

COMMITTEE ON PARKS AND RECREATION

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CITY COUNCIL
CITY OF NEW YORK

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

Of the

COMMITTEE ON PARKS AND RECREATION

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April 23, 2025

Start: 1:11 p.m.

Recess: 3:13 p.m.

HELD AT: COMMITTEE ROOM - CITY HALL

B E F O R E: Shekar Krishnan, Chairperson

COUNCIL MEMBERS:

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

OTHER COUNCIL MEMBERS ATTENDING:

Gale A. Brewer
Kevin C. Riley

A P P E A R A N C E S

Margaret Nelson, Deputy Commissioner for Public Programs and Community Engagement at the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation

Matt Drury, Chief of Citywide Legislative Affairs at the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation

Stephanie Kranes, Senior Education Budget and Policy Analyst at the New York City Independent Budget Office

Sophia Stelboum, Program Coordinator at Trust for Public Land

Merritt Birnbaum, President and CEO of Riverside Park Conservancy

Avery Wallace, NYC H2O

Sommer Omar, founder of the Coalition to Save the Public Recreation Center Downtown

Kit Greenberg, Senior Coach with Wellness in the Schools

Rob Seamans, Local Nature Lab

Susan Dvells, self

Sharon Brown, self

Kelly Pierre, self

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

Christopher Leon Johnson, self

Érycka Montoya, self

1 COMMITTEE ON PARKS AND RECREATION

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2 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Good morning, good
3 morning. This is the Committee on Parks and
4 Recreation. This Committee is being done in the
5 Committee Room. This recording is done by Ginelle
6 Yearwood. Today's date is April 23, 2025.

7 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Good afternoon, and
8 welcome to the New York City Council hearing of the
9 Committees on Parks and Recreation.

10 At this time, can everybody please
11 silence your cell phones.

12 If you wish to testify, please come to
13 the back of the room to fill out a testimony slip
14 with the Sergeant-at-Arms.

15 At this time and going forward, no one is
16 to approach the dais. I repeat, no one is to approach
17 the dais.

18 Chair, we are ready to begin.

19 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you so much,
20 Sergeant. [GAVEL] Good afternoon, everyone. I am
21 Council Member Shekhar Krishnan, representing Jackson
22 Heights and Elmhurst Queens, and also the Chair of
23 the Parks Committee in our New York City Council. I'd
24 like to welcome you all today to our hearing that
25

will examine how we can improve access to public athletic and recreational fields and facilities.

There's something very sad about the fact that on this beautiful day we are in here doing this hearing. We should be on a ball field doing it instead, but that's for next time. But on this beautiful day, this is a very topical issue in all of our minds, and we know that in addition to the environmental benefits and passive recreation offered by our parks, the active recreational and sporting benefits they offer to all residents, from playgrounds for our children to recreation centers to athletic fields and courts, as well as the beaches and pools, are equally important, as important to the life of our city.

Today, we'll examine a few different things. When we think about increasing access to our recreational fields and facilities, I think it's important to look at it in two different respects. One is increasing access to the currently existing playgrounds and other recreational facilities that we have, specifically in finding ways to open them up more to the public. Playgrounds are the cornerstones of many neighborhoods and an integral part of growing

up in the city. For children of today's city, there are approximately 2,067 public playgrounds throughout the city, including 1,000 from the Department of Parks and Recreation, 796 maintained by NYCHA, and 243 that are on Department of Education property, but open to the public after school hours. We also have playgrounds called joint use playgrounds. The concept of adapting playgrounds for joint use by public school children and the surrounding community began in the city with the creation of JOPs, or jointly operated playgrounds. They started early in the 1930s with the Board of Education and agreements to open them up for public use. Generally, JOPs are used exclusively by schools during regular school hours and are open to the public at all other times. There are currently about 267 jointly operated playgrounds throughout the city that the Department of Parks and Recreation staff cleans, maintains, renovates, and upgrades, though they are not officially marked as parkland. We also have schoolyards to playgrounds, which are part of the Schoolyard to Playgrounds initiative that was another joint effort between the Parks Department, the Department of Education, and the non-profit sector to expand access to open space

for the City's children. I know our current Parks Commissioner was instrumental in the creation and implementation of this program during the Bloomberg Administration, working in conjunction with the non-profit organization Trust for Public Land, which is an excellent organization that I personally worked with on this Schoolyard to Playground initiative to renovate a number of such playgrounds in my District as well. The program started in 2007 with Mayor Bloomberg, and they effectively opened up many playgrounds and schoolyards to the public. These former schoolyards were previously off-limits to their respective communities. They are now open and accessible to the public on weekdays from after school until dusk, and from 8 a.m. until dusk on weekends or days when school is not in session. One such playground that I was proud to work on with the Trust for Public Land and the Parks Department and other City agencies was IS-145 in Jackson Heights, right on our open street that we've renovated into a beautiful playground today that's used throughout the year, after school, during the summertime, all year round, and so it really is a testament to what is possible through the Schoolyards to Playgrounds

initiative. Both of these, JOPs, Jointly Operated Playgrounds, and the Schoolyards to Playgrounds initiative provides examples of the way in which we have started in this city opening up our public fields and playgrounds beyond simply the technical purposes of them and have opened them up to make them accessible to our community.

What I'm excited about today is that we have three bills that we're considering that help to take this issue one step further. We have Intro. Number 566, sponsored by my Colleague, Council Member Brewer, that would require the Department of Parks and Recreation to consult with the DOE to create an annual plan to expand public access to school playgrounds. The plan would in part prioritize playgrounds that are located in environmental justice areas and include for them each year a list of at least 25 school playgrounds that could be used by the public on weekends and after schools, the estimated budget required, and any challenges with implementing the plan. Intro. Number 573, also sponsored by my Colleague, Council Member Brewer, would require a regular evaluation of the need for drinking fountains on locations under Parks jurisdiction that are

adjacent to non-Park land. The bill would also require the installation of a certain number of additional drinking fountains after required evaluations, because as I tell my children, you play outside, you got to make sure to hydrate. This is a great way to do so by expanding public fountains. Finally, Intro. Number 643, sponsored by my Colleague, Council Member Kevin Riley, would require that the Parks Department, in coordination with the DOE, create a plan to identify and facilitate the use of indoor basketball courts and gyms for organized basketball leagues to use when weather would not permit use of outdoor basketball courts. The plan would in part address how DPR could facilitate the use of indoor basketball courts that are maintained or operated by the City, how the Parks Department could coordinate with other relevant agencies to facilitate the use of indoor basketball courts and gyms, and identify private indoor basketball courts potentially available for use. What I really like about this bill as well is that it is thinking in creative ways about when we can't use our outdoor playgrounds, when it's raining outside, when it's cold, how we think about opening up our indoor

basketball courts for children to play inside, to engage our youth positively in constructive activities and keep them off the streets, and make sure that we are addressing public space and public health through this legislation.

It is a great way to think about all of these bills together, how we make these facilities more accessible. We start with our basketball courts, we start with our playgrounds, we need to expand to our tracks that we have in our city, as well as our swimming pools too. Each of these bills is a yet another step forward to make sure that every New Yorker has access to quality public space nearby, whether it's for a playground, for a park, or to play basketball indoors during cold weather, which I hope Council Member Riley and I will do one day too.

The first facet that I just described goes to ways that we can make our public playgrounds more accessible to all. There's also another way to think about accessibility too, and that is the permits and the approvals that sports leagues get to access fields and playgrounds. If we can open up all of these spaces, but we're not able to find an equitable way for organizations to access them, then

we're not going to be achieving the goals that we are setting out to do. So today, we'll also examine the athletic features of our Park system and focus on the Parks Department's process for issuing permits for the use of its over 800 athletic fields, 1,800 basketball courts, and 550 tennis courts throughout the city, including ways to encourage and enforce more equitable use of these facilities and consider a broader use of other City-owned facilities as well.

Now a few years ago, the Parks Department revamped the process to better allocate ball fields and courts for a wide range of applicants. They also put into place an interactive web-based system to apply for permits. Still, however, concerns persist about the whole process, with various athletic field users, from educational youth athletic groups to adult athletic leagues and typical parks goers regarding how permanent sports activities are allowed and regulated. Some have alleged that various permit holders have sold or scalped their permits to those who wish to use the field at a given time, trying to profit for themselves off of these public fields, while complaints regarding the unauthorized use of

particular ball fields have continued to add to the confusion and uncertainty already felt by many.

To address these concerns, in 2024, the Parks Department announced a series of proposed changes to its athletic permit rules. Under those proposed rules that were subsequently adopted, the Parks Department tried to address the dominance of for-profit organizations that have greater resources to obtain permitted space to ensure better equity and fair access for non-profits and local community organizations. The rules also seek to reduce or eliminate empty permitted fields and discourage permit holders from requesting unneeded space, ensuring greater access for local community residents. I am very interested to see how these new rules are being implemented and whether they have successfully addressed the concerns that have long been raised by park users so all New Yorkers have equitable access to our recreational facilities.

Again, we're tackling two things. Increasing access for our communities to public fields, both outdoors and courts indoors, and then how we permit those fields to make sure that once we open them up, every New Yorker, every non-profit

organization, everyone can have fair and equitable access to them through our Parks permitting system.

I want to thank my colleagues who've joined us today. We've been joined by Council Member Paladino, Council Member Holden, Council Member Carr, Council Member Brewer, Council Member Ung, Council Member Riley, Council Member Narcisse, and Council Member Lee.

And now, I'd like to turn it over to Council Member Brewer to say a few words about her legislation today.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Thank you very much, Chair Krishnan. I really appreciate your scheduling this hearing. As you indicated, I want to talk about Intro. 573, which concerns access to drinking fountains, and Intro. 566, access to playgrounds, which I've been talking about this freaking issue for 20 years.

On the drinking fountains, I think it's clear that we as New Yorkers should not have to purchase a single-use bottle of water because there's no public option available. Intro. 573 would increase the number of durable and permanent drinking fountains adjacent to public parks and green streets,

as you stated. This idea came from a youth commissioner named Richard Murphy, who was youth commissioner during the Dinkins Administration, where I was proud to serve, and one of his big practical ideas was giving every public school children a free reusable water bottle, but then we'd have to have the water fountains to be able to utilize them so I'm still working on the water bottles, but I hope we can put in the water fountains. We have great water in New York City, thanks to DEP and other agencies, but it's one thing to have the resource and another to have access to the resource.

Second, Intro. 566, as you suggested, aims to expand the School to Playgrounds program. There's no reason for us to be surrounded by open space that is unused, especially in a city where open space is so scarce and the Parks Department budget is inadequate. We still want that one percent of the budget to be for Parks. I think we can improve the lives of thousands by capitalizing on what already exists. The legislation would create an annual plan to expand access to playgrounds outside of school hours by a minimum of 25 locations per year. The plan would prioritize playgrounds in areas with the least

access to City parks. I want to mention, as you did, how important currently the jointly operated DOE and Parks are, and what I call just Trust for Public Land, those playgrounds. When I was borough president, I had the honor of funding and then seeing operational many, many of these playgrounds, and I think if you go to any of them on the weekend or in the summer, you will see every single playground inch occupied, and what that says to me is we need more space to be similarly occupied. It is very depressing to go by, as I have in my District, at PS-9. It's half a block playground, huge, and it is absolutely locked all summer long, and there's a NYCHA development right next door, and you see the young people looking at it, can I just play some basketball? They can't. It is locked, and that's the kind of unlocking we want to do. I want to mention that I have spoken to Robert Trohler, who is the President of Local 891, the school custodian engineers, and a student of mine many years ago at Queens College, and he is supportive. I believe that some of these playgrounds' ideas started again with Richard Murphy during the Dinkins Administration, and every custodian is obviously paid, as they should be,

making sure that the playground is clean Monday morning and when school starts, and that is part of the deal. It has to be that part. I was surprised and so pleasantly surprised when Mayor Adams, when he did his State of the City this year, 2025, he mentioned playgrounds. I said, where the hell did you get that freaking idea? He said, from you, Gale. I said, you did not, I don't know where you got it, but I'm so delighted that you got it, and then to the credit of Speaker Adams, she mentioned the same idea in her State of the City. So, they both talked about expanding Schoolyards to Playgrounds in their State of the City addresses. I just want to make sure I talked about it first, 20 years ago, and I want to make sure that it happens. That's why I'm so excited about today's hearings. IBO has done a study of this. The New York League of Conservation Voters, Randall's Island Park Alliance, Riverside Park Conservancy, Open Plans, Trust for the Public Land, Wellness in the Schools, New York City H2O, Regional Plan Association, Transportation Alternatives, the New York Restoration Project, New Yorkers for Parks, Local Nature Lab. All of these organizations are supportive. Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you so much,
Council Member Burr. I could not agree more.

