



November 19, 2021

New York City Council Committee on Parks and Recreation

Oversight: The Parks Inspection Program and Increasing Park Resources

Testimony by: NYC Parks Commissioner Gabrielle Fialkoff

Good afternoon, Chair Koo, members of the Parks Committee and other members of the Council. I am Gabrielle Fialkoff, the Commissioner for NYC Parks. I am pleased to be appearing at my first New York City Council hearing as Parks Commissioner, joined today by our First Deputy Commissioner Liam Kavanagh, as well as David Cerron, our Assistant Commissioner for Planning and Development, Alex Butler, Director of the Parks Inspection Program, and Matt Drury, our Director of Government Relations. Having served previously in this Administration as Senior Advisor to the Mayor and as the founding director of the Office of Strategic Partnerships, I was fortunate to work with Parks on the Building Healthy Communities initiative, which brought the NYC Soccer Initiative to fruition, launched the Farms at NYCHA - the first urban farms on public housing property in the nation - and focused on activating open spaces across high-need communities. In addition, the office launched initiatives to reduce inequality and create opportunities for our young people, such as Computer Science For All and the Center for Youth Employment, among others. I returned to City government in 2020 for six months to lead COVID pandemic relief efforts, and now I am truly honored to serve New York City once again as Parks Commissioner. My career has been devoted to leading organizations and forging and strengthening partnerships in both the public and private sectors and I am looking forward to working closely with the Council regarding the issues being discussed today.

As this hearing focuses on the allocation of resources for the maintenance and improvement of parks, I would like to start today by highlighting an incredible success of this Administration, the Community Parks Initiative, or CPI. This capital initiative epitomizes the data-driven approach dedicated to equity and fairness that has served as the guiding principle for NYC Parks under this Administration.

CPI is our agency's signature equity program, targeting investment towards neighborhood parks that have been underappreciated and disregarded for far too long. Through the initial incarnation of CPI, the City has invested \$318 million to completely reimagine, redesign and rebuild 67 CPI parks that had seen little to no investment over decades. I'm pleased to report that 62 of the 67 parks have been reopened to the public, with two additional sites nearing completion and the remaining few projects well underway. On October 26th, Mayor de Blasio and myself were thrilled to announce an extension and expansion of CPI, an investment of \$425.5 million in new Administration funding, which will rebuild 100 additional parks across the City – 10 park renovations each year over a period of 10 years. This additional funding will bring the grand total of CPI sites to 167 and close to \$750 million dollars in capital investment - incredible proof of this Administration's commitment to the green spaces in our city and the New Yorkers who use them.

The first ten sites for this new expansion of CPI, representing parks in all five boroughs, will focus on neighborhoods that suffered terribly through COVID, as we seek to help support and sustain local communities through this difficult recovery. As is our common practice, we will work directly with community residents to hear how their local park should be reimaged and redesigned to best meet their needs, with modern, accessible play equipment, more trees to provide valuable shade, park features and amenities for all ages, and increased greenery to help absorb rainwater. We'll build upon that community connection, through the continued efforts of Partnerships for Parks, our joint community engagement program administered with the City Parks Foundation, which allows us to cultivate new community partners and support existing partners, to support the communities that gather in our reconstructed parks. As many of you know, our earlier CPI projects have been truly transformative, revitalizing and resurrecting public spaces that had been lost to years of



bureaucratic neglect, and we look forward to continuing this incredible effort and delivering even more results for New Yorkers.

This commitment to equity also shapes our daily maintenance efforts, as we are dedicated to keeping all of our parks and playgrounds in the best condition possible. Over the course of this Administration, we are proud to have consistently exceeded our performance indicator targets in the Mayor’s Management Report (MMR) for Overall Park Condition and Overall Park Cleanliness, even in the face of tremendous operational and budgetary challenges stemming from the COVID pandemic.

