

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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June 18, 2024
Start: 10:11 a.m.
Recess: 12:14 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
Sandra Ung

A P P E A R A N C E S

Karina Smith, Assistant Commissioner for
Community Outreach and Partnership at the New
York City Department of Parks and Recreation

Carlos Martinez, Chief of Green Thumb at the New
York City Department of Parks and Recreation and
the Mayor's Office of Urban Agriculture

Evan Burr, Deputy Director for the Mayor's Office
of Urban Agriculture

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

Anna-Marie Vallone, self

Perry Vallone, self

Eric Goldstein, New York City Environment
Director at the Natural Resources Defense Council

Anna Sacks, self

Brandon Pachuca, self

Iyeshima Harris-Ouedraogo, Director of Advocacy
and Programs at Green Guerillas

Chrissy Word, Director of Education at City Parks
Foundation

Joseph Reiver, Executive Director of Elizabeth
Street Garden

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

Clare Miflin, Center for Zero Waste Design

Justin Green, Big Reuse

Sherrise Palomino, Director of Advocacy and
Programs at New Yorkers for Parks

Anneliese Zausner-Mannes, co-founder of Nurture
BK

Elizabeth Opurum, Board Secretary of the Garden
by the Bay

Francine Rogers, member of the Neighborhood
Advisory Committee Community Garden

Cory Hasson, Government Affairs Manager at New
York Restoration Project on behalf of Lynn B.
Kelly (Executive Director)

Chrissy Remein, Riverkeeper's Policy and Planning
Manager

Sharon Brown, Rose of Sharon Enterprises

2 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: This is a microphone
3 check for the Committee on Parks and Recreation,
4 recorded by Layla Lynch on June 18, 2024, in the
5 Committee Room.

6 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Good morning, and
7 welcome to the New York City Hybrid Hearing of the
8 Committee on Parks and Recreation.

9 Please silence all electronic devices.

10 At no time, please do not approach the
11 dais. If you have any questions, please raise your
12 hand and one of us, a Sergeant-at-Arms, will kindly
13 assist you.

14 Chair, we're ready to begin.

15 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: [GAVEL] Good
16 morning. Thank you, Sergeant. Good morning, everyone.
17 I am Shekar Krishnan, Chair of the Committee on Parks
18 and Recreation, and I'd like to welcome all of you to
19 this hearing on Community Gardening and Urban
20 Agriculture, and I'd like to thank our leadership in
21 the Parks Department that's here too, that does the
22 great work every day stewarding our Green Thumb
23 Program, making sure our community gardens have the
24 resources they need. Thank you for your work and
25 thank you for your testimony today too.

2 When it comes to recognizing how vital
3 parks and open space are to the life of our city,
4 community gardens are often not given the spotlight
5 they rightfully deserve. Community gardens help
6 provide needed green space in areas that were once
7 lacking, provide educational opportunities for our
8 children, and produce numerous kinds of food products
9 through urban agricultural practices, to name just a
10 few of their many benefits. It is no exaggeration to
11 say that since the community gardening movement took
12 off in the 1970s, gardens have not simply added
13 attractive features to formerly neglected and vacant
14 areas of the city, but have in fact saved many
15 communities from perpetual decline by reinvigorating
16 community involvement and activism through the
17 revitalization and much-needed creation of open
18 space. Having visited community gardens myself across
19 the city and the events put on by many of our
20 community garden groups and advocates, it always
21 deeply moves and impresses me to see the number of
22 volunteers who come out every day, every weekend, to
23 care for the gardens, making sure that it gets the
24 resources that these gardens desperately need and,
25 even through waves of budget cuts and declines in

2 Park spending, our community gardeners are there
3 every single day stepping up where government has
4 not, making sure that the community gardens are an
5 oasis for neighborhoods that need that kind of green
6 space, creating agriculture where it wouldn't exist
7 otherwise, providing space to restore yourself, your
8 mental health, your well-being that wouldn't exist
9 otherwise so I salute every community gardener that's
10 here across the city that's doing the work. Know that
11 you have the eternal gratitude of us here in the New
12 York City Council and I know in the Parks Department
13 as well.

14 Currently, there are approximately 550
15 gardens located throughout the five boroughs and
16 licensed by Green Thumb. Though they have the
17 technical support from the City, many gardens often
18 find themselves in less than stable situations as
19 threats from development, inconsistent public
20 funding, and various regulatory burdens that local
21 gardening groups are ill-equipped to handle often
22 arise. The most recent cuts to Green Thumb proposed
23 by the Adams' Administration does not help to lessen
24 the fears that gardeners often cite when trying to
25 ensure the viability of the gardens they support. The

2 Green Thumb Program is vital for our Parks
3 Department, for all community gardens across the
4 city, and it is simply unacceptable that every year
5 we at the City Council have to fight to reverse this
6 Administration's cuts to the Green Thumb Program,
7 that every year we start from position, a very
8 precarious position, of not knowing whether there'll
9 be funding for Green Thumb and we in the Council have
10 to fight to make sure that funding continues. These
11 funding streams are not temporary. Well, they are in
12 fact temporary, but they should not be so because our
13 community gardens are year-round projects providing
14 much needed sustainability and sustenance to
15 communities that would not have those spaces
16 otherwise. Programs like that deserve stable,
17 consistent funding from this Administration and from
18 City government generally to match the level of
19 investment the community gardens themselves provide
20 to neighborhoods.

21 It's clear to me that the City needs to
22 emphatically support gardens beyond just the lip
23 service that we often hear and commit to fostering a
24 stable environment and fiscal situation where
25 consistent resources are provided to let these

2 gardens thrive but, know from our end, this New York
3 City Council with Speaker Adams' leadership is
4 committed to fighting each and every year to make
5 sure that our community gardens, our Green Thumb
6 Program, has the support that it desperately needs.
7 We need that same commitment from Mayor Adams and
8 this Administration. It is just that simple.

9 Urban agriculture is one of the main
10 reasons why resources dedicated to community gardens
11 need to be sufficient and consistent. Many New
12 Yorkers continue to experience food insecurity with
13 inequitable access to healthy, fresh food options,
14 particularly in low-income communities and
15 communities of color that continue to be underserved
16 by full-service grocery stores. Urban agriculture
17 serves to mitigate these inequities as open spaces
18 that engage in urban farming are able to provide
19 fresh food for the community, serve as centers for
20 school children to learn about nature, food
21 production, and be safe spaces that deliver
22 environmental benefits such as urban heat mitigation
23 and decreasing stormwater runoff. Many activists even
24 argue that the promise of urban agriculture goes
25 beyond just food production and can be a means to

2 address broader social issues such as dismantling
3 oppression, improving political coalition building,
4 fostering greater gender equality, and as I have
5 heard myself from community gardeners, provide spaces
6 to resolve conflict and de-escalate violence. But,
7 again, for an Administration that claims to care
8 about healthy food, healthy eating, and healthy
9 lifestyle, one of the most obvious and impactful ways
10 to match that lip service with actual action is to
11 invest in our community gardens and not cut the Green
12 Thumb program every year, leaving it to the Council
13 to fight to restore it.

14 The City's zoning rules permit
15 agricultural activities in almost all of the city's
16 zones, which presents us with the promising hope that
17 there are no outright rules that should impede the
18 growth of this activity. The Council has long
19 recognized the need for urban agricultural support
20 and called for various policy proposals to support
21 their growth. In 2019, the City Council issued the
22 Growing Food Equity Plan, which in part called for
23 creating a centralized office focused on facilitating
24 the growth of urban agriculture, increasing support
25 for educational programming for farming at gardens,

2 and determining what vacant plots of land are
3 suitable for agriculture and gardening. Various bills
4 were also enacted by the Council, including Local Law
5 123 of 2021, which established the Mayor's Office of
6 Urban Agriculture and an Urban Agriculture Advisory
7 Board, and Local Law 121 of 2021, which mandates the
8 office prepare an Urban Agriculture Report every five
9 years. As required, the office released its first
10 report in October 2023, which detailed the office's
11 plans to expand city residents' awareness and access
12 to urban agriculture throughout the city, with the
13 focus on how agriculture can be used to improve local
14 food production and distribution, cultivate economic
15 development, and how the city can better measure data
16 regarding the impact of urban agriculture.