Council Member Riley has an opening
statement as well about his legislation today.

COUNCIL MEMBER RILEY: Thank you, Chair
Krishnan, for hosting this important hearing today.

Today, I'm excited to champion my bill,
Intro. 643, that's not just practical, it's rooted in
real experiences from right here in our communities.
The Indoor Hoops Act is essential for growth and
sustainability of basketball leagues that bring so
much life and opportunity you need in our
neighborhoods. This bill proposes a simple but
impactful solution, coordinating rain sites to ensure
games go on, even when the weather tries to stop
them. Anyone who grows up playing ball knows how
disappointing it is to have their games canceled due
to rain or bad weather. This legislation makes sure
our young athletes, from rising stars to seasoned
players, always have a reliable court to play on. And
we're not just talking about hoops, we're talking
about health, we're talking about consistency, and
we're also talking about opportunity. We're talking
about investing in the lives of our youth, keeping

them active, off the streets, and surrounded by mentors, teammates, and positive energy. Providing indoor alternatives isn't just about shelter, it's about structure. It's about showing our athletes that we value their time, talent, and potential. It's about making sure that our coaches, family, and fans can keep showing up without worrying whether the game will be called off. Our youth programs are more than just sports, they're safe spaces, they're mentorship programs, and for many, they're second homes. By passing the Indoor Hoops Act, we're making sure that the culture we've built through basketball communities continues to thrive, whether it's rain or shine.

I want to give a heartfelt thanks to the youth, parents, coaches, and organizations who continue to uplift and strengthen our sports community, including my organization within my District that helped sponsor this bill, Grenada Built to Win, and PS-112 Bronxwood. I also want to recognize the incredible groups who stood by us today at the rally, some of who are here to testify. Your presence, your passion, and your ongoing commitment are exactly why this work matters. Let's pass Indoor

Hoops Act, and I really want to give it up to our Chair. We've been speaking about this piece of legislation for some time, and I'm really glad that he made time today to make sure that we hear his. I'm looking forward to hearing from the Administration. Even if I cannot stay for the duration of the hearing, I really want to connect with you guys. I want to make sure that we're figuring out how to get this passed. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you so much, Council Member Riley, for another great piece of legislation that recognizes that recreation is a year-round activity. It cannot be seasonal.

I think both sets of bills by both Council Members, you know, really underscore that if we quite literally want to improve the quality of life of New Yorkers, the livability of our communities, these are great ways to do so, and our playgrounds, our parks, our indoor basketball courts provide a readily available tool to do so.

I'll now turn it over to our Committee Counsel, Chris Sartori, to swear in Parks Department witnesses. We thank them for joining today and for your testimony.

2 COMMITTEE COUNSEL SARTORI: Thank you,
3 Chair. Would representatives of the Parks Department
4 please raise your right hand if you're able?

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

9 CHIEF DRURY: I do.

10 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NELSON: I do.

11 COMMITTEE COUNSEL SARTORI: Thank you.

12 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NELSON: Thank you.

13 Good afternoon, Chair Krishnan, Members of the Parks
14 and Recreation Committee, and other Council Members.
15 I'm Margaret Nelson, Deputy Commissioner for Public
16 Programs and Community Engagement at the New York
17 City Department of Parks and Recreation, and I'm
18 joined by Matt Drury, our Chief of Citywide
19 Legislative Affairs. Thank you for inviting us to
20 testify today regarding recreational access to
21 athletic fields and playgrounds.

22 At New York City Parks, our mission is to
23 offer clean and safe parks, public spaces, and
24 recreational amenities for New Yorkers to enjoy.
25 Making our athletic facilities available to the

public is a significant way in which we fulfill that mission, as is the care and maintenance of those facilities. We are the stewards of over 1,000 athletic fields and over 4,000 athletic courts. In 2024, the agency issued over 14,000 athletic field permits to nearly 3,500 organizations and individuals, representing over 900,000 hours of playing time. Our agency provides athletic permits to hundreds of schools, youth leagues, and adult recreation leagues for use of fields all over the city. The universe of our athletic field permit holders is as vast and varied as the population of New York City. Approximately 1,000 youth leagues, 513 schools enrolled in the Public School Athletic League, PSAL, an additional 400 schools affiliated with leagues other than PSAL, and 600 adult leagues, all hosting games and practices for a wide variety of competitive sports. We permit the use of our fields and courts for over 18 different sports. Our athletic permit offices receive requests for tournaments, competitive and recreational youth leagues, adult recreational leagues, sports clinics and camps, competitive travel leagues, and much more. We strive to offer a simple and straightforward permit system

for New Yorkers to use. Each of our three permit seasons, fall, winter, and spring/summer, has open application periods where anyone interested in obtaining a permit can go to our website and apply. We also accept paper applications at our ball field permit offices located in all five boroughs if needed.

As you all know, our athletic fields and courts are extremely popular with New Yorkers and very well used, and New York City Parks takes every opportunity to invest in the renovation and construction of our athletic facilities to better serve local communities. These projects can range from natural turf field renovations to allow for better drainage, the full refurbishment and replacement of synthetic turf fields, or the installation of sports lighting, which significantly expands the playable hours at a field or court for leagues and other visitors to enjoy. Our Citywide Services Division also performs targeted repairs and upgrades at our synthetic turf sites and deploys a dedicated Turf Maintenance Team to provide preventive maintenance at our turf locations around the city to help extend the useful life of these valuable assets.

In 2024, this team cared for hundreds of fields, redistributing infill, standing up matted turf fibers, patching surfaces, repairing seam separations, and painting lines. The team also delivered in-house turf field upgrades at sites including Leif Ericson Park in Brooklyn and McNair Playground in Harlem, and we have replacement projects planned for sites including Millbrook Park in the Bronx, Elmhurst Park in Queens, and Riverside Park in Manhattan.

Since the beginning of this Administration, we have also invested over 200 million dollars in 70 comprehensive field and court reconstruction projects led by our Capital Division. The recently installed turf field at the Greenbelt Recreation Center in Staten Island includes new sports lighting, allowing us to expand the permanent hours of the field, which is now striped for football, soccer, and lacrosse. Other capital projects in active design, like the Baisley Pond Park Track and Field Facility in Queens, and Quarry Ballfields in the Bronx, are responding to community needs to serve multiple sports, serving as multi-

purpose athletic fields striped for football and soccer.

To help expand the impact of our City's capital dollars, we also explore every opportunity to leverage private philanthropic funding as well. In 2024, we refurbished 25 fields and courts throughout the city through our Adopt-A-Park program, including eight basketball courts renovated thanks to Brooklyn Social Justice Fund and two ball fields renovated with the support of the New York Mets organization. Later this year, we look forward to opening the renovated multi-sport field at Brigadier General Charles Young Playground along the Harlem River, a 9-million-dollar project that represents a creative public-private approach made possible through partnership with the NYPD and the Manhattan District Attorney's Office, along with private funding generously provided by several foundation donors. With this incredible project, we'll be delivering sorely needed improvements to these multi-sport fields, including a new drainage system, drinking fountains, misting tower, new fencing, dugouts and backstops, and new sports lighting that will provide

for over 5,000 additional permit hours for sports leagues and teams to enjoy.

Despite this dedicated effort to increase and improve our portfolio, there will always be far more demand for the use of our athletic fields and courts than we can accommodate with existing space, so we do our best to prioritize requests fairly and thoughtfully. We are proud to share that in recent years, the agency has made significant strides in making the athletic field permitting process less cumbersome, more transparent, and more equitable for our users. In 2022, we improved our user-friendly searchable field and court availability map on our agency website. This tool gives permit applicants and permit holders the ability to see current usage and real-time availability for a field or court. In addition, the tool allows community members to see when their local field is unpermitted and therefore available to use for recreation. In 2023, the agency initiated an athletic permit inspection program to address various concerns raised by permit holders, such as fields and courts being unused during permitted times. Since its launch, members of the Parks team, including Athletic Permit Coordinators

and our Parks Enforcement Patrol officers, have conducted approximately 6,725 inspections, identifying and addressing roughly 1,500 instances of unused permits. During these inspections, we also ensure that permit holders are in compliance with Parks permitting rules and regulations, verifying that permitted organizations are using the field or court in accordance with the approved permit. As a result, permit holders are in greater compliance with Parks rules and regulations, and we're seeing a significant decrease in unused permitted time, which allows us to reallocate permitted hours to deserving applicants. In November of 2024, we updated our agency rules and permit fee schedule to allow for more equitable access for non-profit community organizations, increasing transparency, and improving customer service for in-demand ball fields and courts. Through these changes, we have sought to address the dominance of for-profit organizations that often have greater resources to obtain permitted space as we strive to ensure better equity and fair access. Non-profit 501(c)3 youth sports leagues and schools maintain their priority status in the application period and continue to be exempt from

athletic permit fees, while other youth sports leagues now pay a modest hourly athletic permit fee. We also sought to reduce or eliminate empty permitted fields and to discourage permit holders from requesting unneeded space, ensuring greater access for local community residents. The rules changes introduced defined game and practice categories and also clarified that non-usage of a permit or the provision of false information in a permit application are grounds for revocation, so we can get permits in the hands of groups that need them and actually use them. Lastly, we adjusted our fee schedule to properly reflect the various ways in which our different types of athletic fields and courts are requested and used. We have instituted all of these reforms and process improvements in close coordination with long-term permit holders to make sure the implementation of these new policies goes as smoothly as possible. The rule changes were instituted very recently, but we're encouraged by the initial feedback so far, especially from newer organizations that previously felt frustrated by the complexity of the permit process and now have greater access to the fields they need. I want to

specifically thank our dedicated Ball Field Coordinators and our Citywide Athletic Permit Coordinator who work very closely with leagues and other permit applicants to provide helpful guidance and customer service, because this certainly would not have been possible without them.

New Yorkers are passionate about living active, healthy lives. From soccer in the Bronx, flag football in Brooklyn, basketball in Manhattan, cricket in Queens, and youth baseball on Staten Island, our fields and courts are put to use every single day in every corner of the city. We are proud of the steps our agency has taken to make the permitting process for athletic fields more accessible, transparent, and equitable, and will continue to assess our policies and practices to make sure they best serve the people of our city.