To help make that a reality, our staff uses a variety of tools and approaches to ensure that all of our properties are getting the resources they need in a fair and equitable manner. Firstly, I have to recognize the incredible hard work of our dedicated Parks staff who are responsible for the maintenance of our green spaces. There are a wide variety of maintenance staff roles, including full time year-round staff, seasonal staff, as well as positions filled through our Parks Opportunity Program, administered in coordination with our fellow City agency, the Human Resources Administration. This year, these efforts were bolstered by the incredible addition of 3,200 new Parks maintenance employees serving as part of the Administration’s “City Cleanup Corps,” made possible through the federal government’s direct COVID recovery aid and support to localities and cities, including New York. Some of our maintenance staff serve on fixed-post crews, who primarily maintain a given park or playground, along with its comfort station and other amenities. Others work as part of mobile crews, cleaning parks and playgrounds along a pre-assigned route, traveling to site to site as a team. On a daily basis, our park workers are able to observe conditions in the spaces they care for, address issues as they arise, and report serious concerns to their supervisors.

Above and beyond this consistent presence of Parks maintenance staff in our parks, we actively monitor and inspect the condition of our parks in several ways, including regular park inspections conducted by our Park Supervisors. In addition to these layers of careful monitoring, the agency also administers the Parks Inspection Program, or PIP, which is independently administered by our Operations and Management Planning (OMP) division. PIP is a detailed, objective Quality Assurance program, which is conducted independently from the agency’s Maintenance and Operations staff. For close to four decades, PIP has helped to ensure that our parks are well-maintained and welcoming for New Yorkers and visitors alike. Created in 1984, PIP initially focused on small parks and playgrounds, but has expanded and evolved over the years, growing to become comprehensive and flexible enough to apply to all varieties of Parks properties – from small sitting areas to our largest wooded areas.

Even as the capacity of the inspection program has grown over time, it has remained consistent in measuring the safety and cleanliness of the parks that we maintain on the public’s behalf. Our citywide overall condition ratings reached a low of 39% in Fiscal Year 1995, but has since risen close to 50 percentage points since then. Similarly, our cleanliness ratings have increased from a low of 70% in Fiscal Year 1992 to our recent cleanliness ratings, consistently over 90%. The Parks Inspection Program has measured and reported these gains while serving as an important management tool for achieving improved park conditions.

Our trained inspectors from OMP’s Inspection Team use portable computers and digital cameras to perform 6,000 PIP inspections throughout each year based on very specific standards, giving each inspected park an “Acceptable” (A) or “Unacceptable” (U) rating for overall condition and cleanliness. Individual “Acceptable” or “Unacceptable” ratings are given to as many as 16 separate types of park features, which fall under three broad categories: cleanliness, structural features such as benches or fencing, and landscape features such as lawns and athletic fields. At the beginning of each inspection round, sites are randomly selected from a database of ratable Parks properties, a universe that includes more than 1,500 playgrounds and small parks, over 600 large parks or large park zones, and over 1,000 Greenstreets. This inspection cycle ensures that



most parks and playgrounds receive thorough PIP inspections two or three times a year, all in addition to the monthly inspections and daily monitoring they receive from our Maintenance & Operations staff.

Upon arriving to a site, our PIP Inspectors assess the entirety of the property owned or maintained by Parks, including the surrounding sidewalk, to report on the cleanliness and safety of park properties. The inspection serves as a “snapshot” of the park, as experienced by the public at that moment, regardless of standard cleaning schedules or other pending work. Park cleanliness and features such as play equipment, lawns, trees, benches, athletic fields and comfort stations are evaluated and assigned ratings based on clearly defined and rigorous Parks Inspection Program Standards. Inspectors take photographs and, when necessary, measurements, to document their findings. Hazardous conditions, such as sharp, protruding bolts on benches, or trip hazards, are noted as “Immediate Attention” items and reported directly to M&O staff to be addressed.