17 I'd like to use this hearing to see how
18 we as a city can increase support for urban farming
19 in community gardens and make it less burdensome on
20 gardeners so they can make the best use of the
21 gardens and farms they operate, oftentimes on a
22 volunteer basis. I think we can all agree that there
23 are ways for the City to make this growing practice
24 more welcoming for those who seek to operate a garden
25 or farm in a safe and reasonable way.

2 I'd also like to mention that, separate
3 from community gardens, this Committee will also
4 consider a bill, Intro. 642, sponsored by my
5 Colleague, Kevin Riley. This bill would formally
6 rename Williamsbridge Square, a park located in his
7 District in the Bronx, to Marcus Garvey Square. I
8 thank him for introducing the bill and look forward
9 to hearing any testimony related to it.

10 Today, we will also be considering a
11 street naming bill, an omnibus bill, from Council
12 Members across the Council who have submitted
13 proposals and bills for street namings in their
14 district, including my own.

15 I'd like to welcome the Administration
16 and the advocates who have come today to testify. I'd
17 like to thank Council Member Carr for joining us for
18 today's hearing, and now I turn it over to our
19 Committee Counsel, Chris Sartori, to swear in the
20 witnesses.

21 COMMITTEE COUNSEL SARTORI: Good morning.
22 Would members of the administration please raise your
23 right hand if you're able?

24 Do you affirm to tell the truth, the
25 whole truth, and nothing but the truth in your

2 testimony before this Committee and to respond
3 honestly to Council Member questions?

4 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER SMITH: I do.

5 CHIEF MARTINEZ: I do.

6 DEPUTY DIRECTOR BURR: I do.

7 COMMITTEE COUNSEL SARTORI: Thank you.

8 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you. I'd just
9 like to say we've been joined today on behalf of the
10 Parks Department by Karina Smith, Assistant
11 Commissioner for Community Outreach and Partnership
12 with the Parks Department; Carlos Martinez, Chief of
13 Green Thumb and the Mayor's Office of Urban
14 Agriculture, and a proud Jackson Heights president
15 and constituent too; and Evan Burr, Deputy Director
16 for the Mayor's Office of Urban Agriculture; and, of
17 course, Matt Drury, Chief Citywide Legislative
18 Affairs Director for our Parks Department. Thank you
19 all for joining and for your work. You can now start
20 with your testimony.

21 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER SMITH: Good
22 morning, Chair Krishnan and Parks Committee Members.
23 My name is Karina Smith, and I serve as Assistant
24 Commissioner for Community Outreach and Partnership

2 Development for New York City Parks. Our Division
3 oversees many of the teams...

4 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Assistant
5 Commissioner, sorry. Do you mind bringing your mic a
6 little bit closer?

7 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER SMITH: Oh, sure,
8 sure, sure.

9 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you.

10 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER SMITH: Is that
11 better? Okay.

12 Our division oversees many of the teams
13 within our agency that specifically focuses on
14 external engagement and an interaction with New
15 Yorkers, all with the shared goal of improving and
16 sustaining our park system. For example, our division
17 oversees or is overseeing the agency's Let's Green
18 NYC initiative, which encourages New Yorkers to get
19 out into their green spaces and help beautify them
20 through volunteer service projects. Last month, we
21 were thrilled to announce that we officially
22 surpassed our previous record, with over 500,000
23 people participating as volunteers since the
24 initiative began in 2023. Joining me on today's panel
25 are representatives from two of Community Outreach

2 and Partnership Development's teams, Matt Drury, our
3 Chief of Citywide Legislative Affairs, and to my
4 left, Carlos Martinez, our Chief of New York City
5 Parks Green Thumb, and we're pleased to be here to
6 testify at today's hearing.

7 When Green Thumb was created in 1978, at
8 a time when New York City was in the midst of
9 significant financial crisis and social upheaval, it
10 was able to assist neighborhoods in revitalizing
11 local spaces and creating new and important community
12 resources. Today, after 45 years since its inception,
13 Green Thumb has become the largest urban community
14 gardening program in the nation, with more than 550
15 community gardens across the five boroughs and an
16 ever-growing network of more than 20,000 volunteer
17 gardeners and its membership, and its own operations
18 and administrative teams. Green Thumb functions as a
19 mini-park system inside of NYC Parks, providing vital
20 green oases to relax, to connect with nature, and
21 create social connections. Its original mission
22 continues today by providing free programming and
23 material support for its 550-plus community gardens
24 in the city, including educational programs and
25 workshops that cover topics on urban agriculture as

2 well as group development. Community gardens are
3 stewarded by dedicated volunteers, many of whom are
4 long-standing members of their garden and their
5 community, demonstrating the strength of community
6 bonds and what can be achieved when local government
7 works in close partnership with New Yorkers. To help
8 provide a more detailed background information about
9 our Green Thumb program and various efforts we
10 undertake alongside our community garden partner
11 groups to maximize the potential of these truly
12 special gardens throughout the city, I'll now
13 introduce Chief of NYC Parks Green Thumb, Carlos
14 Martinez.

15 CHIEF MARTINEZ: Good morning, Chair
16 Krishnan and Parks Committee Members. Thank you,
17 Assistant Commissioner Smith, for your remarks. I am
18 Carlos Martinez, and I serve as Chief of Green Thumb
19 at NYC Parks. We are very pleased to be here today to
20 discuss Green Thumb Community Gardens as well as the
21 efforts we have undertaken at Green Thumb to support
22 community gardening and urban agriculture in New York
23 City.

24 Given that several new Members have
25 joined both the Council and the Parks Committee in

2 the last few years, please allow me to quickly
3 provide more information about our community model
4 and our support of urban agriculture initiatives. As
5 Assistant Commissioner Smith mentioned, Green Thumb
6 is the community gardening program of NYC Parks, with
7 a mission of supporting land stewards who care for
8 community gardens and urban farms across the five
9 boroughs while preserving 100 acres of combined open
10 space. Green Thumb was founded in 1978 to support a
11 community gardening movement that had arisen during a
12 time of disinvestment and abandonment of public and
13 private property. Today, we sustain a growing network
14 of over 550 community gardens and tens of thousands
15 of volunteer community gardeners throughout all five
16 boroughs. Green Thumb assists neighborhood volunteers
17 by facilitating free access to public land and
18 providing materials, technical assistance,
19 operational support, public programming, and
20 community engagement. We also serve thousands of New
21 Yorkers who are interested in community-led
22 environmental stewardship through our public
23 programming as well as hundreds of thousands of
24 annual visitors to Green Thumb Gardens who enjoy
25 these cherished public open spaces. Green Thumb

2 community gardens are unique public spaces that are
3 stewarded by volunteer New Yorkers which help
4 catalyze sustainable, resilient, healthy, and
5 equitable communities across the city. Gardens thrive
6 through a long-standing partnership between New York
7 City government, community gardeners, and countless
8 partners who collectively care for these spaces in a
9 shared spirit of service. Green Thumb community
10 gardens reflect the history and diversity of New York
11 City's neighborhoods and serves as platforms for
12 neighborhoods beautification, social cohesion,
13 teaching and learning, cultural and artistic
14 expression, food production, health and wellness,
15 environmental justice, sustainability, resilience,
16 and more. Reflecting the unique personalities and
17 needs of our city's neighborhoods, Green Thumb
18 gardens range widely in size and nature and host a
19 variety of activities from botanical horticulture and
20 fruit gardening to passive recreation, special
21 performances and programming, providing opportunities
22 for all New Yorkers to participate and collectively
23 engage with their fellow neighbors.