Turning to the legislation being heard today, Intro. 566 would require NYC Parks in consultation with NYC Schools to submit an annual plan to expand public access to school playgrounds, prioritizing properties that are located in environmental justice areas. Opening schoolyards to the public outside of school hours has served as an

excellent way to increase New Yorkers' access to green and open space for decades. We are thankful to our sister agency colleagues at NYC Schools for their partnership, and we are proud to work closely with them to identify potential schoolyard access opportunities that can help achieve the City's goal of having 85 percent of New Yorkers living within walking distance to a park or open space by 2030, as established by One NYC Strategic Plan in 2015. Though New York City Parks is broadly supportive of expanding public access to schoolyards outside of school hours, it is important to keep in mind that NYC Schools retain the ultimate authority to determine when and where it is appropriate to open a given property to the general public. Further, when broader access to schoolyards is facilitated, those spaces remain under the care and management of NYC Schools.

In a similar fashion, Intro. 643 would require NYC Parks, in consultation with NYC Schools, to create and implement a plan to facilitate the use of indoor basketball courts, including those in privately owned gyms, as well as gyms under the jurisdiction of NYC Schools, for use by organized

basketball leagues when the use of outdoor basketball courts is impacted by weather. NYC Parks has 36 recreation centers around the city, many of which have very popular indoor gymnasiums, including basketball courts, which are enjoyed by thousands of New Yorkers every day, along with facilities such as indoor pools, weight rooms, dance studios, art studios, game rooms, and media labs. We are very proud of the fact that our recreation centers offer a range of programs for people of all ages and interests, and our memberships are completely free for New Yorkers age 24 and under, and extremely affordable for other adults and senior citizens. Our gymnasiums operate with a rotating programming schedule that is posted at each location and on our agency website, and though we strive to offer a balanced diversity of fitness and sports activity at all our locations, basketball is definitely one of the most popular uses of our gyms. On any given day at our recreation centers, you can find adult pickup basketball games, youth open basketball play in our Saturday Night Lights program, drop-in basketball instructional clinics for youth and adults, and scheduled league play like our Junior Knicks

Basketball League for boys and girls age 8 through 17. We know these recreation centers are vital resources for our communities, so we are investing hundreds of millions of dollars in completely reconstructing existing facilities like the Brownsville Recreation Center, as well as opening brand new facilities like the Mary Callie Dalton Recreation Center in Staten Island and the Shirley Chisholm Recreation Center in Brooklyn, which we look forward to opening to the public later this year. Given the robust offering of program programming at our recreation center gyms, we do not have the capacity to make these spaces available for private permitted use, but when outdoor basketball enthusiasts are faced with a rainy day or rising temperatures, our indoor courts are an incredible resource for anyone with an NYC Parks Recreation Center membership, which again is available to all New Yorkers for very low or no cost whatsoever.

In regards to both of these bills, we are always supportive of increasing access to open recreational spaces where New Yorkers can play and exercise, but it would be inappropriate and infeasible for New York City Parks to undertake the

creation of a strategic plan relating to properties that are not under our jurisdiction, whether that's property under the jurisdiction of NYC Schools or privately owned property, and therefore we oppose Intro. 566 and Intro. 643 as they are currently drafted.

Intro 573 would require NYC Parks to conduct a recurring evaluation of the need for drinking fountains in sections of Parks' property that are adjacent to non-park land and further require the installation of additional drinking fountains in these areas. NYC Parks maintains over 3,400 exterior drinking fountains throughout our parks and playgrounds, making us far and away the largest provider of clean drinking water for New Yorkers, and our dedicated staff works extremely hard to keep them in good working order. As a general practice, we incorporate new and replacement water fountains into the design for nearly all of our park renovation capital projects, making sure they are thoughtfully located to best serve park visitors, whether it's used by kids at the playground on a hot day or a jogger taking a break to fill their reusable water bottle. We appreciate the intent of this

legislation, but it should be noted that its primary goal seems largely duplicative of the mandate that will be imposed by Intro. 900, a bill which is slated to be passed by the Council at tomorrow's Stated Meeting.

Thank you for allowing us to testify before you today and for all your continued advocacy for our city parks. We will now be happy to answer any questions that you might have.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you so much for your testimony. I want to acknowledge that we've been joined by Council Member Menin as well, who's Chairing another hearing too, so good luck. It's still going on since the morning.

Thank you so much for your testimony. We appreciated hearing your perspective.

I have a few questions on the different topics, and I'll turn it over to my Colleagues to ask some questions as well, but let's start with the bills themselves, which I think are really good bills. I have to say it is disappointing to hear the Parks Department oppose both bills, and I do understand the capacity and resource constraints as we fight to increase the funding for the Parks

Department. I would hope the Administration would do so too, but the truth is we just can't let those kinds of constraints get in the way of doing more for New Yorkers and expanding access. The needs are just too urgent. The rec centers, the playgrounds, the fields, both can be oversubscribed or underused because during cold weather it's just not possible to use them, and as Council Member Brewer mentioned, you have readily available public spaces that, I see it as well in my own District too, that are just off limits for access year-round outside of school hours and outside of the students who use them. So, we've got a lot we're working with that has potential, which is why despite the capacity constraints, we've got to get real creative in finding ways to achieve the intent of the legislation, of all the different pieces of legislation. So, my first question is about when we think about our playgrounds outside of the JOP, the Jointly Operated Programs, what kinds of conversations are happening with DOE and Parks about working together to open up more school playgrounds? Are those conversations happening? What is the status of them? How can we expand out beyond simply the JOP program?

CHIEF DRURY: Yeah. Appreciate that, Chair. And just to clarify, we oppose both of those bills as they're currently drafted, and to be clear, our opposition and concerns are largely technical in nature. The bills, as they're currently structured, place our agency and task us with crafting a strategic plan for properties that wouldn't be under our jurisdiction so it just raises, having said that, we are obviously open to the conversation, open to partnerships. There's a lot of creative ways to explore. We already joined in interagency efforts to explore the best use of public facilities in a variety of different ways, and there's plenty of ways to envision how that could happen. So just to be very clear, we're certainly appreciative of the goals.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Appreciate clarification, yeah.

CHIEF DRURY: Having said that, yeah, we work very closely with NYC Schools on what is now constituted as the Schoolyard to Playground Program. Largely from our end, that consists of providing sort of technical analysis and information that identify specific sites that could benefit, namely if it's serving property that would expand access to folks

that don't currently live within what we call a walk-to-a-park, which is sort of the metric, again, as noted in the, the City has a goal of 85 percent of all New Yorkers living within a walk-to-a-park, and we're getting very, very close. I think we're at 83 percent, 84 percent. But these Schoolyard to Playgrounds, thanks to NYC Schools, great partnership, have really helped advance those numbers and opened up access to thousands and thousands of New Yorkers, and that, and so that is an ongoing. As I think Council Member Brewer noted, the Mayor announced 11 new sites will be added to the program. I believe those are coming online July or so, I think after this school year, so this summer, so that's, so we're very excited. So, this is an ongoing, it's been going, you know, the effort has been ongoing for decades and is continuing.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you, and appreciate the clarification on the concerns or opposition you have in terms of it being technical in nature.

So then how, you know, taking a step back again, has there been conversations with Parks and DOE beyond the JOPs and beyond this playground to

1 schoolyards initiative, other ways to open up, for
2 example, gyms, basketball courts, or otherwise, has
3 there been any thought given to that in discussions
4 about expanding the access to facilities?

5
6 CHIEF DRURY: You know, there have been a
7 variety of partnerships over the years that have
8 taken, you know, many different forms and fashions,
9 you know, in terms of, you know, aquatic education,
10 our Swim for Life program is a really close
11 partnership with DOE that does take place at some DOE
12 facilities so there are a variety of ways in which
13 there is sort of really nice synergy and partnership.
14 I will say in terms of broader public access to open
15 space, the Schoolyards to Playgrounds has been the
16 sort of primary vehicle towards making that happen,
17 but, you know, we're obviously always open to
18 creative approaches and new conversations.

19 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Because I think
20 that, you know, understanding the concerns of having
21 a plan and working with other agencies, I think we
22 also want to make sure that agencies are not siloed
23 off from each other and we find ways, and you all
24 have a great collaboration with DOE on one specific
25 program, but it seems to me, like I said before,

we're already doing it with school pools for Swim for Life and other programs. I do believe that should come next too, where we're opening up more of the indoor pools and for use or even, you know, other facilities too so I think, for us, it's very important is that you all are finding ways to get beyond the hurdles of making plans with other agencies and finding ways to communicate to do so, because that shouldn't hold us back.

But, you know, you mentioned in particular this Schoolyards to Playgrounds initiative. I think it's a great program. I do want to recognize too that the Adams Administration in the State of the City, it was great to hear them expand that program. It's been doing very well. You all work with Trust for Public Land. It's an excellent organization. I've seen personally the difference they make with the playgrounds in that program. Have you all explored or considered partnerships with TPL, Trust for Public Land, outside of school yards to playgrounds and other initiatives too?

CHIEF DRURY: So Trust for Public Land is obviously, you know, an important and helpful sort of advocate for open space. I think there's been a

variety of fashions in which we've worked with them in over the years and will continue to do so, we certainly hope. I think in this context, their primary involvement working by and large, you know, through projects routed through the Schoolyards to Playgrounds program, you know, where they provided, you know, some funding, privately raised funding, and is also advising, helping provide design. And those were for instances in which capital improvements were being made to a given site before it became open to the broader public. But that's not the only approach to Schoolyards to Playgrounds. As the mayor noted, those 11 new sites are what you might call turnkey sites where, you know, I believe they're essentially just going to, you know, they are good, solid, great, safe, wonderful sites that are just going to sort of open as is so TPL, as I understand it, has been involved in a sort of certain mode of this program or initiative, but there are lots of other ways to engage with them and other, you know, park advocates and open space advocates and we're always open to those conversations.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: It's definitely worth considering because the speed at which we can

do some of these renovations, you know, as part of opening up the playgrounds, I think gives you all more resources, more opportunity to both open up playgrounds, but also update them, renovate them too.

Now turning over to water fountains and basketball courts, what's the current number of water fountains the Parks Department has?

CHIEF DRURY: So, the agency oversees a system of about roughly 3,700 or so exterior water fountains in our parks and playgrounds.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: And are you all routinely installing more water fountains or, you know, what's the pace of expanding the number of water fountains throughout the city?

CHIEF DRURY: Yeah. That's a great question. And so by and large, essentially any, basically any capital improvement that's being made to a park, like a park, you know, reconstruction or a court reconstruction will practically always include the installation of new water fountains or replacement of existing water fountains.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: And what's the number of basketball courts, indoor and outdoor, under Parks' jurisdiction?

CHIEF DRURY: So, outdoor we have, I apologize, sorry.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NELSON: There are 1,765 outdoor basketball courts in our system, and in our 36 rec centers, 21 have gyms.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: I see. Okay. And how about the number of tracks under Parks Department jurisdiction?

CHIEF DRURY: We actually have that, sorry. Yes, I believe it's roughly 74 sort of track, they may not all be separate individual facilities, but sort of permittable spaces within what we call like a track and field sort of process. So, you know, 74-ish, yeah.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Got it. Okay. Because that's another area too that I want to highlight is, as I mentioned before, we have a great high school track in our District that, you know, we'd love to open up to the community too, especially in a neighborhood like ours that doesn't have, has such little park space. And, you know, this is just another step in that direction of opening up all these facilities.

CHIEF DRURY: Sorry. And that's a reference to a DOE?

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Yes. Newtown High School, yep, it's DOE again, but it highlights the same thing. These are the names of that collaboration.

CHIEF DRURY: And to be, you know, we don't want to, obviously we're not able to speak to the details, but there are systems in place, as I understand it, to access many, many of those facilities, you know, that is routed through NYC schools. But, you know, as I understand it, on a site-by-site basis, there are, you know, some access is allowed to some of those facilities.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: And then a couple more questions before I turn over to my Colleagues.

