



# City of New York Parks & Recreation



## New York City Council Committees on Parks & Recreation

### Introduction 674 requiring NYC to prune trees that block traffic signs or signals within three days of notification

February 11, 2007

#### Testimony by First Deputy Commissioner Liam Kavanagh

As mentioned earlier, you and your staffs know from your work with constituents that tree pruning, removal and replacement of street trees are the leading types of calls by citizens to 311 on Parks-related issues, as well as the number one issue raised in emails and letters.

Since 2002, the total population of trees under our care has increased. We've planted more than 55,928 street trees, and with the Mayor's Million Trees initiative we are scheduled to plant another 600,000 trees, with 220,000 slated for streets.

In our efforts to make our streets safer from tree-related issues, all dead trees are now removed within 30 days of request. We have pruned a total of 204,029 trees since 2002, largely through block pruning contracts funded by the Council, making our streets safer by removing dead and diseased branches and allowing the trees to grow in ways that are good for them and for the neighborhood. We have decreased the amount of time that a tree waits for routine pruning. In the past, our trees have been pruned once every 10 years. Now, trees are on a 7 year cycle, meaning that we'll have few emergency calls to handle and making response times to urgent needs faster.

The speed of our response to tree issues is something that we've spent a great deal of time working on and something that requires a great amount of coordinator and staff time to address. I thought it might be helpful to give an overview of the how we typically respond to tree pruning and cutting requests.

When a request comes into 311 and is processed electronically by the SIEBEL system, our Forestry team in the applicable borough office finds the tree at that address in our Tree Manager software. The forester adds a tree maintenance request if necessary, and then changes the 311 request stats from 'open' to 'assigned.' If the request warrants, the forester will inspect the condition. Upon inspection, there are two paths to follow:

- (1) All requests that do not result in a tree removal, the forestry staffer updates the 311 disposition code, confirm the request type, enter the inspection date and resolution, add additional notes on the case, and then change the status to 'closed.'
- (2) All requests that result in a tree removal or pruning are closed upon inspection and forestry staff update the resolution code to 'contractor' or 'contractor/utility notified' (where a utility like Consolidated Edison is involved). Once tree removal work is completed, forestry staff will update the 311 disposition code, enter the date of work as the date of resolution. Staff adds necessary notes on the matter and change status to 'closed.'

In light of the above, and the fact that our Forestry staff is stronger than it has been in the last 15 years (we have over 100 Foresters and Climbers and Pruners working throughout the City), we see Introduction 674 as currently drafted most definitely increasing the City's tort liability. This arbitrary timeframe requiring a small window of time to remedy this defect would likely increase our liability since it would be impossible for the agency to meet this time frame. Keep in mind that notice to 311 is not direct notice to Parks, and it may take a day or two to get the 311 complaint to the right person at Parks.

In addition, as a matter of policy, setting a three day timeframe would elevate calls such as these comparable to emergency status, diminishing our ability to readily address true emergency situations like imminent tree falls, dangling limbs and other unpredictable tree events.

Also, as stated previously, PlaNYC recognized the need to expand our ability to do needed pruning work that falls outside of the block pruning program and on top of the list of priority conditions that need special attention are trees that interfere with traffic control devices. The problems that these situations can cause are obvious and are a legitimate safety concern. We also agree that establishing concrete service levels is an important step in ensuring that priorities are addressed promptly. Mayor Bloomberg is committed to making government more transparent and accountable, goals that we are actively working to achieve by developing a new information management system for our Forestry Division that will be fully accessible through 311 and allow on-line tracking of service requests. Our current computer system is so outdated that it can't be networked, cannot be integrated into other systems like the Siebel program that supports 311 and the company that developed it no longer supports the system, making any adjustment impossible. However, we are concerned that establishing service levels through legislation will create a precedent that will limit the City's ability to manage its operations effectively. Just as the City must have flexibility to adjust its budget during periods of fiscal uncertainty, it must also retain the ability to similarly adjust service levels.

Legislation will limit the choices available during those circumstances and may also expose the City to additional tort liability if the legislated service levels are not met, even for legitimate reasons. So while we agree with the purpose and intent of the legislation, the need for transparency and accountability in reporting the results of our efforts, either in individual cases or in the aggregate and are open to working with the Council to establish appropriate service levels, we respectfully believe we can achieve the goals without legislation.



# City of New York Parks & Recreation



## New York City Council Committees on Parks & Recreation

### Oversight - Tree Planting, Tree Pruning, and other Greening Programs

February 11, 2007.