24 It is important to note that each garden
25 group determines the use of these places. Our core

2 philosophy is that the local community volunteers
3 that make up the garden groups best understand the
4 needs and hopes of their community. Within this
5 context, we best add value by helping these groups
6 realize their unique vision for each garden. That
7 means that whether gardeners plant ornamental
8 gardens, food gardens, or both, we support them in
9 that undertaking. Thanks to the increased support
10 from City government in recent years, including City
11 Council discretionary capital and expense allocations
12 such as the Parks Equity Initiative and Greener NYC
13 funding, Green Thumb has experienced tremendous
14 growth and an expanded ability to support gardens in
15 addressing decades-long disinvestment. Specifically,
16 this has allowed us to provide new and higher quality
17 materials, to increase the number of annual
18 workshops, to develop new specialized trainings for
19 gardeners, and to work with emerging garden groups to
20 initiate over 25 new community gardens since 2016. In
21 addition, Green Thumb is rebuilding, expanding, and
22 sustaining 50 gardens in 50 public housing
23 developments through an innovative partnership with
24 the New York City Housing Authority. With additional
25 funding and seasonal staff provided by Council

2 discretionary funding since Fiscal Year 2020, we have
3 been able to make unprecedented levels of investment
4 in gardens and expand the ways we serve local
5 gardeners. This includes addressing overdue
6 infrastructure improvements, including the
7 installation of new fencing, sidewalks, accessible
8 pathways, and garden structures, new workshops, and
9 specialized trainings for gardeners, and expanded
10 provision of materials and plant supplies as well as
11 expanded operational support through the addition of
12 new seasonal staff.

13 NYC Parks Green Thumb has supported urban
14 agriculture since its founding, providing tools,
15 equipment, training, and materials that support food
16 production in gardens. Food production has been
17 deeply rooted in community gardening since gardens
18 began sprouting across the city, and this has been a
19 growing trend in recent years. Green Thumb has
20 adjusted its programming and support accordingly to
21 remain responsive to the needs of our network. We
22 have developed new workshops and trainings on growing
23 food, permitted garden groups to sell their own
24 produce to support on-site efforts, and formed new
25 partnerships to provide additional supplementary

support for food-producing gardens. Today, more than 80 percent of gardens on NYC Parks property grow food in some way, and we estimate that a significant amount of food is grown in community gardens each season, typically for household consumption or local distribution. Some gardens are able to distribute food to their community to supplement healthy food access through farm stands, community-supported agriculture, and food box programs in partnership with regional farms. In 2022, Green Thumb secured more than 46 million dollars in federal funding from the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, also known as the Bipartisan Infrastructure Plan, to provide critical on-site water supply infrastructure that will ease access for irrigation and maintenance to over 260 food-producing community gardens under the jurisdiction of NYC Parks. This represents the largest capital investment in the history of the Green Thumb program, which will allow thousands of volunteer land stewards involved in urban agriculture across the city to grow more healthy and fresh food while providing vibrant green spaces for all New Yorkers.

2 In closing, we want to thank City Council
3 for the opportunity to testify at this hearing, to
4 shine a spotlight on the tireless work of the
5 volunteers that steward community gardens across New
6 York City, and to showcase the work that we have been
7 doing to support them.

8 You will now be hearing from our
9 colleagues at the New York City Mayor's Office of
10 Urban Agriculture, after which we will be happy to
11 answer any questions that you may have. I will now
12 introduce Evan Burr, Deputy Director of the Office of
13 Urban Agriculture.

14 DEPUTY DIRECTOR BURR: Thank you,
15 Director. Good morning, Chair Krishnan and Members of
16 the Committee on Parks and Recreation. My name is
17 Evan Burr. I am the Deputy Director of the Office of
18 Urban Agriculture. Director Mickie sends her
19 apologies. She woke up today with a nasty stomach
20 bug, so she was not able to be in but, anyhow, we are
21 very happy to be here to testify at this hearing on
22 important topics of community gardens and support for
23 urban agriculture.

24 As the Chair pointed out, we were
25 established by LL 123 of 2021. Mayor's Office of

2 Urban Agriculture, or the MOUA as we like to refer to
3 it, is a newer office, and we are tasked with leading
4 New York City's efforts to increase access to and
5 production of fresh, healthy, and locally grown food,
6 while strengthening climate resiliency and spurring
7 economic activity across our city. Through research,
8 policy development, advocacy, and community outreach,
9 MOUA aims to address the climate, health, and food
10 disparities in our natural and built environments. We
11 collaborate with other City agencies to advance
12 agriculture and equity on several fronts, including
13 community gardens, urban farms, food systems,
14 workforce development, environmental justice, and
15 building a green, resilient economy. NYC has a long
16 and rich history of urban agriculture and land
17 stewardship. It dates back to the Lenape, the
18 indigenous people of the land that now comprises the
19 five boroughs of our city. Many of the active
20 community gardens across the city arose out of a
21 grassroots movement in which New Yorkers stepped up
22 to reclaim trash-strewn vacant lots and transform
23 them into green spaces for public use and benefit.
24 The majority of these gardens are within the NYC
25 Parks Green Thumb Network now. NYC is now home to a

2 breadth of urban agriculture models, such as soil-
3 based community gardens, urban farms, and rooftop
4 gardens as well as non-soil-controlled environment
5 models like aquaponics and hydroponics. Some of these
6 models are built to teach through growing, others
7 have a focus on food production. Some are places of
8 respite and wellness, and quite a few strive to do
9 all these activities and more. All of these models
10 and sites are critical elements in our city
11 landscape.

12 Infrastructure that extends the season of
13 growing, such as greenhouses or multipurpose
14 buildings to provide educational centers and hubs of
15 learning, are also a part of urban agriculture in New
16 York City. Some great examples that I'd like to share
17 are exciting new agricultural educational sites
18 taking shape now in our city, including the farms at
19 NYCHA expansion, the coming greenhouse facility soon
20 to begin construction at NYCHA Marlborough Houses,
21 and the District 22 Learning Farm in Bergen Beach,
22 Brooklyn, now finishing construction and due to open
23 in October of this year.

24 Yet, despite this good news, there are
25 many barriers that stakeholders face, and the office

2 strives to address in our efforts to expand urban
3 agriculture in NYC. Constraints on scaled food
4 production and revenue generation, access to land to
5 steward beyond a volunteer capacity, and lack of
6 urban agriculture infrastructure in all boroughs are
7 all formidable hurdles to urban agriculture
8 stakeholders. In our quest to address these barriers,
9 MOUA has developed initiatives and achieved success
10 in our first year and a half of operation. We created
11 the Reimagining Farm to School in NYC initiative in
12 collaboration with NYC DOE Office of Food and
13 Nutrition Services. We are leveraging New York State
14 and USDA Farm to School grant funding to develop and
15 integrate agricultural education in the classroom and
16 on urban and rural farms for approximately 350-plus
17 NYC public school students across the five boroughs.
18 The students learn about the important life cycle of
19 food and what culturally relevant crops are grown
20 throughout the city straight from urban farmers. The
21 pilot also includes the city's first farmer-producer
22 training, which kicks off this fall to support more
23 small- to mid-scale farm businesses primed to apply
24 for school food procurement contracts. It includes

2 funding to refurbish or restore 14 school gardens as
3 well as on-site cooking demos at the urban farms.

4 MOUA's efforts to foster equitable
5 economic development opportunities in the food and
6 agriculture sector also extend to other initiatives.
7 For over a year, we have collaborated with NYC Small
8 Business Services to provide free M/WBE certification
9 workshops to ensure eligible small food, farm, and
10 other relevant businesses are getting into the
11 pipeline to earn their M/WBE certifications. NYC is a
12 city of small businesses. Improving the pathways to
13 City-based procurement as well as building a stronger
14 bridge to critical resources for food, climate, and
15 other related agriculture-based businesses is work
16 that our office has undertaken to help meet the
17 City's M/WBE goals and to support emerging

18 businesses. Another innovative approach
19 that the MOUA has taken to address the intersecting
20 needs of food production and climate resiliency is
21 the development of a rooftop urban agrivoltaics
22 pilot. Agrivoltaics is the co-location of solar
23 energy and agriculture in a model. We believe a pilot
24 that focuses on the co-location of both solar and

2 food production could be one of the next advancements
3 needed on our rooftops in the city.

4 We're also researching and exploring ways
5 to develop new license agreements for underutilized
6 City-owned land as we recognize that this is a
7 barrier to be addressed and that Members on the
8 Council as well as urban farmers have identified.
9 These new agreements would be focused on enabling
10 revenue-generated urban agriculture activity, such as
11 scaled food production or climate resiliency, and
12 would allow for profit generation in the selling of
13 urban agriculture products and services.