Just now going over to the, you know, second aspect of this hearing about permitting. So, what drove the Parks Department's desire to update the rules about athletic field permitting in 2024? What was the reason for it?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NELSON: Thank you for the question. I mean, I think both internally, we saw ways that we could be improving the process. We heard

from folks about what their pain points and frustrations were. And in general, we saw, you know, one of the drivers was to address the dominance of for-profit organizations that often have greater resources to obtain permitted space, and so we were trying to provide more equity and fair access. And so, in some of the rule changes, for example, for the first time creating a non-profit category and then prioritizing that non-profit category for youth, we were trying to then create that greater equity and kind of community access.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: And what specifically in the new rules was trying to address that dominance by for-profit leagues and increased access for youth leagues and non-profits? What were some of those specific changes that were supposed to address that?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NELSON: Yeah. So, again, I think that creating for the first time, splitting up the for-profit and non-profit, we also created in these rules a limit on the number of average hours that leagues could have return rates for so it doesn't mean that they can't apply for other hours, but it was starting to limit kind of

their return rates, which then freed up other spaces for other newer groups. I think also by restructuring the fees, it made it clearer and more likely that groups would not apply for space that they didn't really need so, again, that also freed up space and time for other newer groups to come in.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: And appreciating the intent of the rules changes, are you all still hearing concerns about access? Because I know, I am in particular, from organizations around the city at a number of levels. I have to imagine that you all are getting them too, right?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NELSON: Yeah. I think one of the benefits of the rule changes is that we've seen a decrease in permits denied so I think that's showing one of the changes that we are getting more people fields that they're asking for. I think we have a finite number of fields, so there's always going to be kind of more demand than we have supply. I think the other thing that the Permit Coordinators do very well is that when people apply and say they're a new organization, we really try to work with folks that maybe they can't get the exact field or the exact time they're asking for because somebody

else has it. We work with them to try to accommodate them in whatever way we can. I think we do an excellent job at that. So, sometimes people can't get everything that they want, but I think we do a very good job at trying to get time and trying to help them increase their time as if it's a new league that's growing.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Got it. Okay. We'll come back to that too. But again, it highlights, right, there's much more demand than there is supply. When you open up school playgrounds or other facilities too, you can help address that demand that the current supply is not going to be able to address so these two issues really do go together and they're very important.

I will come back to that in a bit, but I now want to turn over to some of my Colleagues to ask questions. I know Council Member Riley had some questions.

COUNCIL MEMBER RILEY: Thank you so much, Chair, and good afternoon again.

Thank you so much for explaining that you're not opposed to it. It's just some technicalities that we have to discuss. Currently,

you stated how much basketball courts and how much recreational gyms are in the parks?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NELSON: Sure. So, we have 1,765 outdoor basketball courts and, in our 36 recreation centers, we have 21 gyms that have basketball courts.

COUNCIL MEMBER RILEY: So it's kind of...

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NELSON: You can kind of see. And so, you know, in looking at your bill, when you're just looking at our assets, right, we permit, there's 535 permits for basketball courts in the season, 46,000 hours, you know, of time for outdoor, yeah.

COUNCIL MEMBER RILEY: Okay. And normally, what's the process if someone wants to get access to those recreational spaces that the Parks Department has?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NELSON: So, we don't permit outside groups coming into any of our recreation centers because we have a membership that pays to access our centers and then we provide programming. So, again, one of our concerns with the bill is we don't want to displace, you know, our existing youth that are coming to the center to make

time for another organization. But we hear that, you know, we share the goal of folks when they're rained out to be able to go somewhere else, but we feel like we're providing a lot of great recreational activity around in our rec center.

COUNCIL MEMBER RILEY: And do you guys collect data on summer leagues when they can't execute their tournament because of inclement rain or bad weather?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NELSON: Whether we keep track of when...

COUNCIL MEMBER RILEY: I'll repeat the question. Do you keep track of when the summer leagues aren't able to have their programs that weekend? Do you have any data regarding that information? No?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NELSON: No, we do not. Sorry.

COUNCIL MEMBER RILEY: Okay. All right. It would be helpful because it would give us an understanding to know how frequently this happened. Just for instance, I know last year in about July or August, one of those months, it was like raining every weekend, but it will be nice Monday through

Friday like how it is now. So yes, I don't want to displace anybody who pays for a membership. I don't believe anybody wants to, but we just want to make sure that we're working with other agencies out there to provide the spaces so I'm really open to discussing any technicalities that we have to upgrade within the piece of legislation, but really just want to emphasize how important this is because I know the goal for the Parks Department is to grant safe space, clean air, and public spaces to people in the community. I believe the New York City Public Schools can help you guys out with that as well.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NELSON: Thank you.

COUNCIL MEMBER RILEY: So, I'm looking forward to connecting with you guys and, Chair, like I said, once again, thank you so much for hosting this hearing.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NELSON: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you, Council Member Riley.

Council Member Brewer.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Thank you very much.

So, a couple of questions about the school playgrounds. First of all, just what would be some of the technical changes that you might want to see on the bill? And then secondly, I wasn't paying enough attention, but how many total, if you know them, school playgrounds, are there? How many are already, thankfully, in programs that we just discussed, either the ones that are jointly operated or Trust for the Public Land. And then just that would give us a sense of, we obviously can't make them all, nor should they all be used during the summer, but it would give us some ballpark figures.

CHIEF DRURY: Sure. Thanks for the question. So firstly, as to the legislation, I think the primary concern is that the way it's currently drafted, it tasks the Parks Department with crafting a plan to enable access to property that's not under our jurisdiction so there's sort of a fundamental sort of technical concern there, if that makes any sense, right? Like obviously we work really closely with NYC Schools and have over the years, there have been a variety of different ways that School property has been opened up to the public more broadly, right? So that's generally happened in two models. One was

sort of starting in the early 1940s, headed into the '90s and 2000s, that was the Jointly Operated Playground, right? So there's roughly about 260 of those, give or take. And those were by and large, most often, as I understand it, they were generally kind of conceived and created as the school was being constructed, right? So those were sort of like, and then in the 2000s, through PlayNYC and other aspects, there was sort of a transition into a sort of a new approach, which is sort of what we would now call the Schoolyards to Playgrounds, and there's about 290 or so of those, is roughly what I understand that, with more on the way. And so when you add it all up together, it's roughly 550 properties, which as I understand it, I think our Planning Team took a look at it, it opened up access to close to a million New Yorkers that wouldn't live within a walk to a park or open space, have that, thanks to that universe of 550 sites.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: And we don't know how many total school playgrounds there are, however, only DOE would know that.

CHIEF DRURY: Yeah. I mean, yeah, I know there's roughly 1,400 public school buildings in the city, but they don't all have schoolyards.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: In Manhattan in particular.

CHIEF DRURY: Yeah, so yeah, NYC Schools.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: So, then the question would be, in terms of technical, you're saying that the Parks Department would be tasked with drawing up a plan, you'd obviously have to work with DOE, but you already work with DOE. I mean, it's not like, it's complicated. The ones that are jointly operated in my District, you cannot get onto a swing on the weekends, it's so packed so it's already a success.

CHIEF DRURY: For sure. I think it's just, you know, not to get hung up on it, but the bill as it's drafted, you know, sort of compels and requires, you know, the agency to kind of...

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: So the bill should say DOE and Parks work together on a plan?

CHIEF DRURY: I'm sure there's a variety of different ways it could be structured, sure.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Okay. In terms of the drinking fountains, I think our bill is a little bit not as clear. We would be talking on the edge of the parks and in the green spaces. I have to say, it's not easy to find a fountain to have a drink of water. If you go way into a park, yes, but it's not easy to find a drinking fountain. So, my question is, what's the average cost to build one? And then, are they operating all year long or are they turned off during the cold weather?

CHIEF DRURY: Okay. Thanks for the question. So, as I mentioned, you know, generally speaking, we look to install or replace water fountains at every opportunity. We will note, you know, there are some physical and engineering challenges that come with the perimeters of parks and other sort of restrictive areas like that because the installation of this infrastructure requires sort of a footprint, if you will, with an RPZ, you know, and other, you know, both above and below surface. So, and then when you have the perimeter of a park which often has fencing or, you know, a tree canopy with, you know, subsurface root systems, they're, you know, so I think we appreciate, and we completely recognize

that the bill is sort of has a different intent focused on those edges and perimeters.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Sometimes there's a hydrant nearby, though. Wouldn't that be a way of, you have to work with DEP?

CHIEF DRURY: Yeah. I'm not a plumber or an engineer. Yeah, that's an interesting, that's an interesting notion that there could be, and I, and part of the bill that is, I believe, passing tomorrow does, will compel DEP to install a smaller number of fountains on non-parked property so there is definitely progress being made or will be made in that regard.

And then, sorry, average cost. It's a little hard to say in a vacuum because, again, these are usually part of a larger because, you know, and it depends on the subsurface conditions and yada, yada, yada, so the cost in and of itself isn't really quite the concern, but if you had to sort of just pull it out of a larger project, it probably, you know, 30,000, 40,000-dollar's worth of work, give or take.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: So, in other words, you only probably put in new fountains when

there is a Park project taking place. Is that the idea? In other words, it only...

CHIEF DRURY: I mean, that's our general approach for sure, but, you know, again, noting that the, although we appreciate the intent of the park perimeter sort of distinction, and we do, whenever possible, try to place our fountains within sight of the street. That's just because of, you know, entrances to these parks are different. There's different, you know, visual impediments to that sometimes. That's not always feasible, but that is something. And also, not for nothing, but, you know, we have, you know, hot sweaty kids playing at our playgrounds, and we want to also make sure that that water fountains are within the parks, right, like next to the amenities and features where they're needed.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: I'm for as many as possible so I would think we need both. That would be my hope. Okay.

CHIEF DRURY: Sure.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

2 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you, Council
3 Member Brewer.

4 Going back to water fountains for a
5 second, are those, to install or, you know, to repair
6 water fountains, are those capital eligible projects,
7 or are they expense funding? What do you all
8 currently, what funding do you all currently use?

9 CHIEF DRURY: So, the installation of a
10 water fountain, when it takes place as a larger
11 project, you know, a playground renovation, ball
12 field renovation, what have you, that's capitally
13 eligible. And a standalone installation of a water
14 fountain, as I understand it, would not be considered
15 capitally eligible, nor is, you know, let's say a
16 valve breaks or like, so an individual repair is not
17 capitally eligible either.

18 And also, I'm sorry, I was reminded,
19 Council Member Brewer asked if they were year-round,
20 and currently they are not. The market right now does
21 not offer a reliable freeze-proof water fountain.
22 There are frost resistant fountains that we have
23 modeled in one or two locations, and it hasn't gone
24 totally great, so by and large they need to be
25 winterized so it's just quite an undertaking, as you

can imagine, but it's important to make sure that the pipes don't burst, etc., etc.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Got it. Thank you.