Testimony by  
First Deputy Commissioner Liam Kavanaugh  
and  
Chief of Forestry Fiona Watt

Parks, trees and greening are inextricably linked together. As cities grew and became more congested during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century people began searching for ways to connect with nature. When two large new pastoral cemeteries opened in the 1830s. Mt. Auburn in Boston and Green-Wood in Brooklyn, they were immensely popular with the public, drawing tens of thousands for strolling and picnicking. The demand for parks and open space was clear and spurred the leaders to authorize the creation of Central Park in the 1850s. The Greensward Plan, prepared by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, not only resulted in the great park we know today, it firmly established the place of trees and greenspace in modern cities. Olmsted and Vaux knew intuitively how important nature was to urban life, a lesson that succeeding generations have worked to perpetuate. The Parks Department is heir to that legacy and is responsible for managing, protecting and when possible, expanding, park and open space on behalf of the people of the City of New York.

Today that legacy includes almost 29,000 acres of land, about 11,000 of which are undeveloped, half of the 5 million trees that grow in the City, including almost 600,000 that line our streets and the gardens, landscapes and greenspaces that adorn many of the 1800 park properties under our jurisdiction. It is an enormous responsibility made more so by PlaNYC, Mayor Bloomberg's visionary blue print for creating a greener, greater and more sustainable future. PlaNYC recognized the critical role that trees and greenspaces play in building a cleaner and healthier city for all New Yorkers. Trees clean the air, cool the atmosphere, reduce energy consumption and carbon production, manage storm water, improve property values and make our streets more beautiful. PlaNYC will build on those benefits and extend them to all corners of the City through three initiatives: fully planting out all of our streets, creating 2,000 new acres of forest and building 800 new Greenstreets. Trees Count!, the second census of street trees found 592,140 trees on the streets in all five boroughs. We project that we can add approximately 220,000 more and PlaNYC dedicated \$225 million over the next ten years towards that goal. About 44% of parkland citywide is covered by tree canopy, but with \$39 million provided through PlaNYC and a little ingenuity, we can add another 2,000 acres of tree cover to the total which will create more

oxygen, remove more carbon, absorb more storm water and provide homes for urban wildlife. Greenstreets, the popular program that turns concrete and asphalt into streetside gardens, will grow by more than a third as 800 new sites are added to the program thanks to \$13.6million in new funding provided through PlaNYC. Primary responsibility for overseeing this massive greening agenda falls to our Central Forestry and Horticulture division and Chief Watt will discuss how we will realize these goals while managing the urban forest.

Central Forestry and Horticulture has three primary missions: managing the street tree planting and Greenstreets programs; providing policy direction, developing training programs and monitoring the performance of our tree maintenance and horticulture operations; and, conducting research and development into emerging issues in the fields of forestry and horticulture. Thanks to PlaNYC, street tree planting and Greenstreet construction are busier than ever. This fall we planted over 8,300 street trees, more than in the entire prior year and built 50 new Greenstreets. Street trees provide a link to nature for every block in the City. For decades, we only planted street trees based on requests from property owners. Now in order to fully capitalize on the benefits of street trees and achieve our PlaNYC goals, we are automatically replacing dead trees after they have been removed and are planting entire blocks in communities that lack street trees. This spring we will conduct full-block planting in six neighborhoods that are part of our Trees for Public Health initiative. These are neighborhoods with low canopy cover and high incidents of asthma where we have developed comprehensive greening plans in response to the Mayor's pledge to focus on communities that have historically have lacked greenery. We will still honor individual requests for street trees and it's easier than ever to request one. Simply call 311 or go on-line at the Parks website to ask for a free street tree. And of course we still welcome requests from elected officials and community boards. We plan to plant more than 12,000 street trees this spring to complete the first installment of our drive to fully stock our streets with trees. In addition to block planting we are also exploring tree growing contracts with nurseries throughout the region to ensure the quantity, quality and species diversification need to build a healthy urban forest.

### **MILLION TREES NYC**

PlaNYC also established the ambitious goal of planting one million new trees throughout the city's five boroughs over the next decade. To help reach the million trees goal, MillionTreesNYC – a citywide tree planting, stewardship and public awareness campaign that was launched by Mayor Bloomberg and Bette Midler's New York Restoration Project (NYRP) on October 9, 2007 at 165<sup>th</sup> Street and Teller Avenue in the Bronx.

Over 60 organizations, including City agencies, private businesses, professional associations and non-profit organizations, all of the City's great public gardens and community-based groups have joined the Million Trees Advisory Committee to make a million trees a reality. A core element of MillionTreesNYC will be a community-based tree planting strategy that compliments the New York City Parks Department's expanding public tree planting programs over the next 10 years.