14 Our office has also been involved in
15 policy advocacy and legislation, including the
16 Community Gardens Water Bill Exemption, Green Roof
17 Tax Abatement, our Growing Opportunities in
18 Innovative Farming Act, which is introduced in the
19 U.S. House and U.S. Senate, and informing ongoing
20 discussions around farm bill policy. We have also
21 partnered with NYC Department of City Planning over
22 the last year on info sessions, briefings, and
23 advocacy for the City of Yes for Economic Opportunity
24 as these new zoning changes will allow a greater
25 breadth of urban agricultural business development,

2 creating exciting new economic opportunities for the
3 food and agriculture sector in New York City. Great
4 news that this passed the City Council two weeks ago.

5 We're very much looking forward to
6 partnering with you in the future on urban
7 agriculture policy and projects in your districts,
8 and I want to thank you for the opportunity to speak
9 with you today. Thank you. Now we'll take questions
10 if you like.

11 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Sure. First of all,
12 thank you so much, each of you, for your testimony,
13 for your work, for your commitment to both the Green
14 Thumb program, community gardens generally, and of
15 course the state of urban agriculture with the
16 Mayor's Office of Urban Agriculture as well. We know
17 the work you do and send my best to Qiana, hope she
18 recovers soon, and please thank her.

19 DEPUTY DIRECTOR BURR: I'll tell her.
20 Thank you, Council Member.

21 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Yes, for her great
22 work too. As I've said before, you know, I've seen
23 you all in your work and events that Green Thumb has
24 done that I participated in and know well your
25 commitment to this effort and to improve the support

2 for community gardens and urban agriculture in our
3 city so thank you all.

4 I also want to note that we've been
5 joined by Council Member Lee and Council Member Ung
6 virtually.

7 I'll ask a few questions then turn over
8 to my Colleagues in case they have any questions. My
9 first one was just to set the stage a bit too. Has
10 the Administration and the Parks Department or Green
11 Thumb in particular done any analysis of what
12 neighborhoods are most in need of new urban
13 agricultural sites or community gardens?

14 CHIEF MARTINEZ: I'm sorry, Council
15 Member.

16 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: I'll speak up a
17 little bit. Has the Administration or the Green Thumb
18 program done any analysis of what neighborhoods are
19 most in need of urban agriculture or community garden
20 sites?

21 DEPUTY DIRECTOR BURR: Yeah, we haven't
22 engaged in any formal analysis as far as the citywide
23 situation goes, but we plan to embark on that
24 starting that research actually in the fall. We
25 utilize existing urban ag data, which is helpful but

2 not comprehensive from sources such as community-
3 based research like Farming Concrete and City
4 Resources and NYC Open Data for neighborhoods across
5 the city where there's both great need and vast
6 potential for urban agriculture development. We
7 understand that Green Thumb has conducted some of
8 this analysis, so I defer to my friend, Director
9 Martinez, here on that one.

10 CHIEF MARTINEZ: Thank you. Thank you for
11 the question, Council Member.

12 At Green Thumb, we have done analysis of
13 the areas served by community gardens, also the areas
14 that lack community gardens where residents are
15 unable to reach these spaces within walking distance,
16 and we're happy to share that information.

17 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Sure, it would be
18 helpful to see it too, absolutely.

19 Similarly, do we have data on the total
20 number or average amount of food that is harvested
21 each year by urban farms and community gardens?

22 CHIEF MARTINEZ: Thanks for the question,
23 Council Member. That task is almost impossible. At
24 these spaces, we know and we value the amount of food
25 that is grown in these spaces, but to measure or to

2 give you an exact number is very difficult. The
3 spaces are stored by volunteers. We estimate that
4 they grow approximately 600 tons of food but, again,
5 these are very rough estimates.

6 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: It might be helpful
7 for Green Thumb or the Parks Department generally to
8 find ways to quantify this information a bit more
9 because I do think there's so much food production
10 that's great for our neighborhoods happening at our
11 community gardens and to have a better sense of what
12 that looks like, whether it's through surveys or
13 outreach to the community gardeners themselves and
14 kind of on a local level, what they project is the
15 amount of food they're growing, but it would be
16 helpful to have that information and data, especially
17 as urban farming and agriculture becomes more and
18 more an important part of our climate work overall so
19 hopefully we can try to track that more carefully or
20 in more detail going forward.

21 CHIEF MARTINEZ: Thanks for that, Council
22 Member. I just want to also that year, the Community
23 Engagement Team at Green Thumb, we visit the gardens
24 under jurisdiction and we collect some data. We're
25 happy to explore that idea and work with the Mayor's

2 Office of Urban Ag how to be more targeted and more
3 specific.

4 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: That's great. What
5 portion of the Parks' budget, Green Thumb or
6 otherwise, is devoted to promoting or supporting
7 urban ag programs in community gardens?

8 CHIEF MARTINEZ: Thank you, Council
9 Member, for that question. We don't discriminate in
10 our budget. Our support to gardeners is with tools,
11 materials and technical assistance. We don't dedicate
12 a specific item or budget item to urban agriculture
13 specifically, but we provide them with the specific
14 tools that go from lumber, soil, compost, landscape
15 fabric, even like with seeds, native plants,
16 seedlings. In addition to that, we provide training
17 for them how to grow or scale up food production so
18 year to year, this type of allocations vary depending
19 on the needs, but we don't have a specific number
20 dedicated for urban agriculture. It's because these
21 spaces are very different. Some spaces are for
22 botanical purposes and they also need soil. Other
23 gardens are dedicated specifically to food production
24 and they also need soil. So we don't discriminate the
25 type of budget items in our budget.

2 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Taking a step back.
3 I mentioned before in my opening statement to the
4 Green Thumb funding that we include every year as
5 part of the budget negotiations. As I've said, it's
6 unfortunately a what we call in budget language a
7 one-shot funding where every year we have to fight to
8 get it renewed. How important is that funding for the
9 Green Thumb program? What does it fund and how
10 necessary is it for your operation as a Green Thumb
11 program?

12 CHIEF MARTINEZ: Thanks for the question,
13 Council Member. The one-shot funding that we receive
14 every year since Fiscal Year '20 has helped us
15 provide additional support to our gardeners and that
16 is like more quality materials, more resources,
17 expand food production, provide more technical
18 assistance, more trainings. In addition to that, it
19 helped us provide 15 seasonal lines which help us
20 provide more dedicated support to our gardeners.

21 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: And those are the
22 seasonal workers that every year are depending on
23 this funding for the continuation of their positions,
24 correct?

2 CHIEF MARTINEZ: Correct. They are
3 attached to that specific one-shot funding.

4 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: And would you say
5 that the need for the technical assistance, for the
6 support from seasonal workers for the community
7 gardens has increased or decreased since this funding
8 line started in 2020?

9 CHIEF MARTINEZ: This funding helped us to
10 match the needs of our gardeners. Since the pandemic,
11 there is a growing interest about food production,
12 and we're dedicating more effort towards that aspect
13 of the community gardens, and it also coincides with
14 like the Fiscal Year '20 when we start receiving this
15 additional funding so it's our response to that also
16 need of the gardeners to grow more food and we're
17 supporting them through this funding, yes.

18 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: If the proposed cut
19 to the Green Thumb program in the FY25 budget takes
20 effect, how would the Parks Department adapt? What
21 would be the responsibilities on community gardening
22 groups? How would the Parks Department make up for
23 this loss of funding?

24 CHIEF MARTINEZ: Thank you for the
25 question, Council Member. We'll adapt as we have done

2 in the past. We will use our resources efficiently
3 and be more strategic about that, but we will need to
4 scale down.

5 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: It would require
6 scaling down, right?

7 CHIEF MARTINEZ: Yes, Council Member.

8 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Let's go back to
9 another question on the budget side. I think you had
10 mentioned in your testimony that the Green Thumb
11 secured 46 million dollars in federal funding from
12 the IRA and so I'm just curious more about what that
13 in particular means. I mean you kind of testified a
14 bit already but just in a bit more detail, what does
15 that funding look like? What will it be used for? How
16 will it help with support for community gardens in
17 the long term?

18 CHIEF MARTINEZ: Thank you, Council
19 Member, for the question. Some background. Our
20 community gardeners access water traditionally
21 through the fire hydrant. That means the gardeners
22 need to use hoses that cross sometimes sidewalks,
23 major intersections, sometimes as far as 100 feet
24 away from the garden so having internal on-site
25 infrastructure for water is a game changer.