And now going back to the permits issue, and I think, you know, it'll be good to hear, for you all to hear the testimony of some of the groups and individuals today, to get feedback on how the rules are working, because my sense is there are still, both access has been an issue. I also think people, you know, we've had groups reach out to us from across the city that aren't aware of exactly what the rules are now, and so they're applying as non-profits for for-profit on for-profit rates that are just categorically not feasible for them, and then we have to explain to them or bring you all in so what communication have you all done, especially now the non-profit category being a new one, how much outreach have you all done, or what are the plans to do more outreach to make sure the non-profits know that they are not subjected to these much higher rates?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NELSON: So, during the rule process where we did a public hearing, we also did some webinars that were open to permit holders that we had contacts for. We also did some

specific outreach to some of the groups that we knew we were working with, and then we also institute kind of regular pre-season webinars for groups so they can go, we were going through all the rules and the rule changes. So, we're kind of providing these webinars on a regular basis for people to sign into and, you know, hear what's going on. They also can call their Permit Coordinators, and one of the things that we did in as part of the upgrade to the application process online is that we have a better feature for asking questions and getting feedback so I think we're much more responsive when people have questions now because it's all taking place within that permit process.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Have you all considered having maybe a dedicated team as well there to work with organizations that run into permitting issues, you know, aside from all the other, you know, communication tools you have in place, but when issues come up, when people are able to get access to a field, I think it also could be really helpful to have, you know, a regular, you know, routine conversation back and forth with Parks about this issue so have you all thought about, you

know, having some dedicated staff to be able to help with those issues as they come up?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NELSON: So, we do have dedicated Ball Field Coordinators in each borough. So again, big shout out to them because it's really only one or two people in each borough who are processing in total 14,000 permits a year. But they go above and beyond to be responsive to people when they have questions, to answer questions. They're also out there when we get complaints about specific permits. They are the ones that are going out there to try to get a sense of what's going on. And those are the folks that, you know, I think anybody who is having a problem and if they are not getting an answer through their Ball Field Coordinator, they can go through 3-1-1 like you said. Like sometimes on a Saturday morning, they're like, the field isn't available, there's an urgent problem. That's when our 3-1-1 system will route it into our central communications and we'll see if somebody is available to respond immediately.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Okay. I mean 3-1-1, I understand that many New Yorkers have a lot of concerns and I agree with them about it, but do you

all feel that that gives you a responsive way to quickly, to your point, when issues come up, to troubleshoot in that moment or respond right away?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NELSON: If it's something that's like, you know, something going on in the field, we have a 24/7 Central Communications Division that takes those incoming 3-1-1 calls and if say a PEP officer is just, you know, can be dispatched or an email goes out to the relevant folks to see who could be responsive.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: What about if multiple groups apply for permits for the same space at the same time, how does Parks determine who should ultimately receive the permits?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NELSON: So, you know, in our rules, we have priority order. So our youth, first of all, let me see if I can get to it. So, New York City Parks programming, youth leagues and school and school leagues take priority. After that, returning customers, which includes adult leagues, and then those applying within the optimal season request period. And then after that, so there's an in-season and out-season, right? So, if you're applying for a field that the in-season is soccer,

but you want to play a different sport, you have to wait to the kind of other people who are asking for the in-sport season are accommodated and then if it's still available, we would issue that permit so that's kind of the ranking order.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Got it. Okay. Can you clarify again, what was the ranking for priority?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NELSON: New York City Parks programming and youth leagues, which includes official school leagues, then returning customers, which includes adult leagues, then those applying within the optimal season request that may be new, and then all other field and court requests.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: I see. So, included in there too are, you know, separate and apart from youth and others is if there are groups, individuals who have a history of successfully applying for permits and getting them, they are part of the preference when they're applying for a new seasonal permit.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NELSON: Yes. Right.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Got it. Okay. And can you explain a bit about the process to obtain

permits through the Citywide Events Management System, CEMS?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NELSON: Sure. Thank you for the question, Council Member and Chair. So CEMS is a citywide system. Parks has created its own kind of interface with CEMS with our own digital media team to make it more user-friendly and accessible. So, for the athletic field permit side of our event processing system, it's free. There's no application fee. You have to go online and you create an account. Once you've created the account, you can see all your past permits, current permits. You can email with your borough coordinator. You can see what fees you owe, and that all takes place through that system. If you're applying, which is not the focus of the hearing, for a special event, that's a different permit system handled by different people. There is a 25-dollar application fee, and then depending on what kind of special event, there might be other fees on top of that. Does that answer your question?

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Yes, it does. Is that a multilingual system, or is it English only?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NELSON: Hold on one second. On our Parks website, you can toggle to a different language.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Got it. Okay. And what's the number of athletic fields that are typically reserved or capable of being reserved for permitted activity compared to the fields that are available for open and non-permitted uses for the general public? And how do you all determine what fields will be for open use and what fields are for permitted activities?

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Sure. So, all of the fields in our system are available for permitting so there's not any amount of fields that are kind of put aside and not permitted that are in our system that are available to be permitted. That said, I think with our new rules, the idea is we were seeing before a lot of times we go out and fields were unused, right, but in the system it was showing that somebody had that permit. In our new system, if we can reduce that kind of time that folks are taking that is not getting used so that they're having fewer permits, that will show up on our website and show up at our system as available so that more time for the

community, they'll see that that field is free and they can go play on that field so that's how we balance the permitted time versus the community time.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: That was my next question.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NELSON: With that said, there's plenty of spaces in our parks or smaller fields that aren't permitted fields that are available through the special events.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: And that was my next question actually was how common of occurrence is it to have permits issued and the fields go unused?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NELSON: So, I would say when we started our inspection program, citywide inspection program in 2023, that was our most prevalent finding. And again, out of I think it was like 6,500 inspections, 1,500 times the fields were empty and not being used. I would say that as we started to do this great permit system, which takes a lot of time and energy by everybody out there doing these inspections, every time that field is unused, we're sending an email saying we noticed your field is unused. If this keeps happening, we're going to

have to have a conversation and maybe take back this time. Maybe you don't need it. So over time, as our inspection process has gone on, folks have given back time or not applied for time. We're seeing it much less often so I think it's a big win to have this inspection system and really being, holding those permit holders accountable.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: So how quick then, if the field is unused and that continues, how quickly are you able to release that time and open it up for someone to apply?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NELSON: It's a little more of a gradual process, right, because again, maybe there was an exception, a reason that they couldn't use that field on that day. We don't want to be punitive. We want to start with education so it's more an issue of it becomes a pattern, right, so we'll give a warning. They'll be on notice that we're watching. We'll check again. If it's not corrected, then we start a conversation about, hey, do you really need all this time, you want to give some time back? Or maybe it becomes, if we keep seeing it and they don't give time back, it could be like, we're not going to give you this time next year, you're

going to have less time next year. So, it's a gradual process, but it's something our staff are really on top of, and I think we're heading in the right direction.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: But how often would you, like, how, what would be the time would you estimate? Understanding it's a gradual process, just given how high the demand is to, at what point do you all say, all right, let's open it up for those who are waiting and wanted to apply?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NELSON: I think it's more from, it doesn't really happen in the middle of the season as much as it will have an impact on the next season, to be fair. I mean, there might be some instances where someone's like, oh yeah, actually I'm not using that and they give it back right away voluntarily and that does happen, but I wouldn't say that that's happening in all the cases.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: More seasonal.
Okay.

And then did I understand correctly that pretty much a lot of the, almost all the Parks' fields are available for permitting with the exception of those that are too small or not

appropriate for it, but essentially there's no set of possible for permitting and not possible for permitting field division.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NELSON: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Got it. Okay. And how does the process differ for groups that use entire sports fields versus groups that use smaller spaces within the park? It's like a 20 by 20 patch of grass for structured play or sports related activities. Are you all having different processes for how much field you're using?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NELSON: Sure. You know, we're really encouraging, especially leagues or organized sports play to be using the athletic field permit process and to be permitting those spaces. The 20 by 20, you know, is more for a birthday party or, you know, some very, you know, small group of people. But we really don't want other park spaces to start to get overutilized for sports play. That's not what the special events permitting process is really made for.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: So for those smaller instances that come up?

2 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NELSON: So, you know,
3 I think we're working with some groups that want to
4 offer, you know, clinics or things like that, you
5 know, parts of fields and figuring out how we can
6 divide up some of these permittable spaces in our
7 athletic field system as opposed to doing it on other
8 parkland.

9 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Got it. Okay. And
10 then going to the revenue, how much revenue was
11 collected through permit fees for the most recent
12 Fiscal Year?

13 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NELSON: So, for
14 Fiscal Year '25 to date, we've brought in 3.7 million
15 dollars.

16 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: 3.7 million. And
17 what's the trend been over the last few years? Has
18 that only increased or?

19 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NELSON: So, in the
20 full FY 2024 was 2.4 million so it's definitely an
21 increase, and that's largely due to the fact that as
22 part of our rule change, we did increase fees and
23 restructure fees.

2 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: I see. So, there's
3 been a 1.3-million-dollar increase from last year to
4 this year or over the last two years, basically.

5 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NELSON: Yeah. We
6 hadn't increased the permit fees since I think 2012
7 so this was both restructuring where before we were
8 charging based on the type of sport and not the type
9 of field.

10 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Right.

11 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NELSON: And we were
12 also building in field lighting into those fields
13 that had lighting so lighting is now a separate
14 charge and we're charging separately for the type of
15 field and not the type of sport. And we also
16 increased the permit fees for adult leagues and
17 instituted for the first time a smaller charge for
18 profit youth leagues.

19 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Right. Right. Okay.
20 And then am I correct that, this is always an issue
21 for me that the fees that you all collect, that does
22 not go back to the Parks Department. It does not go
23 back even to the park within which the field is
24 located, but it goes to the City's general fund. Is
25 that right?

2 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NELSON: That is
3 correct. But again, the general fund funds our entire
4 agency so it comes back to us one way or the other.

5 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: In some fashion.
6 Yes, I agree. But I think with all of these things,
7 it's just ridiculous from fields to concessions that
8 the money doesn't go back into the Parks Department
9 directly, but also more specifically to the park
10 that's being used that could use that funding. You
11 take, for example, Flushing Meadows Corona Park, a
12 number of soccer leagues there, a number of
13 concessions there, and that money doesn't go back to
14 Flushing Meadows Corona Park. So, it is a larger
15 issue for me overall that we'll continue to work on.

16 What about permit fees that are generated
17 in parks with conservancies? Does that money go to
18 the conservancies? I'm assuming that goes to the
19 conservancies and not to the general fund, right?

20 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER NELSON: No, generally
21 that goes to the general fund as well.

22 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: I see. Got it.

23 CHIEF DRURY: And more broadly, just to
24 clarify, the permitting for those parks are generally
25

still handled by the agency so it's really part of the larger system anyhow.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: So, it's all going to the general fund, one from another. Okay, got it.

I think those are all the questions. Give me one second. Yes, those are all the questions I had. I would encourage you to both stay to hear from the members of the public who testified too, because as I mentioned, we are hearing a lot of these things and I think knowing Parks' intention with this system, perhaps the more can be done to make sure that it is providing the access that it's intended to provide. So, thank you all so much for your testimony.

So, I'm now going to open up the hearing for public testimony and also agency testimony as well. I'm just going to read a bit in the beginning.

I remind members of the public that this is a formal government proceeding and that decorum shall be observed at all times. As such, members of the public shall remain silent at all times.

The witness table is reserved for people who wish to testify. No video recording or photography is allowed from the witness table.

Further, members of the public may not present audio or video recordings of testimony, but may submit transcripts of such recordings to Sergeant-at-Arms for inclusion in the hearing record.

If you wish to speak at today's hearing, please fill out an appearance card with the Sergeant-at-Arms and wait to be recognized. When recognized, you will have two minutes to speak on today's hearing topic, which is Improving Recreational Access to Athletic Fields and Playgrounds at Intros 566, 573, and 643.

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

I'm now going to call up, before we go to public testimony itself, I'm going to call up, we have a representative from the New York City Independent Budget Office, one of our City agencies, here to testify. I will call up Steph Kranes for your testimony. Thank you, IBO.