The Parks Department and NYRP will invite community members at every level to get involved in tree planting and stewardship. As a result, neighborhoods throughout New York City will see

their streets, parks, and public and private spaces transformed into green spaces – providing citizens and families with the increased environmental, health and economic benefits associated with trees. Additionally, creating a greener New York City through a comprehensive, community-based planting strategy will serve as a model for other urban communities across the country and throughout the world. Last fall, in addition to the 8300 street trees that we planted, 22,000 more trees were planted in parks and open spaces, highlighted by 10,000 trees planted on It's My Park Day, contributing over 30,000 new trees toward the Million Trees Goal.

Greenstreets, a joint program of parks and the Department of Transportation (DOT) began in 1996 and by 2002 had “greened” 2,000 sites in roadbeds in all five boroughs. Two hundred additional sites were built in the intervening years, but with the first dedicated funding for the program provided through PlaNYC, we have shifted into high gear. Greenstreets are developed from unused portions of roadways, traffic triangles, medians, or untrafficked striped areas formed by the intersection of two or more streets. Sites that can support plant life and not interfere with traffic are ideal candidates for the program. Anyone can nominate potential Greenstreets, elected officials, community boards, members of the public, Parkies and DOT staff all provide leads for new Greenstreets. Landscape architects from Central Forestry and Horticulture design the Greenstreets which are reviewed and approved by DOT. Greenstreets have always been a partnership between Parks and DOT, but never more so than now, as we collaborate on public plazas, traffic calming measures and enhancing bikeways with greenery.

Greenstreets are not only aesthetically appealing, they are also practical additions to the streetscape. They help manage storm water by intercepting it before it reaches the sewer system, storing it on site and using the water to irrigate the plants. We are working with the Gaia Institute, a leader in sustainable design and development to pilot storm water capture at several Greenstreets in Hunts Point, which, if successful, will become standard elements in future Greenstreets. We also participate in the BMP Taskforce, led by the Mayor's Office of Long-Term Planning and Sustainability to develop new strategies for managing storm water through natural solutions among other initiatives. Through PlaNYC, we will be building 80 new Greenstreets in each of the next ten years. Last fall we added 50 new sites to the inventory bringing the total to 2,296.

## **TREE MAINTENANCE AND HORTICULTURAL SERVICES**

Tree maintenance and horticulture services are delivered by the Maintenance and Operations of each borough. We have three major goals for street tree maintenance: remove dead trees within 30 days of inspection; maintain the health of the urban forest through a systematic block pruning program; and, responding effectively to tree related emergencies. Through the first six months of Fiscal Year '08, we have met the tree removal goal 98% of the time exceeding the target rate of 95%. This can be partially attributed to the relatively calm weather we have enjoyed lately, that has produced fewer than average tree emergencies. We did experience dramatic and devastating damage from a freak tornado in Brooklyn last August, but fortunately the damage was not widespread. Thanks to extraordinary efforts by Brooklyn Forestry and tremendous cooperation from Sanitation, and the Police and Fire Departments streets and homes were quickly cleared of debris.

Tree maintenance is the most highly requested Parks service as measured by calls to 311, with three of the top five requested services related to trees and tree pruning coming in third with over 17,000 in FY' 07. Block pruning, where every tree on a block is pruned at the same time, is the most efficient and cost effective way to deliver pruning services as well as manage this critical resource. Since 1998, we have tried to maintain a ten-year block pruning cycle, with funding provided primarily by the City Council. Prior to that, there was no systematic street tree pruning and you probably had a better chance of hitting the lottery than getting your tree pruned. The authors of PlaNYC understood that maintenance was key to realizing the full benefits that street trees provide and as a result funds were added to our budget to reduce the pruning cycle to seven years, in line with industry standards. We also received \$2 million in new funds to eliminate the backlog of tree stumps that have accumulated on our streets as a result of tree removal efforts.

Trees are living organisms and while they grow in predictable patterns, they are subject to stress and damage that can create unanticipated maintenance demands. PlaNYC also funded additional Forestry crews in every borough to address needed pruning work that falls outside of the block pruning program, added staff to expedite inspections and surveys and enhanced our ability to respond to storm damage. We closely track our performance in these areas to ensure that we are meeting our goals. Last fiscal year 32,590 trees were pruned through the block pruning program and 4,124 stumps were removed. We project pruning 50,000 street trees and 6,760 stump removals this fiscal year as a result of our new funding. This fiscal year so far, we have already removed 5,921 stumps. Additionally, this Thursday we will launch a comprehensive training program for our Foresters at the New York Botanical Garden. Modeled after our successful Master Gardener partnership with the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, it will ensure that our staff are well grounded in the principles of tree care and fully up-to-date on the latest developments in the field. New York's Street trees have never had it so good.