2 Currently, we have 60 community gardens in parks
3 property that have that infrastructure so this
4 funding will allow us to provide to have 260
5 community gardens to benefit from this new
6 infrastructure. We're working with USDA and the
7 Natural Resources Conservation Service in this grant.
8 We're currently in the planning phase and, with this
9 specific funding that we secured, the 46 million, 260
10 gardens are eligible to receive support but with the
11 current funding with the federal government we're
12 able to provide internal water to 100 gardens.

13 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you. I just
14 want to note too that it's incredible to see on the
15 federal side the commitment to our trees, to our
16 community gardens with these kinds of investments,
17 and I think New York City needs to get much more
18 serious much quicker about really matching where the
19 federal government is when it comes to investing in
20 our green spaces because to see the disparity between
21 the federal government's support for these kind of
22 efforts and the City government's lack of support for
23 it is very telling in itself and so, in the larger
24 push for one percent of our budget for Parks, it is
25 really catching up to where other levels of

2 government are frankly doing much more and I think
3 that does not reflect well on New York City and it's
4 something that really needs to change in the near
5 future but I just wanted to note that.

6 Switching gears a bit too, I've heard
7 from community gardens and gardeners too some of the
8 for lack of a better word bureaucratic difficulties
9 between making sure they get the resources from the
10 Parks Department, the licensing agreements and making
11 sure they have the resources they need. It's a common
12 issue in City government whether it's community
13 gardens, plazas, or public spaces. The groups on the
14 ground oftentimes have the most difficulty getting
15 the resources because of a lot of complications in
16 the process that they're not streamlined enough, so
17 what are the biggest concerns that you've heard from
18 community gardens about where they need the most
19 support and resources from Parks in caring for these
20 gardens?

21 CHIEF MARTINEZ: Thank you, Council
22 Member. As I mentioned before, we do site visits
23 every year. We visit these gardens with the help of
24 our Community Engagement Team so we do an assessment
25 of these sites and we know which gardens need the

2 help right away so we use an equity lens to address
3 their needs and we address the gardens who are
4 historically disinvested and that's where we put the
5 resources there. We have communication with these
6 gardeners and we know their needs and we put the
7 resources where the needs are more immediate.

8 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Aside from the site
9 visits too, are there regular communications
10 throughout the year with the gardens or a system for
11 communication to kind of hear their concerns evolve
12 over the course of the year?

13 CHIEF MARTINEZ: Yes. We actually started
14 this year State of the Green Thumb Gardens where we
15 have basically a town hall type of event where we
16 invite gardeners to join us in a room and hear from
17 us about our challenges and also like our needs as
18 well but, at the same time, we want to hear from
19 them, like what are their real needs and how we can
20 work together to prioritize our service.

21 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: In 2019 there were
22 some gardening groups that were hesitant to sign a
23 new license agreement with Parks. Did Green Thumb
24 lose any gardening groups as a result of the new
25 agreement or how was the process regarding the recent

2 2023 licensing renewal? How has that process worked?
3 Have there been any changes in the licensing renewal
4 process from 2019 to 2023? Can you speak to that a
5 bit?

6 CHIEF MARTINEZ: Yes. Thank you for the
7 question, Council Member. No garden group had been
8 lost as a result of the new license agreement. I want
9 to clarify the license agreement is with the gardens
10 under Park jurisdiction so, right now, we have 388 of
11 those gardens in our jurisdiction and those gardens
12 signed a license agreement with us. We now started
13 the 2023 licensing agreement. I'm happy to report
14 that all the groups have executed the agreement. We
15 did an extensive outreach to these groups with a lot
16 of education. We did surveys. We did also town halls
17 where we explain the details of the license agreement
18 also in multiple languages and, the license
19 agreement, I'm happy to report that we listened to
20 them and we made some beneficial changes, changing
21 the term of the license from four to ten years. That
22 was a welcome change as well. Also...

23 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: The term of the
24 license is now ten years?

25 CHIEF MARTINEZ: Correct, a full decade.

2 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Okay.

3 CHIEF MARTINEZ: So it's a message that
4 we're now telling the garden that these gardens are
5 here to be preserved. In addition to that, we
6 clarified the term about selling agricultural produce
7 just to clarify that also involves they're allowed to
8 sell compost for example. The 2019 license agreement
9 allow them to sell their produce with any revenue to
10 be invested into the garden group and we clarified
11 that. In addition to that, we increase their ability
12 to host fundraisers from two to four because we know
13 there are volunteers, they need to raise funds for
14 the care of the space, so we made those updates and,
15 again, all 388 gardens are in good standing.

16 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Can you just
17 clarify, Carlos, you were saying for composting and
18 also for urban agriculture so they are allowed to
19 sell composting and what are the restrictions on the
20 sale of agriculture? Can you just clarify what the
21 policies are around that for community gardening?

22 CHIEF MARTINEZ: Selling agricultural
23 produce grown on-site in the garden is allowed by the
24 by the license agreement. In this 2023 license
25 agreement, we just made the categories more broadly

2 to allow them to sell eggs, compost, seeds,
3 seedlings, plant material beyond what is produced
4 from the actual, their harvest for example, so it's
5 more broadly the idea of selling agricultural produce
6 in gardens.

7 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: I see. My final
8 question before turning over to my Colleagues for a
9 bit was just, this is the lawyer side of me, but I
10 think with the license agreements whether it's for
11 community gardens, even frankly separate agency but
12 plazas and things like that, the terms can be very
13 onerous for community groups in particular. The
14 legalese in there, the requirements for insurance
15 policies or indemnification or things like that can
16 really be excessive for groups that have very little
17 in resources and it really transfers a lot of the
18 legal responsibility from the City agencies where I
19 think it should be because the City's resources are
20 much greater from a legal standpoint and otherwise
21 and would transfer them to the community groups that
22 don't have the capacity to really carry those
23 obligations and it could make gardeners very hesitant
24 to sign on to licenses or otherwise and assume so
25 much legal liability they really shouldn't be

2 assuming in the first place. Has that come up in in
3 this context? What efforts in the licensing process
4 have been made by the Parks Department to refine that
5 to make sure the burden shifting isn't great on the
6 community gardens?

7 CHIEF MARTINEZ: Thank you for sharing
8 your concern, Council Member. We made an extensive
9 educational process during the 2023 relicensing
10 process where we explained all this and we made it
11 clear. We even made videos, we hosted town halls in
12 multiple languages because we understand that our
13 gardens are stewarded by many folks from different
14 backgrounds and we clarify all this. For example,
15 insurance is not required as part of the process. I'm
16 trying to think about, we'll listen to their
17 concerns. We learned from process back in 2019, and
18 we tried to make it better actually, also the
19 license, and also we created like a Q and A document
20 where all these legalese is now into like plain
21 English, explains every single detail. We also host
22 workshops and trainings about the license agreement
23 in a way to explain every single section of the
24 agreement just to make it easier to digest like what
25 the things are able to do in the space. I have talked

2 to many people in other programs around the country
3 and even around the world and they are amazed to see
4 that this is a very generous agreement and our
5 program is going above and beyond to support
6 gardeners so I'm happy to see that the City is making
7 an intentional effort to support the gardeners.
8 Again, we provide free resources, free access to
9 land, free access to water, tools, materials,
10 training so I think, and again, trying to match the
11 efforts that the volunteers provide to this space.

12 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: That's good to
13 hear, and I just urge you all to continue to be
14 conscious of those concerns and how to address it
15 because it's one of the biggest but most important
16 considerations when it comes to public space. If we
17 want it to remain public and we want communities to
18 participate and residents to be a part of it, we
19 can't hold them to the same standards as private
20 entities that have much more in resources or,
21 frankly, City government, and I'm not saying that
22 that's necessarily happening here. I'm just saying
23 that it is a larger, I see it in public space over
24 and over again in our city that where the burdens put
25 on smaller community groups can be so great and it's

2 almost like expecting the same things of them as we'd
3 expect of a private entity or a BID or otherwise that
4 has more resources to manage space and then, if we go
5 down that route, we end up in situations where we're
6 actually decreasing the access to public space and
7 deprioritizing it and so even if the intentions are
8 good that's where in the licensing process can get
9 much more complicated so I just urge you all to
10 continue to be conscious of that to find ways to ease
11 the burden on community gardener groups in particular
12 as they maintain their spaces.

