



NYC Parks

**Hearing before the New York City Council
Committee on Finance / Committee on Parks & Recreation
Fiscal Year 2024 Executive Budget
May 22, 2023**

Testimony By: Sue Donoghue, Commissioner, NYC Parks

Good morning, Chair Brannan, Chair Krishnan, members of the Finance Committee and Parks Committee, and other members of the Council. My name is Sue Donoghue. I am pleased to be here today testifying as the Commissioner of the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, and to be joined today on this panel by several members of our agency's senior staff leadership.

Firstly, I want to thank the Council for its continued support for our city's open spaces over the past year and for championing the importance of parks for all New Yorkers. Thank you for allowing us the opportunity to discuss the agency's Executive Budget for Fiscal Year 2024, and to provide an overview of our agency's mission to build and maintain a restorative and thriving park system.

The arrival of warmer weather in the spring means we're heading into our peak season, when our city's green and open spaces truly come alive, and more and more people get outdoors to take advantage of our amazing parks to lead happier, healthier lives -- and we've been busy, delivering results for New Yorkers.

In just the last two months, we completed a \$41 million renovation of Starlight Park in the Bronx, closing a former gap in the Bronx River Greenway and converting 2.7 acres of formerly paved, industrial property into a beautiful greenspace with added greenway connections for everyone to enjoy, and also completed an important wetlands restoration at Hook Creek Park in southeast Queens, replenishing sand and adding native plants to preserve and protect this breathtaking natural habitat for birds and other wildlife. We began construction on renovations to Captain Dermody Triangle in Bayside, Queens, which will provide new ADA-accessible entrances, expanded curbs and new trees to this small-but-beloved open space, which commemorates the memory of an abolitionist and Civil War hero. We're continuing to improve and activate our parks through initiatives like "Park Poems," five new art installations in parks around the city that incorporate the literal text of poems into site-specific works of public art, inviting parkgoers to take a moment to pause, contemplate and enjoy their beautiful surroundings. Our GreenThumb community garden division hosted the 39th Annual GrowTogether Conference to celebrate the start of the gardening season, offering the opportunity for over 1,000 New York City community gardeners to network, exchange ideas about best practices and enjoy a variety of lectures, talks, tutorials, giving these dedicated stewards more resources to help improve their local green spaces, in partnership with our agency.

Of course, our busy season means we're also gearing up for the opening of our beaches and pools, so that millions of New Yorkers can stay cool and have fun all summer long. As we have discussed with the Council, despite a national lifeguard shortage that has continued to limit public access to pools in cities across the country, we're doing all that we can to recruit and train as many lifeguards as possible. We're fortunate that here in New York City we were able to open all of our pools and beaches last summer and we're committed to doing that again this summer, though we are clearly still facing a very challenging hiring environment. Because we very much understand the grave importance of teaching the next generation to swim, for health



and safety and in order to build a pipeline for the next generation of lifeguards, we were happy to recently announce that we will be bringing Learn to Swim classes and Parks-hosted Summer Camp programming back to a small subset of our outdoor pools this summer in a limited capacity.

Turning to the specific topic for this hearing, the Fiscal Year 2024 Executive Budget reflects the Administration's ongoing commitment to promoting an equitable recovery by making investments in a greener, healthier city, and gives our Agency the resources we need to continue getting the job done, while demonstrating fiscal responsibility amid the ongoing economic and fiscal challenges facing the city. NYC Parks' Fiscal Year 2024 Executive Expense operating budget is \$610.4 million dollars. This represents a \$27.7 million dollar increase from the FY24 Preliminary Budget, largely reflecting the increased wages for Parks employees which will result from the City's recent contract agreement with District Council 37 negotiated through collective bargaining. The budget also includes new baseline staff additions for our Climber-Pruner Apprenticeship Program as well as funding to formalize more of our natural trails and increase our preventative tree care efforts and inspections, in accordance with the agency's approach to tree risk management.

The agency's 10-Year Capital Plan is \$8.8 billion dollars, allowing the agency to renovate, reimagine and preserve our parks, playgrounds and public spaces. The Executive Budget includes new Mayoral capital allocations for pools and recreation facilities, such as the outdoor pool at Hamilton Fish Park in Manhattan, where we're going to invest \$51 million dollars to completely reconstruct the mechanical and electrical infrastructure for the pool, so it can continue serving New Yorkers for years to come.

In closing, I want to thank Mayor Adams for granting me the incredible privilege of leading this agency, and the opportunity to work with each of you to continue improving our parks and open spaces for all New Yorkers. Many of you are already familiar with our experienced, responsive Borough Commissioners and their district teams, who work alongside our central agency division staff to deliver for New Yorkers every day. We are always available to answer questions and address concerns from your offices and are happy to hear your thoughts on any topic, whether it regards a local park in your district or a citywide agency policy. NYC Parks looks forward to continuing our close partnership with the Council, to create a bright, green future with a more equitable, inclusive and resilient parks system. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, we would now be happy to answer any questions that you may have.