There are four inspection seasons each year: Spring, Summer, Fall, and Winter. Each season consists of six inspection rounds, and each inspection round includes approximately 250 inspections that take place over a roughly two-week period. At the conclusion of each round, the citywide inspection results for cleanliness and overall condition are reviewed and discussed at regularly scheduled meetings where I am joined by Deputy Commissioners, Borough Commissioners, and other senior management. The results of these inspections bring focus to concerns that require corrective action, so that sites with persistent maintenance concerns can receive targeted attention, and challenging problems can be tackled head-on. The PIP results also provide an important performance review that helps inform our decisions about resource allocations, alongside 311 reports and staff observations.

In line with our agency’s standing commitment to transparency, historic PIP inspection details for individual parks are available on Parks’ public website, in addition to citywide and borough performance data. More detailed line-item inspection data is also available on the NYC OpenData portal. Lastly, our PIP inspection results serve as the source data that helps inform our key maintenance indicators in Parks’ section of the Mayor’s Management Report (MMR), which is updated biannually and available online.

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

NYC Council Parks Committee

Oversight Hearing: The Parks Inspection Program and Increasing Park Resources - 11.19.2021 City Parks Foundation Testimony

I'm Ted Enoch, Director of Catalyst, an intensive outreach effort led by Partnerships for Parks. I send regards and thanks from our Executive Director Heather Lubov, who is unable to join today, but who wants to extend her sincere thanks on behalf of all of us at City Parks Foundation to Chairman Koo and the entire Parks Committee for your unwavering dedication to our city's parks and open spaces.

Partnerships for Parks, a joint program of City Parks Foundation and NYC Parks, helps turn community members and occasional volunteers into neighborhood leaders, building long term investment in public spaces through the formation of friends groups that care for and activate parks, critical community resources that have become even more important throughout the pandemic and to combat climate change.

We're excited about the Mayor's expansion of the Community Parks Initiative to upgrade 100 parks in neighborhoods with the greatest need. When CPI launched in 2014, Mayor DeBlasio cited the City Parks Foundation Catalyst program as the "proven model through which NYC Parks would engage community stakeholders such as friends of groups and help them build their own capacity to use, program, and be advocates for their parks." NYC Parks received \$1.1M in operating support to hire additional Partnerships for Parks outreach coordinators. Since then, that outreach team has played a key role in engaging XX community members in XX CPI renovations, often recruiting and building that grassroots support from the ground up. The team continues to support 476 volunteer community groups across the five boroughs. Adding 100 new park renovations is incredibly exciting, but to ensure that CPI parks are well-used in the long term, it will be critical to provide expense funding to grow the outreach staff who are on the ground, every day, organizing community members around both renovation planning and long term use. We know that renovations are far more successful when the community not only provides input at the start, but is also invested in the ultimate success and care for the park once it has reopened. In this work we see community members as our partners and the essential stakeholders in our effort to realize the potential of our parks and to bring these public spaces to life.

As an organization whose fundamental mission is to address inequity in our city's parks, we strongly believe the city's investment of 0.5% of the budget in parks is insufficient to adequately maintain and improve these spaces. We join the Play Fair Coalition in asking the City Council to dedicate at least 1% of the city's budget to parks to advance a visionary and pragmatic approach to meeting their needs.

Thank you, Chairman Koo, the Parks Committee Members, and City Council for organizing today's hearing and for your commitment to improving our city's parks and open spaces.

**Testimony of Dilcy Benn, President of Local 1505, District Council 37
before the City Council Committee on Parks and Recreation**

November 19, 2021

Good afternoon Chair Koo and members of the Parks and Recreation Committee. My name is Dilcy Benn and I am the President of Local 1505 representing City Park Workers (CPWs) in the NYC Parks & Recreation Department. My members work in all five boroughs conducting maintenance in all City Parks.

I cannot thank the Speaker, the City Council, and the Mayor enough for restoring the funding for the 100 CPWs and 50 Gardeners in the FY 2022 budget. In addition, we were fortunate enough to get additional funding for seasonal lines to assist with clean up and maintenance in parks. Due to this infusion of funding, the CPWs were able to perform at unprecedented levels and afforded New Yorkers clean parks and amenities. With that said, this still falls short of the staffing levels needed to sustain sufficient cleanliness and maintenance.