2 STEPHANIE KRANES: Good afternoon, Chair
3 Krishnan and Members of the Committee on Parks and
4 Recreation and other Council Members. I'm Steph
5 Kranes, Senior Education Budget and Policy Analyst at
6 the New York City Independent Budget Office. I
7 appreciate the opportunity to testify today regarding
8 Intro. 566, which prioritizes the expansion of the
9 Schoolyards to Playgrounds program.

10 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Sorry, do you mind
11 bringing the mic a little bit closer to you?

12 STEPHANIE KRANES: Sure.

13 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you.

14 STEPHANIE KRANES: Which prioritizes the
15 expansion of the Schoolyards to Playgrounds program
16 for at least 25 additional schoolyards located in
17 environmental justice areas. My testimony focuses on
18 all available schoolyards and builds upon IBO's
19 recent analysis requested by Council Member Brewer.
20 In that letter, published in January 2025, IBO
21 summarized the cost of keeping all outdoor
22 schoolyards open to the public after school on
23 weekdays and for full eight-hour days on weekends,
24 based purely on the price of labor. IBO estimated
25 this cost for schoolyards that were not already

participating in the Schoolyards to Playgrounds program. IBO previously estimated this cost in 2022 and found an increase by eight buildings participating in the Playgrounds program since then, from 260 up to 268, based on publicly available data. The Schoolyards to Playgrounds program, which began in 2007, is co-managed by Department of Education, Department of Parks and Recreation, and the Trust for Public Land, and allows public access to playgrounds on weekends. The Mayor's Preliminary Budget, released in January 2025, added 770,000 dollars to Fiscal Years 2026 and beyond. The Administration indicated these funds will support an expansion of the Schoolyards to Playgrounds program by 11 additional schoolyards, a 4 percent (TIMER CHIME) increase from the 268 buildings that currently participate. Regarding IBO's estimate of additional costs, IBO assumes the cost to keep playgrounds open on a weekend would be to pay a custodian for eight hours and on a weekday after school for three hours at \$44.95, which is the \$29.97 an hour plus time and a half, based on the prevailing wage schedule settled July 1st, 2024. IBO's estimate did not account for other costs, such as playground improvements, which

would be made prior to the playground opening to the public. Based on publicly available data as of December 2024, IBO used this hourly rate to estimate the labor costs for one additional playground as follows. One weekend day would be \$360 or \$37,000 per year for both weekend days, including summer months. One weekday after school would be \$135 per weekday or \$35,000 per year for all five weekdays, including summer months. In total, those weekend and extended weekday costs amount to a combined amount of \$72,000 per year for one playground. Regarding the counts of school buildings with outdoor yards available, of the 946 buildings that have outdoor yards, according to the most recent report on physical education pursuant to Local Law 102 of 2015 and released for the 2023-24 school year, 676 buildings have outdoor yards available, but are not part of the Schoolyards to Playgrounds program currently, and therefore are not open to the public during after school hours. If all 676 buildings were kept open on weekends and extended weekday hours, the total annual cost would be approximately 49 million dollars, again based only on labor costs.

1 Lastly, IBO also examined the average
2 distance that students would need to travel to the
3 nearest City park for schools with a yard and for
4 schools without a yard. IBO found that for the 676
5 school buildings with a yard that are not currently
6 open during non-school hours, students would need to
7 travel just 0.26 miles or 5.2 blocks on average to
8 the nearest park. However, the maximum distance
9 traveled would be 2 miles or 40 blocks in Staten
10 Island and over a mile in Queens and in the Bronx.
11 For the 431 school buildings without an outdoor yard
12 available, students would need to travel just 0.29
13 miles or 5.8 blocks on average to the nearest park.
14 The maximum distance, however, would be 1.6 miles in
15 Queens and 1.4 miles in the Bronx. Thank you for the
16 opportunity to testify. IBO welcomes your questions.

17 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you very much
18 for your testimony. This is actually very helpful
19 data to see and to have it broken out in this way.
20 So, if I understood this right, the 676 are the
21 remaining schools throughout the city that are not
22 part of the Schoolyards to Playground Initiative, but
23 with playgrounds that could be part of it. So in
24 other words, for another 50 million dollars, all of
25

New York City's playgrounds with play yards could be opened up to the public.

STEPHANIE KRANES: Yes, the 676 buildings have outdoor yards available based on publicly available data, and there were 431 buildings that don't have an available yard based on the same data. And then additionally, there's the 268 that are currently in the playgrounds program.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Got it. If you opened up the 676 buildings that have school yards and made them part of this program, did you all calculate how that would affect the access that New Yorkers have within walking distance to a play yard? I think you both looked at the 431 without an outdoor yard, but the 676, if you bring them in, how does that impact walkability? If you open them up, does that impact walkability for anyone to play yards?

STEPHANIE KRANES: So, you're asking if all 676 buildings with a yard were made available, how would that affect walkability? Well, so on average, students would travel. I mean, if they attend the school in their district, they would be able to then use the yard that's attached to that

school, as opposed to having to travel five blocks on average to a park that's not part of their school.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: And it would also impact, of course, all the residents who live around there, too, whose walkability to a park would increase with the playground being open, right?

STEPHANIE KRANES: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Got it. Thank you. Council Member Brewer, do you have any questions?

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: No. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you very much. It's very helpful. It seems like a very worthwhile investment to me for 50 million dollars, at the very least.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: I just want to thank IBO for doing all that work. I really appreciate it. Thank you.

STEPHANIE KRANES: Oh, sure. Thank you both.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you. We'll now call up our next panel.

Now this is public testimony. We have Sophia Stelboum from Trust for Public Land, Merritt

Birnbaum from Riverside Park Conservancy, and Avery Wallace from New York City H2O.

You can sit at the table, too. All right, we've got Sophia from New York Trust for Public Land.

SOPHIA STELBOUM: Good afternoon, Chairs Brewer and Krishnan and Members of the Parks Committee. My name is Sophia Stelboun, and I'm a Program Coordinator at Trust for Public Land. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of two bills introduced by Council Member Gale Brewer pertaining to access to athletic fields and playgrounds and the installation of drinking fountains near such facilities.

Since 1996, the Trust for Public Land has partnered with City agencies and many City Council Members to convert over 230 asphalt lots into vibrant school community playgrounds. These sites feature shade trees, gardens, athletic courts, running tracks, and outdoor classrooms, and provide close to home places to gather, exercise, and play for students and neighbors alike. Numerous studies show that access to outdoor play in nature relieves stress, increases physical activity, improves mental health, and decreases social isolation for both

adults and youth. These playgrounds depend on annual custodial funding to ensure they remain safe, clean, and accessible to the community outside of school hours. While roughly 300 sites receive this essential funding for maintenance through PlaNYC and annual City Council allocation, there is potential to open more than 300 additional sites to the public through baseline funding for custodial support. The Division of School Facilities allocates 70,000 dollars per year to open a schoolyard to the public. Adding 25 per year would cost the City a mere 1.75 million dollars at today's prices, an easy, cost-effective way to increase play space within a walkable distance from home. Trust for Public Land wholeheartedly supports Intros 566 and 643, requiring DPR and DOE to create a plan to fund the opening of additional schoolyards for public use each year, prioritizing those in environmental justice areas. Parks and playgrounds are more crucial than ever, offering cost-effective, research-based solutions to public health and loneliness. Thank you for affording me the opportunity to address this Committee this afternoon. We greatly appreciate your attention to these important issues. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you for your testimony. I just want to say I cannot say enough good things about Trust for Public Land. It's a really phenomenal organization and purpose, and as I said, I've seen it personally. IS-145 in Jackson Heights, we have the least amount of green space in the city. That playground, had very little to no green space, and the way you all have transformed it is incredible with green space, environmental resilient architecture there too, beautiful basketball hoops and a track, and I can tell you every day of the year that playground is fully utilized. The school loves it. The principal loves it. Our community, every day after school on the weekends, it is fully packed with students and families, and it's just such an incredible example of the work you all do, but how a program like the Schoolyard to Playground Initiative with TPL really leading that work. We can do so much more for playgrounds across our city, so thank you all for your work.

SOPHIA STELBOUM: Absolutely. Thank you so much. Really happy to hear that.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Absolutely.
Merritt.

MERRITT BIRNBAUM: Thank you. Thank you,
Council Member Krishnan. My name is Merritt Birnbaum.
I'm the President and CEO of Riverside Park
Conservancy. I'd also like to thank Council Member
Brewer for introducing these crucial bills that will
make both drinking water and public open space more
accessible for all New Yorkers. Council Member Brewer
represents the southern portion of our park and has
been a great advocate for many years for parks across
the city.

Riverside Park Conservancy cares for five
parks representing six miles of park land. We work in
partnership with NYC Parks to care for parks between
59th Street and 181st Street. I updated the numbers,
but within that, it's about 16 playgrounds, 14
athletic fields, 10 basketball courts, 8 volleyball
courts, 30 tennis courts, 3 handball courts, 5
pickleball courts, a skate park, 2 running tracks, 3
outdoor gyms, and our greenway that runs the entire
park and is used by cyclists and pedestrians year-
round. So, thousands of people of all ages are using
the park every day, rain or shine, and especially

through the heat of the summer. As climate change brings more extreme heat and drought conditions, access to drinking water becomes even more crucial. It's a basic human right and a key element in keeping people safe, especially during outdoor activities, of which our park is well known and well-loved for. In a park with so many opportunities for sports, exercise, and play, including our summer camp that hosts thousands of children, we're particularly concerned about the issue of having access to drinking water. By increasing the number of fountains, and many of our fountains are in disrepair, we have about 35 fountains in the park, but they're really, really old. Many of them don't have pressure, very hard to fill water bottles in them. We've been working on this issue with Council Member Brewer's office, and I'm really glad to see the Council taking up this issue. It is something that is a critical human right, and not only is it something that will ensure people can stay hydrated, but it also will help prevent a lot of plastic from accumulating in our park, and free up our park staff time to do other tasks which are so critical for our park. We take

thousands and thousands of single-use plastic water bottles out of our park every year.

I also just want to underscore that we strongly support Intro. 566, which would make more playground school yards available after hours, as was discussed earlier. While we're grateful to have Riverside Park available with its 16 playgrounds for children who live nearby, we recognize that many, many children do not have playgrounds within a half mile, as was pointed out in the IBO report, and we believe that every child has a right to a playground within walking distance, as this bill would mandate so thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I have longer testimony, which I will submit online. Thank you again.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Sure, thanks. One question. Merritt, thank you and Riverside Park Conservancy for all that you do for such a wonderful park, and appreciate your testimony in support of the two pieces of legislation.

Switching gears for a second, on the topic of permitting itself, you all have incredible ball fields and courts that I'm sure there's high demand for them too. So, can you speak a bit about

how the new permitting rules has affected you all?
What has the demand been like for your fields, and
how have you all tried to navigate that?

MERRITT BIRNBAUM: Yeah. Demand remains
very high. The Conservancy, also, we don't handle the
permitting, so I can't really speak to it. I know
that, you know, the Parks Department continues to
handle an extraordinary number of reservations for a
limited number of fields, and, you know...

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: But to the best of
your knowledge, are you hearing any feedback from
park goers about it at all, just curious.

MERRITT BIRNBAUM: We hear that people are
frustrated. People are navigating the system. What is
challenging is when fields are closed, and so we
recently were able to undertake repairs. Our Parks
Department staff work very hard to make sure that we
can move people around if something comes up where a
field is reserved, and scheduled maintenance and
repairs are happening, and then changes have to be
made, and we have to actually find other places to
put people. We're fortunate that we have so many
fields in the park that we can often figure out
alternative locations, but it's really challenging.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thanks for your testimony.

Avery Wallace from NYC H2O.