13 Now I'll turn it over to Council Member
14 Carr who I think had some questions.

15 COUNCIL MEMBER CARR: Thank you Chair.
16 It's good to see you all. Thanks for being here
17 today.

18 My home borough has eight community
19 gardens, Staten Island, and one of them is in my
20 District and then if I go to the Brooklyn side of my
21 District and I look at, not just the little area that
22 I have but the entire sort of southwest Brooklyn
23 area, there's none, and that's not surprising because
24 on both sides of the bridge of my District the
25 housing typology permits people to garden at home.

2 They have that capacity and so my focus here in this
3 conversation is really in NYCHA facilities. The one
4 community garden I have is at the South Beach Houses,
5 a NYCHA facility, and I have a second NYCHA facility
6 in my District, the Berry Homes, which does not have
7 one so I guess what I'm interested in hearing from
8 you is how does the partnership with NYCHA work? Is
9 there a preference with working with tenant
10 associations as your local community partner or can
11 it just be a resident or group of residents separate
12 and apart from that. What could be the process and
13 partnership that we can continue to grow between
14 yourselves and NYCHA as it pertains to the Berry
15 Homes?

16 CHIEF MARTINEZ: Thank you, Council
17 Member, for the question. Yes, we understand the
18 difference in numbers about community gardens. We
19 want to support that in Staten Island as well. I'm
20 glad that you are aware of the South Beach Community
21 Garden. We're partners with them. This is part of the
22 partnership between NYC Parks Green Thumb and NYCHA.
23 The idea behind this partnership is like to start
24 thinking about being creative and how we can expand
25 our support. South Beach Community Garden is an

2 eligible garden because it is accessible from the
3 sidewalk. It functions as a public space so we're
4 expanding the definition of public space in
5 collaboration with NYCHA. We're taking a closer look
6 to continue expanding in Staten Island, but I'm happy
7 to work with your office about identifying potential
8 sites as well. I want to be mindful that our model is
9 community-driven. We go where there's a community
10 group ready to take a community garden
11 responsibility. It's a lot of work here behind the
12 scenes. It's a year-round work, but we're always
13 happy to explore initiatives. For example, we have a
14 partnership memorandum of agreement with NYPD in Hill
15 Street Community Garden is under jurisdiction of
16 NYPD. There's a plan for a future capital project
17 there, but they don't have a use there so, in the
18 interim, where we plan a community garden there and
19 it's been functioning very well since 2016, 2017, and
20 we want to continue working with those type of
21 partnership with other City agencies.

22 COUNCIL MEMBER CARR: No, I appreciate
23 that and absolutely you need a willing partner on the
24 ground right who's going to be working with, you and
25 I think I just wanted to make the point that I think

2 borough equity in this case is not trying to get us
3 from eight to 100 community gardens but rather you
4 know being very targeted and invested in particular
5 places where, again, the housing typology does not
6 permit people to garden at home so to speak, right,
7 and I think NYCHA facilities, as it pertains to
8 Staten Island, is where we should look. In addition
9 to that, as far as urban farming is concerned, is the
10 mission of the office particular to just helping
11 private actors kind of access credits and whatnot at
12 the federal level in order to bring about urban
13 agriculture? We have a green roof in my District at
14 the Teleport thanks to the Nicotra's efforts. Is
15 there a look at publicly owned spaces and what role
16 they could play in the urban agriculture field
17 because there's a couple of places in Staten Island
18 that I think we could have that conversation about
19 how there could be significant food growth there and
20 maybe that flows into our pantries, maybe that flows
21 into a marketplace, what have you. I think there's a
22 lot of thought we could put into that, but I'd just
23 love to know like what you think the limits are of
24 your mandate.

2 DEPUTY DIRECTOR BURR: I'm sorry, Council
3 Member. What was the question?

4 COUNCIL MEMBER CARR: The question was
5 about the mandate of MOUA, right?

6 DEPUTY DIRECTOR BURR: Yeah.

7 COUNCIL MEMBER CARR: Is your mandate
8 specific to helping private actors set up urban
9 agriculture opportunities or are you actively engaged
10 with what City land, public land, public spaces could
11 be used in that mission as well, and do you think
12 there's opportunities for you to get funding streams
13 that are available to private actors through taxes
14 and credits for public spaces as well. Is that
15 something that's in your bandwidth, something that
16 you've had some experience with, thought about? You
17 mentioned that there's an analysis that's forthcoming
18 later this year. Is public space part of that
19 analysis?

20 DEPUTY DIRECTOR BURR: Yeah, it certainly
21 is. This is actually something that we discuss
22 actually all the time, anywhere from finding
23 additional funding streams but also the innovative
24 licensing agreements that I actually refer to in the
25 statement to where certain City-owned land parcels

2 could be put to use for community benefit and that
3 would enable a wider range of sort of urban
4 agriculture activities on that land so, yeah, we talk
5 about this all the time. We would be happy to circle
6 back with your office, actually with the Director. We
7 could have a much more in-depth conversation about
8 that for sure.

9 COUNCIL MEMBER CARR: That would be great.
10 I'd love to do that. Thank you, Chair.

11 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you, Council
12 Member Carr. Council Member Lee.

13 COUNCIL MEMBER LEE: Thank you. Just a few
14 questions. I am not a lawyer so I will be putting on
15 my social worker hat because I do think that these
16 programs are great just for the well-being of all
17 folks in the community in addition to obviously
18 providing food and other benefits to the community so
19 just a few questions. Just to clarify the point on
20 the licensing, so if a group, let's just say, came
21 together and said we want a community garden in our
22 space. Is that something or do they need the
23 licensing? I wasn't sure about that piece.

24 CHIEF MARTINEZ: Thanks for the question,
25 Council Member Lee. I think we can talk about two

2 different categories of gardens. We have the gardens
3 that are under the jurisdiction of Parks Department,
4 388 of those. They sign a license agreement with us.
5 Then we have 175 gardens in different jurisdictions.
6 That would be State or other City agencies, and those
7 gardens register with us to receive support from us.
8 That is the difference between those two types of
9 gardens.

10 COUNCIL MEMBER LEE: Okay, awesome. Do you
11 also have a breakdown by borough of where they are,
12 and is it in places where there are food deserts,
13 let's just say, so that perhaps we can do more green
14 growing and naturally build those fresh foods into
15 the neighborhoods?

16 CHIEF MARTINEZ: Thanks for that question,
17 Council Member. Yes, we have a breakdown by borough.
18 These community gardens, most of them were started
19 back in the '70s when we had a lot of disinvestment
20 and also matches where we have food deserts, and
21 actually those gardens are producing food and we
22 provide extra support to those gardens because
23 there's a historic disinvestment in those
24 neighborhoods so we provide targeted support to
25 those.

2 COUNCIL MEMBER LEE: Okay, awesome. Then,
3 when I ran my former non-profit organization, it was
4 a Korean-Asian-specific organization. We had two
5 senior centers, and it was the most interesting case
6 we had to get involved in because there were seniors
7 that were part of a community garden in Flushing, and
8 we had to be mediators and intervene because there
9 were language barriers, and what was happening is
10 that the seniors, and this showcases the importance
11 of the community gardens, they really took ownership
12 but they took ownership to like the 100th level,
13 right, so they started growing their foods and then
14 selling them privately and all these things and then
15 they got into arguments with each other saying no,
16 this is my land, this is not your land, and we had to
17 come in because there was a language barrier and
18 explain no, this is not either of your land, this is
19 public property, right, but it just speaks and goes
20 to the point that I think especially older adults and
21 seniors in New York City, they thrive on these types
22 of programs, and so I just wanted to know if you had
23 any sort of partnerships with DFTA, let's just say,
24 to have these Green Thumb type programs that are more
25 geared towards older adults and seniors because I

2 think we saw, especially during COVID and all of that
3 hell, it was important for their mental well-being to
4 just be outside and be productive.