Reestablishing gardening and horticulture as a core element of our Operations division has been one of Commissioner Benepe's priorities since the start of the administration. As we have seen time and again, good gardens and well maintained landscapes convey a sense of civic order and community pride. Since 2002, the number of Parks staff devoted to horticulture—gardeners and assistant gardeners—has grown from 48 to 135, an increase of 181%. We have created over 500 small gardens at key entry points to parks and in playgrounds around the City, assigned dedicated gardening staff to 35 parks through the Neighborhood Parks Initiative, a program generously supported by the Council, planted over a million flowers of all types in each of the last seven years and introduced every Parkie to the basics of horticulture. In addition to the 120 graduates of the Master Gardener Program mentioned earlier, the Central Park Conservancy provide hands-on training and on-going coaching to many of our new gardeners and assistant gardeners.

A less visible, though no less important aspect of our horticulture agenda is our plant production facilities. Led by the Native Plant Center on Staten Island, the first urban nursery dedicated to the propagation of native plants from local genetic stock, our nurseries and greenhouses produce the raw materials that bring our greening plans to life. The NPC was recently chosen to collect local seed for the prestigious Millennium Seed Bank Project led by the Royal Kew Botanical Garden in England. Over the next few years, we will be investing in our greenhouses in Queens and the Bronx and in the Arthur Ross nursery in Van Cortlandt Park to ensure a steady stream of quality

plants, well suited to the urban environment for years to come. In large and small ways, we are reviving the Parks Department's great tradition of horticulture.

Our Capital Projects Division has also made great strides in greening the neighborhoods of New York City. Parks has spent hundreds of millions of dollars over the past six years reconstructing park facilities—transforming barren asphalt and former industrial areas into vibrant green spaces, reconnecting communities with the waterfront and creating safe, engaging play environments for kids. Parks Capital Projects have won numerous awards for landscape architecture and architecture in recent years for our innovative park design. Maximizing green space versus paved space and planting trees to shade paved areas has been standard practice at Parks Capital for many years, and our designers are incorporating more elements of green, sustainable design into all projects. We are developing greening strategies to improve storm water management, minimize impervious paving and reduce heat island effect.

### **RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT**

Research and development is the third major function of Central Forestry and Horticulture, one that has grown significantly in recent years as the field of urban forestry has grown in stature. From our partnership with the US Forest Service to create the nation's first Urban Forestry Research Station to our founding membership in the Urban Ecology Collaborative, a consortium of city managers from across the north-east who focus on environmental issues, Parks & Recreation is on the cutting edge of the latest innovations in the field.

In partnership with the United States Forest Service, we will be establishing a base at Fort Totten, in Bayside, Queens, a first-of-its-kind Urban Field Station to promote research on natural resource stewardship and ecological literacy. The urban field station provides a vehicle for generating information about urban ecosystem management and disseminating that knowledge throughout other metropolitan regions in the United States and globally. Lessons learned in New York City have strong relevance for other major cities across the region, country, and the globe.

This Urban Field Station will be a key tool in the discovery of how urban greening can be managed and understood as a tool for sustainable development, mitigating the impacts of rapid growth, and improving public health. Data and research formulated at the station will be not only helpful to Parks, but to other agencies and other community stakeholders in public health and economic development in solving new challenges for urban land management. Studies already underway include urban tree canopy, young street tree survival, and stewardship mapping. This Urban Field Station will be essential in establishing the baseline for evaluating and understanding the impacts of PlaNYC and Million Trees NYC going forward.

Commissioner Kavanagh mentioned that the 19<sup>th</sup> century designers of some of our great parks understood intuitively the value of trees. Today we know them empirically as well. One of our first projects with the Forest Service was the New York Municipal Forest Resource Analysis, which applied their STRATUM program to the data compiled during our most recent street tree census. It produced an astonishing amount of detailed information about the environmental and economic benefits of street trees, including the fact that each year the City's street trees alone produce over \$121 million dollars worth of those benefits. On a more practical level, Central

Forestry and Horticulture developed the standards and specifications for the Trees and Sidewalks pilot program launched by Mayor Bloomberg in 2005. For years, homeowners were responsible for repairing sidewalks damaged by tree roots after we cut the tree's root. Under the pilot program, Parks repairs the sidewalks and uses design and construction techniques that avoid cutting roots while still creating a safe sidewalk that meets all DOT standards. To date almost 3,000 sidewalks have been repaired through this program, which we intend to resume in the spring. Central Forestry and Horticulture is helping Parks achieve its planting, pruning and greening goals while making New York a cleaner and greener place to live and work.