AVERY WALLACE: Hi. Thank you, Chair Krishnan and Members of the New York City Council Committee on Parks and Recreation for convening this hearing and providing the opportunity to testify in support of two important bills that would expand recreational access to athletic fields and playgrounds. My name is Avery Wallace, and I am here on behalf of NYC H2O.

NYC H2O's mission is to inspire and educate New Yorkers of all ages to learn about, enjoy, and protect their city's local water ecology. Through our educational programs, we foster science-based understanding of New York's ecosystems and promote the City's long-term water resilience in a time of escalating climate change impacts. In 2024 alone, we led 254 field trips at 144 schools, bringing over 7,000 New York City students, primarily from Title I and Title III schools, to experience parks, wetlands, beaches, reservoirs, and natural areas across the city. These students, many of whom have minimal access to green spaces or STEM

education, benefit immensely from time spent outdoors. Our work underscores how essential it is that all New Yorkers, especially youth, have safe, welcoming, and equitable access to recreational spaces. For this reason, we support both Intro. 573, which would increase the number of drinking fountains in public parks, and Intro. 566, which would expand afterschool and weekend access to school playgrounds. These common-sense improvements would promote physical activity, enhance public health, and foster deep connections between New Yorkers and their local environments. Intro. 573 would also reduce reliance on single-use plastics, advancing the City's zero-waste goals, and reinforcing New York City's leadership in sustainability. Thank you for your consideration of NYC H2O's testimony. We look forward to continued partnership with the Council, the Parks Department, and the fellow community organizations to ensure every New Yorker can access clean drinking water and vibrant public green spaces.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you for your testimony. Thank you for your great work at NYC H2O, especially around this issue.

Oh, sorry, Council Member Brewer and then Council Member Holden.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: Thank you very much. I think, actually, for the Chair, one of the questions would be followup. We did get the number of fountains from Parks, but we didn't get the number of broken fountains from Parks, and I would like that to be a follow-up question for the Parks Department, because if it's broken, and it sounds like it's outdated, so how would we get both repairs and new? Second, for the same issue of the silo. I get so frustrated when agencies silo, so it kind of got hinted at when I asked about the perimeter of the parks that there is a hydrant, so don't tell me there's no water, because there's a hydrant. So how can DEP, FDNY, and Parks work together to produce fountains at the edge of the parks? If it's an issue with trees, I understand that. Issue with barricades of other kinds, but there is a hydrant there, and that means water, so why can't we do that connection? That would be another follow-up.

And then my other question is on the playgrounds. It seems to me, and I wonder if IBO may know this or Trust, is that if you are asking, and we

all are, for more field time, in the playgrounds that I know of, there are a gazillion basketball and quality basketball courts, and in some cases, the appropriate size so you could actually have PSAL games. So, my question would be for IBO, maybe you didn't look at this, but how to alleviate some of the pressure on current basketball in parks would be to have the playgrounds, and I don't think IBO looked to see what is an actual appropriate size for PSAL, but do you have some sense of how many of those are basketball or other kinds of playgrounds? It may not have been in your report.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: If IBO can come back, and TPL, this is also a question for TPL, but if you both want to come back and...

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: We can follow up. We can follow up.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Okay.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: But Trust for Public Land, do you have some sense of how populated your playgrounds are or how many people use them? I mean, I believe it's pretty constant.

SOPHIA STELBOUM: Thank you for your question. I don't know if I have that information

with me at this time for a precise answer, but I'd be happy to follow up and get back to you on that.

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

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you, Council Member Brewer, and (INAUDIBLE) Parks, Matt, if we can get that information for Council Member Brewer's first two questions, I think that's important information to know.

MERRITT BIRNBAUM: If I may add a clarifying point on the drinking fountain, there is definitely a big distinction between totally broken, because some of them are knocked over or not working, but then there's the barely working, which is when this much water comes out, which I think is a sanitary issue, and also you can't fill a water bottle in them. There are states where many of these drinking fountains for us are like... maybe there should be a grading system.

COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: I know. I think we should really focus on that issue. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: That's a great point and well said. That's absolutely true. I think we have to look at all of those and the grading

2 system as well, because to your point, Merritt, there
3 are fountains that are barely functional.

4 MERRITT BIRNBAUM: Yeah, and I'll say that
5 in talking to our Parks staff about it, just given
6 how underfunded the Parks Department is right now,
7 it's really hard to take on just the maintenance of
8 the ones that are barely working, because it's a
9 multi-crew effort and trying to bring together the
10 teams to tackle those when you're so understaffed.

11 COUNCIL MEMBER BREWER: If I was in
12 charge, I would get this goddamn silo to go away,
13 because the Water Board has tons of money at DEP,
14 right, so why can't we use some of the Water Board
15 money to fix water fountains? Just as one example of
16 a non-silo approach. Thank you.

17 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: I think one of the
18 main lessons from today's hearing is we have to make
19 sure the agencies are working much closer together if
20 we're going to solve some of these problems.

21 I know Council Member Holden had some
22 questions.

23 COUNCIL MEMBER HOLDEN: Yes, and I just
24 want to echo the Chair's praise of the Trust for
25 Public Land. You guys, I'm amazed at how you operate,

how fast you work, and involve the students in the design. I can tell you that is really resonating in the schools, but I go there and I'm amazed at your work, and then it's done so fast. We're not used to that in New York City, but I would like to say that you probably are helping to launch careers for future architects, designers, engineers, it is purely amazing, because sometimes you don't realize one little, you praise a student, and they realize, they understand that, and then they carry that forth in life so I think that's an important aspect of the Trust of Public Land, the way you operate.

But I'd just like to ask you a question. What is the biggest obstacle you're facing with the Schoolyard to Playground program? Because I know we had some obstacles in the past. The pandemic was one, a big one, but putting 70,000 dollars per school to maintain that is a drop in the bucket, considering the City's budget.

SOPHIA STELBOUM: Thank you, and I agree about the children. It's a really amazing process.

I don't know if I have the ability to answer your question right now, just based on my position, and yeah, I'm not entirely sure.

COUNCIL MEMBER HOLDEN: Because we had projects, I had several schoolyards that were waiting years, and I think it was the City's budget, and putting enough money, that 70,000 dollars, believe it or not, was the obstacle, and that's why I was hoping to hear that it's been better. I don't know if it's better or worse than it was, but you know, talking to the Mayor, every time we talk budget, I say put money into opening up our schools, our school gymnasiums. Every district should have a number of schools that are open on weekends or weeknights or, you know, give us something. And you're not talking about a big investment to give our youth or even the community access to, you know, gyms and facilities that are closed on weekends, all weekend. They're sitting there while our kids are out on the street. So, it's not really a wise investment. We're not making the wise investments that we should, but I have faith in Trust for Public Land. I always, you know, because every project that I've, you know, partnered with the Trust, it's worked, and it's been amazing payoffs.

And I want to congratulate H2O for wonderful work that you're doing and expanding. You keep getting bigger, but, and I like that. And you're

in my District, but you know, again, it's a win-win for everyone. Thank you so much for your work, too. Thanks.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thanks so much, Council Member Holder. I couldn't agree more. I think it is a drop in the bucket. It's total 50 million dollars is what it would take to bring all the playgrounds into the Schoolyard to Playground program. It's, as IBO noted before, it's such a worthwhile investment, frankly, in the grand scheme of things with 114-billion-dollar budget. It's such a small amount. But, you know, I agree. I think in addition to finding ways for the agencies to collaborate and communicate and how that shouldn't be a barrier, you all as non-profit organizations are really doing incredible work that the Parks Department should really utilize more to make up for areas where perhaps the public resources and capacity may be an issue. You all are proving how we can expand in creative ways the ability to address and build and repair new playgrounds on quick timelines, even if the Parks Department can't do it alone so I appreciate all your work. Thank you.

The next panel is Sommer from Coalition to Save Public Rec Center, Kit Greenberg, Wellness in the Schools, and then Robert Seamans from Local Nature Lab.

We can start with Sommer Omar.

SOMMER OMAR: Good afternoon. My name is Sommer Omar. I'm the founder of the Coalition to Save the Public Recreation Center Downtown. We're comprised of block associations, parks advocates, political clubs, and neighbors organizing to save the Tony Dapolito Recreation Center, a public affordable rec center located in the West Village. This rec center already had a popular indoor basketball court, and for the last five years, the Parks Department shut down the facility for much-needed repairs. The Department recently changed its mind, however, and now plans to demolish this facility, basketball court and all. I personally haven't had hoop dreams, but I grew up with three brothers who all thought they'd be in the NBA. Every chance they'd get, they'd grab a basketball and play pickup games with kids from the neighborhood or use the plastic mini-hoop on their doors that inevitably fell apart every few months because of too much dunking and one too many alleged

game-winning fadeaway shots. My brothers didn't make it to the NBA, which I believe only they were shocked about, but every kid should get to at least dream about making it or have access to indoor courts to stay active and find a safe place to grow, not just as athletes, but as young people figuring out who they are. We have had three Community Board meetings downtown about the Tony Dapolito Recreation Center, and there has been near unanimous outcry over this demolition plan, and you should hear how much this basketball court meant to the kids, not just living downtown, but who came from across the city to be part of a rare mix of kids from all backgrounds, united by a love of the game and a deep respect for Coach Ray Pagan, a legendary figure who didn't just coach basketball but built a family. Kids who played for him still come back for an annual reunion, and they even created a website called iplayedforray.com because playing for him on that public indoor court meant something and stayed with them. For these reasons, I urge the City Council to pass the Indoor Hoops Act, and I am hopeful, Chairman Krishnan, you'll be on our side as we fight to save this beating heart in our neighborhood. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you for your testimony.

KIT GREENBERG: Good afternoon, Council Chair Krishnan and esteemed Members of the Committee on the Parks and Recreation. My name is Kit Greenberg, and I'm the Senior Coach with Wellness in the Schools, a national non-profit committed to creating healthier environments for children to learn, live, and thrive. I'm honored to testify in strong support of Council Member Gale Brewer's proposed bills, 0573 and 0566.

Every day in my role, I work with students across New York City public schools to promote wellness through nutrition, fitness, and healthy habits. These bills represent essential steps forward in ensuring that all children, regardless of zip code, have equitable access to resources that support their health and development. 0573, which would increase the number of drinking fountains adjacent to parks and green streets, is more than a matter of convenience. It's a matter of health equity. Too often, the students and families we serve in under-resourced neighborhoods lack access to clean public water when they're outside enjoying green

spaces. This bill affirms a basic truth, that hydration is a human right, and that free, accessible water must be available in every corner of our city, not just in well-funded districts. The increased availability of drinking fountains supports children's physical activity and reduces the reliance on sugary beverages, a key contributor to childhood obesity and preventable illness.

0566 would create an annual plan to expand public access to school playgrounds with a focus on environmental justice communities. This could not be more aligned with our mission. Safe outdoor play is foundational to a child's physical and emotional well-being. And yet, for many families, especially in communities of color and low-income areas, access to green and recreational space remains limited after school hours and on weekends. By prioritizing the opening of at least 25 schoolyards each year in these areas, the City would take a powerful step toward reclaiming school playgrounds as true community spaces, where children can run, play, build (TIMER CHIME) social emotional skills, and simply be kids. We at Wellness in the Schools believe that wellness must be integrated into the very fabric

of children's daily lives. That means clean water to drink when they're in the park, that means safe places to play when their school day ends, and that means recognizing that public resources should serve public needs equitably and consistently. Council Member Brewer's proposals reflect a deep understanding of these needs and commitment to health of our children, families, and communities. I urge this Committee to advance both these bills and help New York City lead the way in creating a healthier, more equitable urban environment. Thank you for your leadership and opportunity to testify today.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you for your testimony. Thank you for your work in Wellness in Schools. I think we're trying to coordinate a visit coming up in one of our schools.

