year old father, of a young Korean woman are now added to the murders of homeless men in the park and nearby. We've seen numerous stabbings throughout the park and the brutal beating of an elderly woman. Years ago, I held the head of a teenager as he died of a stab wound after a fight in the park.

We also have a drug market that preys on and destroys the minds of those who are homeless. Drug dealers are back out on the street mere days after they are arrested.

We lost AudubonNY and a proposed demonstration bird garden and much of the public over fears for their safety.

We know how bad it can get when a community no longer feels safe in a park. Too few community-responsive resources are offered, and a bureaucracy can't seem to quickly and effectively respond to the crisis. Fencing off sections of the park doesn't make a park safe nor a park a community can use.

We know people will only come back when we have established anchors of safety and of positive use here. We temporarily need our police and PEP to be deployed, but they agree, they are not a permanent solution.

Fix the City's broken capital construction process.

Sara Roosevelt Park is home to four parkhouses: Three of them closed to the local community to serve the needs for all Manhattan or all five borough's parks.

Only one Parkhouse is a hub of activity as a low-income nutrition center for seniors. It is waiting now 7 years for a fully funded repair of the windows and doors.

Return Parkhouses to create anchors of active positive use

We need NYC Parks to return buildings in our park to active community use by reputable non-profits who know how to engage the neighborhood because they have a track record of doing so. One parkhouse has been promised for return for 30 to 40 years. Funding was found for Parks to move out. Still no date.

Our Parkhouses are needed, especially now, for public uses that are not for profit: meeting sites for Community Boards, centers for seniors, centers for youth, children and families, AA meetings, resiliency/recovery centers for emergencies, job (bike repair) training, centers to promote and model sustainable practices, etc. These buildings should be active hubs of local activity.

Staffing

Even with our volunteers and a dedicated Park staff we cannot keep up with the work of maintaining it. Though our park is far from neglected by this community, our citizens and sparse Park's crews cannot take care of it alone.

Future

Equity in parks is not only a matter of gardens and sports fields. Park equity preserves the life of our neighborhoods and sometimes it means preserving our literal lives.

We need the Play Fair for Parks and Parks and Recreation Chair Shekar Krishnan's clear recommendations to immediately secure 1% of the City's budget for Parks, a streamlined capital construction and repair process, and a City that respects its armies of park volunteers and no longer tolerates the conditions in a park like mine.

Thank you.

K

K Webster

President

Sara Roosevelt Park Coalition <http://sdrpc.mkgarden.org/>

From: Chloe Riven <cyr2108@columbia.edu>
Sent: Monday, April 18, 2022 8:22 PM
To: Testimony
Cc: CHLOE RIVEN; chloe.riven@patagonia.com
Subject: [EXTERNAL] ADVOCATE FOR NYC PARKS

Dear Mayor Adams,

My name is Chloe Riven, a Columbia University social work student, Patagonia employee, and advocate for nature and the NYC Parks. Growing up in Vermont, I have found my happy place in nature, and during the darkest days of the COVID-19 pandemic, I have found solace in the parks, particularly Central Park. I have used the park to run in the NYC Marathon.

I am writing to you to urge you to continue to commit to the 1% of the City Budget for the Parks. A \$60M cut to the parks department will do harm for myself and will impact New Yorkers who depend on this outdoor space for mental health reasons and physical health reasons.

Parks are critical to everyone's public health, public safety and are deemed critical infrastructure. NYC Parks have been operating with an austerity budget for over 40 years, with just .5% of the city budget.

From the bottom of my heart and soul, this is a plea for you to step up and continue to take action to help fund the NYC Parks.

THANK YOU.

Best,

Chloe Riven (she/her)
Columbia University, '23
School of Social Work, MSSW

E. cyr2108@columbia.edu
[LinkedIn](#)