CPWs were in the field every day during the height of Covid. The public was utilizing parks at record levels due to the travel ban and shut down of entertainment venues. CPWs stepped up to ensure parks were properly cleaned and maintained for the public's use.

As we begin to prepare for the FY 2023 budget, I am urging incumbent Councilmembers, as well as the incoming Councilmembers, to keep Parks a priority in the budget. We have made great strides in parks and hope to improve on them.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today and I will be happy to take any questions you may have.



New York City Council
Committee on Parks and Recreation Oversight Committee
November 19, 2021
Subject: The Parks Inspection Program and Increasing Park Resources
Dear Chairperson Koo and committee member,,

My name is Aaron Sanders and I'm the Associate Director of Advocacy and Policy at the Natural Areas Conservancy, the non-profit partner to New York City Parks supporting the management of 20,000 acres of forests, wetlands and grasslands. Within these natural areas there are over 300 miles of nature trails for New Yorkers to explore in all five boroughs that are in need of additional resources in order to stay safe and accessible to New Yorkers. Last summer the NAC released the Strategic Trails Plan, a blueprint for the long term management of NYC Parks' citywide trail network that lays out goals and recommendations to realize the network's full potential of environmental, public health, and recreational benefits for all New Yorkers.

A key recommendation of the plan is an increase in investment in the ongoing maintenance and stewardship of the trail network. The Citywide Trails Team, a partnership between NYC Parks and the NAC, has been working with NYC Parks Maintenance & Operations division to incorporate new trail management tools that would streamline the care of trails citywide and bring all nature trails under a cohesive standard of care. An investment in the Parks Inspection Program is an investment in New Yorkers. 1.35 million New Yorkers — more than 15% of the city's population — live adjacent to natural areas with nature trails. However, only 50 percent of New Yorkers only access nature in city parks. The Council's investment in the citywide trail network would provide better access to natural areas; underserved communities would benefit by this natural resource, as trails provide important community and social benefits.. Investing in a citywide trails plan and the Parks Inspection Program is effective to showcase the diversity of New York City Parkland.

We have worked closely with the Parks Inspection Program to review the trail standards for inspection, and recently trained 15 members of the inspection team on identifying basic trail concerns for reporting. We are also planning to use PIP trails data to inform future trail management decisions.

While we have made strides in bringing attention and resources to the nature trails, NYC Parks does not have sufficient resources to support the long term maintenance and care of the citywide trail network, and without further investment the years of work we have accomplished to formalize the trails will be undone. We are on track to complete the formalization of the entire trail network in 2023, and we have worked since 2017 to ensure that all nature trails are navigable, well marked, safe for the public and healthy for the forests and wetlands. To ensure that this work is sustained we are advocating for new borough crews that are dedicated to natural areas and trails throughout the city. These NYC Parks Maintenance and Operations crews would provide the much needed support to keep the forest healthy and accessible, providing environmental and health benefits to all New Yorkers.



Respectfully submitted,
Aaron M. Sanders



Council Oversight Hearing: Parks Inspection Program and Increasing Park Resources

TESTIMONY from Lynn Kelly, Executive Director, New York Restoration Project

November 19, 2021

To the members of City Council and Chairman Dromm, thank you for this opportunity to testify on park-supporting programs.

My name is Lynn Kelly and I am the Executive Director of New York Restoration Project (NYRP). I founded the Play Fair Coalition in 2019 and am a proud supporter of all provisions that protect New York City's green spaces.

For over 25 years, NYRP has renovated and upgraded 80 acres of City parkland, 52 community gardens, and hundreds of underused outdoor spaces throughout the five boroughs. We transformed an illegal dumping ground into a thriving and vibrant public park, and turned many underused lots into inviting green spaces that host a variety of activities for our community members.