Next.

ROBERT SEAMANS: Hi, thanks for having me here. My name is Rob Seamans. I'm here on behalf of Local Nature Lab. We're a community organization with a focus on advocacy, education, and promoting access to local nature and outdoor spaces. We believe that the proposals presented today, 573 and 566, will

promote people's greater health and recreation opportunities in diverse New York City communities.

Access to schoolyard playgrounds can increase the extent of public open space, especially in neighborhoods with low park acreage, though these spaces should be considered as a complement to rather than a substitute for increasing green space in communities that have experienced traditional underinvestment in parks. Many communities do not have easy access to urban parks or play spaces that provide activities for teens and tweens. Schoolyards are often designed for these age groups. They usually include basketball hoops and open areas for active play. This will support neighborhoods by providing children with safe and productive places to play and socialize and, frankly, I think we can appreciate that rather than spending more time on their cell phones and things like that. It may also take pressure off of wild and planted areas, which are often designed as passive spaces, but used as active spaces when high-use play areas are not available in a community. Additionally, we believe that greater access to clean drinking water in New York City public spaces is essential. Not only will this keep

people safe and hydrated in the hottest months, it provides a way to reduce plastic pollution as people may move away from buying bottled water. Local Nature Lab believes that education about the quality of New York City drinking water, combined with access, will increase the quality of life for New Yorkers throughout the five boroughs while supporting environmental initiatives. Clean and publicly accessible drinking water is a public health issue, especially during extreme weather events, which are increasing in frequency and in duration and in heat-vulnerable communities so we very much support these bills that Council Member Brewer has brought forward. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you so much for your testimony.

Our final in-person panel is Susan Dvells and Sharon Brown.

Susan, you may begin.

SUSAN DVELLS: Good afternoon. My name is Susan Dvells. I represent a diverse group of homeowners and renters who live adjacent to the Curtis High School athletic field on Staten Island. While we very strongly support expanded community

access to Department of Education facilities, particularly in designated disadvantaged and environmental justice areas such as ours, we must oppose Curtis High School as a candidate for extended after-hours use of its athletics facilities. Our civic association has repeatedly approached the principal and athletics director requesting limited access to the track, the indoor pool, and gymnasium, only to be told that PSAL usage has maximized their capacity. Yet a non-profit youth football league regularly uses the athletic field without access to essential amenities such as toilets, dressing rooms, proper parking, and designated gathering areas. During summer and fall, the facility operates for approximately 14 hours daily, generating excessive traffic using non-compliant stadium lighting, constant crowds, announcements, and music using amplified sound that exceed City code limits. Frequently, vehicles idle for extended periods, raising environmental and health concerns. And despite our reports, the NYPD 120 has not addressed illegal parking that impedes emergency vehicles and disrupts MTA bus service. DOE District 31 has suggested that we must accept these disruptions as an

inherent risk of residing adjacent to a school.

(TIMER CHIME) Meanwhile, Curtis High School has not demonstrated compliance with Department of Education regulations or New York City ordinances. We cannot support expanded use of this facility until Curtis High School demonstrates its ability to manage its current operations in a manner that respects the neighborhood and addresses these ongoing concerns. Thank you very much.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you for your testimony.

Before we move to the next panelist, I'll also call up Kelly Pierre to the witness table to testify.

And now we'll go to Sharon Brown.

SHARON BROWN: Hello. My name is Sharon Brown. Before I begin, remember Israel released the hostages, let Yahweh's people go, defend Israel.

Okay, the parks are very necessary. The schools should be allowed to open up after hours for the community. This would help out the safety in the areas. When people have something to do with their time, outdoor activities, children will not get into so much trouble and the problems that they're having

in schools and stuff like that will dissipate when they actually have something to do during school times and after schools. They have to make the parks accessible for the disabled. There has to be activities for disabled people. When they have slides for well-bodied people, they also have to have some kind of slides or something for disabled people. I don't know who's doing the drawings and the blueprints, but they also have to make sure that disabled people are represented. People are going to be training for Olympics and competitions and different things like that in the parks. They need to upgrade what we have in our parks. We definitely need water and things like that. These are things that we know are the essentials, but we also have specialty things that we need in the parks. A lot of people go to the parks, they play basketball, and then they wind up in professional sports and things like that. We need to try to have these facilities also cater to people who are going to be in professional athletics. It's not the only thing that they can do, but this is something that they need in these parks. We need the parks to be state-of-the-art and the (TIMER CHIME) recreation centers to be up on the latest

technologies in play and just regular technology. I can go into that further at a different time.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you so much for your testimony, Ms. Brown.

Now we'll turn to Kelly Pierre.

KELLY PIERRE: Hello. All right. Can I have an extra minute, three minutes? It could be extended.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Let's try to get that, just to be fair to everyone else, too, that we're stuck with the time limit. Try to do the best you can to stick to the two minutes.

KELLY PIERRE: Okay. All right. Representatives of the Council, I come before you today in support of City Council Introduction 643-2024 and increasing access to recreational parks. I am a resident of East New York and in the District of Council Member Chris Banks, who is listed as one of the sponsors of this bill. As an active Community Board member, community activist, and founder of my business, All Access Golf, I understand the need for sports and recreation access for all. You may be asking, Kelly, don't you do golf? Yeah, I do golf, but where some see a basketball court, I see a golf

course. You see, golf isn't just a game you play, it's also a state of being, a getaway, a place to be able to play and enter into a flow state of mind. A key factor of getting into a flow state is environment, and by making basketball courts accessible, you are now creating an environment to be able to enter into a flow state, which can help enhance the mental health of residents of New York City. As a New York City golfer, I know how hard it is to find places to play or practice. This can be even more difficult when you don't have a car. For the past two years, All Access Golf has held free community golf clinics called Look at the Birds in partnership with the Canarsie Merchant Association that has worked to make golf accessible within the community. We also held a family fun golf day at a local community garden, which had over 600 registrants. With these proven events, I would be denied a permit for a park, but what has not been explored is using plastic clubs that would not form divots. Why am I telling you this? It's because the bill has components that can be identified from my golfing experience. Number one, how the Department of Parks and Recreation and the Department of Education

will facilitate the use of indoor basketball courts and gyms that are maintained and operated (TIMER CHIME) by the City. According to the National Golf Foundation, there has been a 55 percent increase in the pool of potential golfers since 2019, which is attributed to the growth and popularity of off-course golf. A basketball court would be listed as off-course golf. Two, how the Department of Parks and Recreation will coordinate with other relevant agencies to facilitate the use of indoor basketball courts and gyms. In order to play golf in New York City, you would have to find your nearest golf course. There are 13 public golf courses across New York City, which isn't accessible to all New Yorkers. This bill can help make the golf program accessible to all. With that said, a budget would be needed in order to create a seamless pipeline to extract the hidden value that this bill intends to bring out. Since my time is running out, this would be a perfect conversation to have on the golf course on what the infrastructure can look like.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Well said, and I agree.

Thank you so much for your testimony to all of you.

We'll now turn to virtual. We have two people on the virtual. Our first witness is Érycka Montoya.

SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: You may begin.

ÉRYCKA MONTOKA: Good afternoon. Thank you, Park Chair Krishnan and the rest of the Committee for holding this hearing. My name is Érycka Montoya. I'm a candidate for City Council for District 21 to represent Corona, East Elmhurst, Jackson Heights, and LeFrak City but, today, I come to you as a mom of a first grader and a fifth grader who attend public school and to express my support of Intros 566 and 643.

I live in a densely populated working-class district that is desperate for more recreational space for young kids. We also know that there are some limits to simply building more space, so it is imperative that we get creative and resourceful about addressing this shortage. We know the value of recreation and movement for kids. We can't continue to tout the benefits of engaging in sports such as developing healthy physical and

nutritional habits, learning how to be part of a team, lowering anxiety, building self-confidence, and then not invest in the very resources that make these pathways possible and accessible. This increase in access is critical for working parents and students alike. As a kid, I didn't have access to playing sports on a regular basis until I was in high school, and it was a game changer. Paying out of pocket for my mom was not a cost she could afford for my sister and me, and decades later, it is a cost I struggle with for my two kids. In fact, what made it possible for them to participate consistently was that during the winter months, there was a program at their school, so it was within walking distance. I got lucky this time around, but it shouldn't be a matter of luck. Access to afterschool sports should be available for all kids and free, if not low cost. While these bills don't get us quite there, they begin to open the door to what is possible. Like many other parents, also know the struggle of accommodating the weekend schedule to attend a game or a tournament that probably only got posted 24, 36 hours ago, only to then have plans completely change because of inclement weather. Now these kids are

stuck at home, unable to get that energy out, and making these indoor courts available would alleviate this. We know that youth sports lower stress levels, gives children greater self-confidence and self-esteem, and it leads to (TIMER CHIME) improved cognitive performance and creativity so we need to...

SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Thank you. Your time has expired.

ÉRYCKA MONTOYA: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you so much for your testimony and for those good points.

Now we have our final witness, Christopher Leon Johnson, virtual.

CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: Yeah. Hello, hello. My name is Christopher Leon Johnson. I'm here to show my support for Kevin Riley's bill, Intro. 566, but we need to make sure that we need to ban all drill rappers from these schools. We need to bill any music that has a drill beat. We need to ban any person that's a convicted felon to be around these kids. At the same time, while we're pushing for sports, we need to push for coding too. Kevin Riley, you need to introduce a bill to push for coding inside all New York City schools, especially in bills

like this. Like I said, we need to ban all Cure Violence non-profits from being involved with this type of initiative because I have a big feeling that they're going to allow these, like I saw Farrah Louis there and she's connected to Elite Learners Inc. They get a lot of from the City Council, particularly Farrah Louis. I have a big feeling that she's going to allow organizations like that organization to come in and run the whole show. We need to introduce a bill to the City Council to ban all Cure Violence or violent interruptive organizations from being involved with this type of initiative because once that happens, you have a few of these people that are part of those non-profits like Life Camp and Man Up Inc. and all these non-profits that Chris Bank has big ties to. They're going to really influence these kids, and what's going to happen is going to be counterproductive to what's going to be accomplished. What you guys spoke out outside that rally table, Mr. Shekar, and like I said, we need to ban all bad influences from these kids. Like I said, no drill rappers, nobody rapping over drill beats, no gangster rap, no felons. We need to make sure that nobody wears tattoos. I don't have tattoos, but if they have

tattoos, make sure you need to ban. Make sure nobody has tattoos, no gang tattoos allowed to be shown in these schools. Like I said, once that happens, maybe this stuff will stop. But if you just let this stuff go blanket and just allow all the bad elements like Bobby Shmurda and all these little gangster rappers or convicted felons talking about shooting another Black man, shooting each other back and forth for no apparent reason, like drill rap, like the City Council, like Sandy Nurse who allowed the rap group 41 to host an event (TIMER CHIME) in her District and she sponsored...

SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Thank you. Your time has expired.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thanks so much, Mr. Johnson. Your time is up.

CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: Nothing's going to be done. So, thank you so much and enjoy your day.

CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: We appreciate your testimony. Thank you.

And on that note, without seeing any other witnesses for public testimony, I want to thank you all so much for coming today for your testimony on this important issue and look forward to our

1 COMMITTEE ON PARKS AND RECREATION 112

2 collective work together with the Parks Department to
3 address expanding access to our parks and
4 playgrounds. Thank you all so much.

5 This hearing is now closed. [GAVEL]

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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 May 26, 2025