5 CHIEF MARTINEZ: Thank you, Council
6 Member, for the question. Yes, many of these
7 community gardens are cared by seniors, and we love
8 what they're doing for all these years, or even
9 decades. Talking about conflict, that's another thing
10 that we do in Green Thumb. We provide conflict
11 resolution as well. We don't have a specific
12 partnership with a senior program or Department of
13 Aging, for example, but we direct into specific
14 resources. Many of these gardeners who care for these
15 spaces, they need the extra support physically, and
16 that's where we fill the gap sometimes so building
17 raised beds, delivery materials, that's where we help
18 them.

19 COUNCIL MEMBER LEE: Okay, awesome. Sorry,
20 one more question if I may. Just going along the
21 senior them, have you looked at also partnering, is
22 there room for public/private partnership meaning
23 there are some NORCs I have in my District that have
24 a ton of green spaces because they're in these garden
25 apartment style co-ops, and so let's just say they

2 came to you and said hey, our Board wants to use a
3 certain piece of our property to do this community
4 garden through the NORC, which is funded through
5 DFTA, is there a way to have a partnership there
6 where they can utilize some of the support resources
7 like you're talking about but then do it on sort of
8 private property if you will, like that's shared by a
9 cohort I guess you could say?

10 CHIEF MARTINEZ: Thank you for sharing
11 that idea, Council Member. Yes, we even support
12 gardens that are in private property.

13 COUNCIL MEMBER LEE: Okay.

14 CHIEF MARTINEZ: Our support is basically
15 providing the materials and technical assistance.
16 We're not the property managers.

17 COUNCIL MEMBER LEE: Right.

18 CHIEF MARTINEZ: We'll defer to them to
19 manage the property, but we'll provide that
20 assistance. We're not able to provide labor in those
21 spaces, but we can provide free resources, and we are
22 all the time being creative, working with other City
23 agencies, State agencies, also with NYCHA, private
24 property, even land trust sites, so we provide that
25 type of support.

2 COUNCIL MEMBER LEE: Okay. That's great
3 because some of these co-op areas have like 3,000
4 units that expand over miles in my District, like on
5 one Board, and so they have lots of young families,
6 kids, so I just feel like this would be a great
7 opportunity to teach them about food, learning,
8 growing, all of those things so okay.

9 CHIEF MARTINEZ: Thank you, Council
10 Member. I'm happy to follow up with your office.

11 COUNCIL MEMBER LEE: Okay. Thank you.

12 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thanks so much,
13 Council Member Lee, for the good questions. Social
14 workers' questions are always better than a lawyer's
15 question.

16 Actually, following up on Council Member
17 Lee's questions too, I couldn't quite get a clear
18 answer so does the Administration or does Parks have
19 data on the number of sites on City-owned land that
20 are engaged in urban agriculture practices?

21 CHIEF MARTINEZ: Yes, we have all that
22 data, Council Member.

23 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Okay. It would be
24 good, I think Council Member Lee's question also
25 about the mental health impact for seniors and

2 otherwise too, I think if there are ways for Green
3 Thumb to quantify as best as possible some of these
4 things, like publicize more some of things like what
5 are City-owned sites that have urban agriculture,
6 what are neighborhoods that are both food deserts and
7 lack community gardens or need more sites for urban
8 agriculture, what are the mental health impacts, what
9 do seniors, for example, or our youth report about
10 how they feel being in community gardens of, even as
11 I mentioned before, I know there's one community
12 garden in the South Bronx too that has served as a
13 violence interrupter space for rival gangs as well
14 and for conflict de-escalation. I just think that
15 there are such great ways to show how our community
16 gardens are so useful and it's not just about having
17 a green space but it connects to all of these
18 different other social impacts that we really care
19 about, especially in communities that need it. I
20 think it'd be great for Parks to have more data and
21 clear ways to communicate it. Not a criticism by any
22 means but just more to say I think that there is much
23 more attention that can be called to community
24 gardens and how important they are, and I think you
25 all have some good data there to show that and make

2 those connections so it's something to definitely
3 consider and maybe look forward to having some maps
4 or other reports that, even at the next hearing that
5 we do on this, we could review as well.

6 CHIEF MARTINEZ: Thank you, Council
7 Member, for that idea. We have some of those
8 analyses. Happy to share with you, but the other
9 ideas, we're happy to work with that and maybe in
10 collaboration with the Mayor's Office of Urban Ag.

11 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Yeah, in fact, the
12 two agencies working together I think would be a
13 great collaboration there.

14 DEPUTY DIRECTOR BURR: That's actually
15 fully on the radar. We actually mentioned it in our
16 first Urban Ag report that came out in October '23,
17 and we're sort of starting to lay the groundwork for
18 this actually, data collection, trying to quantify
19 things like that, mental health benefits and things
20 like that. Easier said than done, but we're going to
21 try.

22 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: That's great to
23 hear. If you can share that with the Council too,
24 that would be really helpful because we can also help
25 to publicize it.

2 Carlos, you had mentioned this before,
3 but this is my last couple of questions. How has the
4 Mayor's Office of Urban Agriculture and Green Thumb
5 engaged with other jurisdictions to learn about and
6 adapt to best practices related to community gardens,
7 the management of gardens, working with community
8 groups on the ground or urban agriculture? What are
9 you seeing from other jurisdictions across the
10 country?

11 DEPUTY DIRECTOR BURR: We have engaged
12 with urban agriculture leaders in cities across the
13 country and internationally in the spirit of
14 exchanging ideas and best practices, sharing
15 inhibitions and brainstorming policy prescriptions.
16 Executive Director Qiana Mickie has a regular meeting
17 with an urban agriculture directors' group actually
18 comprised of urban agriculture directors from around
19 the country, which is great. She is also regarded as
20 a national expert and is frequently requested to
21 share best practices at urban agriculture and food
22 systems events and conferences and symposiums and so
23 forth but, yeah, there are all kinds of ideas that
24 are actually happening all across the country and
25 internationally as well. Different cities are doing

2 different things. We're trying to benefit from that.
3 Some of the land use agreements that we've seen are
4 actually interesting, not ready to quite share that
5 yet but happy to have a deeper conversation again
6 with you about this, actually with the Director
7 involved, but she's being doing this pretty
8 consistently since the start of the Office so..

9 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: (INAUDIBLE) Qiana's
10 a leader in this work, and I've been fortunate to be
11 able to learn from her so definitely very excited to
12 talk more.

13 How about on the community gardens side?

14 CHIEF MARTINEZ: Thank you, Council
15 Member, for that. I'm proud to say that we're the
16 largest and the strongest community gardening program
17 in the nation. I would even dare to say around the
18 world. Many people from other countries, from Japan,
19 from Europe, from Latin America, come here to see our
20 program, and they're always amazed about our system
21 and our model and our philosophy, but we always learn
22 from them in that exchange, so we're in constant
23 communication with them. We are also part of the
24 American Community Gardening Association as well and

2 also sharing best practices and we're very proud to
3 share that we're the largest and the strongest.

4 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: That's great to
5 hear. Finally, how does Parks navigate and support
6 community gardens that are not on Parks-owned
7 property so, for example, if they're on vacant HPD
8 lots or other lots that have been abandoned or vacant
9 in some way? Is that part of the portfolio too, and
10 how does Parks support those community gardens as
11 well?

12 CHIEF MARTINEZ: Thank you, Council
13 Member, for the question. Yes, we have 175 gardens in
14 different jurisdictions, and we provide the same
15 level of support to them. Land trust, privately owned
16 gardens, both City and State jurisdiction. The only
17 difference is we don't provide the property
18 management aspect. In our gardens, we are responsible
19 for sidewalks, fences, retaining walls, and all that
20 nature, but the same level of support.

21 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Great. Thank you.
22 We've also been joined by Council Member Narcisse. Do
23 you have any questions before?

24 COUNCIL MEMBER NARCISSE: Today is about
25 the street co-naming?

2 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Yes, (INAUDIBLE)
3 street co-naming, yep.

4 COUNCIL MEMBER NARCISSE: Yes.

5 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: If you need a
6 minute, I can ask another..

7 COUNCIL MEMBER NARCISSE: No, I'll ask
8 because I have to run back again for my Health.

9 Good morning, and thank you, Chair, for
10 the opportunity for me to ask a question.

11 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: We need more
12 community gardens in City Hall so we can all rest and
13 relax too.

14 COUNCIL MEMBER NARCISSE: Yeah, we don't
15 have no time to rest. I have about three different
16 things going at once.