Unfortunately, within this same time frame, most parks have not seen the same degree of attention and renovation. On average, New York City parks have not received a single renovation in over 25 years.

As experts in green space renovation, we know that maintaining and supporting green spaces demands commitment from all angles. While community-based organizations such as ourselves have been able to renovate a portion of the city's parks, we need the city to invest in *all* of New York City's parks. Given that parks cover 14% of NYC space, we need more than the current NYC Parks budget - which only comprises 0.5% of the total city budget - to manage our critical natural resources.

These funds are needed beyond renovations. As we witnessed over the pandemic, parks and open spaces are essential for the physical, mental and environmental health of our residents and city at large. To better manage these spaces, we need informed policy. To make informed policy, we need better systems to collect and systematize data.

At NYRP, we understand this need, which is why we have helped pilot two critical research initiatives that study tree planting and natural shoreline infrastructure. With stronger financing of data collection and open-space maintenance projects across NYC parks, such initiatives will be able to scale, open space partners will be able to share best practices, and New Yorkers will have improved access to outdoor spaces.

We therefore implore the Council to further support the Parks Inspection Program and increase park resources.



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

**City Council Committee on Parks and Recreation
Oversight: The Parks Inspection Program and Increasing Parks Resources
November 19th, 2021**

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

Parks are one of the city's most valuable environmental assets and we must be investing in them in order to fight climate change and protect public health. Parks provide numerous resiliency benefits, increasing cooling by reducing the urban heat island effect and fighting flooding by capturing almost 2 billion gallons of stormwater runoff. Parks also clean our air, absorbing pollutants and greenhouse gasses that cause climate change. Lastly parks provide safe open spaces for recreation, an aspect that was highlighted during the height of the pandemic.

In order to ensure that parks can continue to provide these benefits, we must be investing heavily in parks operations and maintenance. Parks too often are cut when money is tight in the City, as we saw in FY21. The direct impacts of cuts like this are obvious, 2020 was one of the dirtiest years for parks on record. However, it is also critical that we are funding the parks department consistently. Constant changes in funding levels year in and year out make it very difficult to maintain workers and allocate resources.

This is why we are so excited that Mayor elect Adams along with many NYC Councilmembers have committed to allocating 1% of the city budget to parks, an initiative that the Play Fair for Parks campaign sees as a top priority. We hope that the

full council will also uphold this commitment next year as the budget is negotiated and will ensure that this funding is baselined so that parks get consistent funding every year.

Lastly I would like to thank chair Koo for his service as parks committee chair, he has been a formidable champion for green open space and we will miss his leadership in the council next year.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

From: Benny Wong <asiaticmythology@gmail.com>
Sent: Wednesday, November 17, 2021 8:49 AM
To: Testimony
Subject: [EXTERNAL] the need for greater increase in funding parks

Hello,

My name is Benny Wong. As president of a park group, Elmhurst Supporters of Parks, I represent the residents of Elmhurst that care about parks. Our care is not only that of Elmhurst parks but that of other parks in Queens. We have seen park concerns such as sanitation where many of the trash cans in the parks are overflowing with trash. The safety of visitors are threatened by robberies and assaults. This may be due in part to insufficient lighting in the parks. We are aware of the homeless hanging out in the parks. Not only are they taking up the park bench spaces. They drink alcohol and use drugs in plain sight of children. They litter the benches with newspapers they use to cover themselves and the benches smell awful even after they leave the benches. The smell of them after they relieve themselves in the bushes and trees is most pungent. At Clarke Clement Moore Park in Elmhurst, gambling is still continuing as there is little in any park enforcement officers present. As more and more people move into Elmhurst, the parks are getting overcrowded as the kids using the playground have to wait to use the swings, etc. One solution is to create more parks and greenspaces. To do this, more funding and space is needed. The city budget has allocated only 0.5% towards parks. Why so little?

Benny Wong
11/17/21