17 I'm asking for the support for the street
18 co-naming because Detective Joe Calabrese lived in
19 Marine Park, that's my constituency. Detective
20 Calabrese was a dedicated member of the NYPD, and
21 that's the reason I had to rush here to come and ask
22 for the support. He's a beloved figure in our
23 community. His service and the positive impact he
24 made deserve to be remembered so co-naming the street
25 is an honor to serve lasting tribute to his legacy

2 and a reminder of the sacrifices made by those in law
3 enforcement which we need to keep up and making sure
4 that their names are never forgotten for the work
5 they have done for our community. It will also
6 highlight the importance of mental healthcare for
7 all, especially our first responders who face immense
8 pressure every day so I'm asking not only the
9 opportunity to name the street, I know some folks
10 will always wonder what he could have been, but it is
11 time for us to take mental health seriously, if any
12 time, so I thank you, Chair, for giving me the
13 opportunity so I'll ask everybody to support because
14 it's important to keep his name high. Thank you.

15 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you so much,
16 Council Member, for your moving words and look
17 forward to voting on your bill and all the others
18 right after this hearing is over too so thank you,
19 Council Member.

20 All right. I want to thank this panel so
21 much for your testimony, for answering the questions,
22 and look forward to our continued work together to
23 highlight the importance of community gardens. Thank
24 you all so much. Thank you.

2 We will now move on to public testimony.
3 Before doing so, I just need to read out a few
4 reminders.

5 I now open the hearing for public
6 testimony. I remind members of the public that this
7 is a formal government proceeding and that decorum
8 shall be observed at all times. As such, members of
9 the public shall remain silent at all times.

10 The witness table is reserved for people
11 who wish to testify. No video recording or
12 photography is allowed from the witness table.
13 Further, members of the public may not present audio
14 or video recordings as testimony but may submit
15 transcripts of such recordings to the Sergeant-at-
16 Arms for inclusion in the hearing record.

17 If you wish to speak at today's hearing,
18 please fill out an appearance card with the Sergeant-
19 at-Arms and wait to be recognized. When recognized,
20 you will have two minutes to speak on today's hearing
21 topic which is about community gardens in our city as
22 well as street namings.

23 I would now have the honor to call up
24 Anna-Marie Vallone as well as Perry Vallone to give
25 their testimony.

2 PERRY VALLONE: Hello, Chair. This is for
3 the City street renaming?

4 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Yes.

5 PERRY VALLONE: I'm here for moral
6 support.

7 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Good morning.

8 ANNA-MARIE VALLONE: Hi, Chair. How are
9 you? Thank you, Chair Krishan and Council Members.
10 Thanks for giving us the opportunity to speak today
11 and thank you for considering the co-naming of 157th
12 Street and 32nd Avenue right by Bowne Park Paul A.
13 Vallone Way. I'm just going to take two minutes just
14 to say a few words about my husband. Anyone that knew
15 Paul knew he wanted to make our community the best
16 place he could. He worked tirelessly and was devoted
17 to advocate for better quality of life. He worked on
18 scholarships for students for the community. He was
19 part of a tree giveaway to make our spaces more
20 green. He instituted holiday parades. He brought back
21 fireworks celebrations and all family events. He
22 mentored, inspired, and built relationships. He
23 served on boards and was a leader. In everything he
24 did, everyone knows he did with his heart, his soul,
25 and his big smile. This street, 157th and 32nd Avenue

2 by Bowne Park, is so meaningful to our family.
3 Outside of him spearheading a 10-year project for
4 improvements to the park, it's several blocks from
5 our home. We raised our children there. With many
6 visits during the week, the kids ran around the pond,
7 they played in the playground, they sat on the famous
8 concrete turtle, and he even coached and had
9 practices for his soccer team there. He loved the
10 community. He loved community service, and he's lived
11 his life to serve. This co-naming is an honor and
12 would be in honor of his eight years in Council and
13 two years of Deputy Commissioner. I want to thank you
14 for recognizing his achievements, working with him
15 and remembering him. My husband passed away almost
16 five months ago. He did so much in his short time. He
17 leaves behind a legacy and, for that, I am thankful
18 and proud. Thank you.

19 PAUL VALLONE: Thank you, Chair. On behalf
20 of my father and the whole Vallone family, thank you
21 for the honor.

22 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: I just want to say
23 first it's an honor to be able to consider as our
24 City Council a street naming for Paul Vallone. Our
25 hearts, Anna-Marie, of the entire City Council are

2 with you, with the Vallone family. Paul has left an
3 indelible mark on this City Council, and now we will
4 make sure that he does on the streets of Queens and
5 our City too. He was always someone who encouraged me
6 even in fighting for parks and green space and our
7 tree canopy, and I couldn't be more profoundly moved
8 to be able to push this forward in Paul's honor which
9 will be a lasting testament to his work...

10 ANNA-MARIE VALLONE: Thank you, Chair.

11 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: So thank you all so
12 much and all our love to you all too.

13 ANNA-MARIE VALLONE: Thank you so much.

14 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you. We'll
15 now call up Eric Goldstein, Anna Sacks, and Brandon
16 Pachuca.

17 Go ahead, Eric.

18 ERIC GOLDSTEIN: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

19 Eric Goldstein, New York City Environment Director at
20 the Natural Resources Defense Council, NRDC, a long-
21 time supporter of Parks and community gardens. We
22 advocated for many years for the 1 percent for Parks
23 that you have been championing. We represented
24 community groups in the 1990s fight when Mayor
25 Giuliani wanted to destroy so many of our community

2 gardens, and we appreciate your leadership in
3 standing up for and fighting for Parks in every city
4 neighborhood and for all New Yorkers. Just about
5 everybody who loves New York loves our community
6 gardens. They're the green oases. They provide
7 recreation, exercise, fresh air, fresh vegetables for
8 hundreds of thousands of city residents, and they
9 bring people and communities together, but our
10 community gardens continue to face challenges. They
11 need more support and resources, not funding cutbacks
12 from the Department of Parks and from the Adams'
13 Administration. They need to know that their
14 licensing agreements will be renewed and their future
15 assured, and they need the funds to expand community
16 gardens to all city neighborhoods and, in particular,
17 to every NYCHA development. One other thing our
18 community gardens need if we're to continue to expand
19 urban agriculture in the nation's largest city, they
20 need healthy soil, soil that's nutrient rich and
21 without heavy metals, and that's where community and
22 Parks Department composting should come in. Our
23 city's organic trash, food scraps, yard waste, food,
24 soil, paper can be processed into finished compost
25 that can serve as natural fertilizer and soil

2 enhancer, but the Parks Department is failing its
3 responsibilities to advance this essential strategy.
4 First, they're violating the City's recycling law
5 that requires every City agency that generates a
6 significant amount of yard waste to compost those
7 materials. The Department has for years ignored this
8 statutory directive. Second, the Department is
9 evicting the Big Reuse community processing operation
10 from its small but spectacular Long Island City
11 location under the 59th Street bridge. Big Reuse is
12 well-run, efficient, nationally recognized non-profit
13 community composting group that is converting waste
14 into finished compost. It produces nutrient-rich soil
15 amendment that goes back to the community and
16 supports urban agriculture. It actually assists the
17 Parks Department, as you know, by accepting from
18 western facilities Parks and taking their leaf and
19 yard waste, saving the Department from having to set
20 up its own composting. NRDC and all the other
21 advocates here love our city's parks. We appreciate
22 the good work of the Parks Department workers, but
23 this move to evict Big Reuse as of June 30th is
24 inexplicable, unwise, and unnecessary. It brings
25 shame on Parks Department Commissioner Sue Donoghue

2 and her senior staff. Shame, and if that decision is
3 not reversed, it will become a permanent blot, a
4 stain that cannot be removed, on the proud history of
5 this Department and its current leadership. We thank
6 you for all you are doing and have done to preserve
7 all of our community gardens and community composting
8 and Big Reuse in particular.

9 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thanks for your
10 testimony, Eric, and for highlighting the importance
11 of Big Reuse's work and the importance of making sure
12 that the Parks Department finds space for them and
13 protects their operations. Thank you.

14 ANNA SACKS: Thank you for having this
15 hearing. I also wanted to talk about Big Reuse and
16 community composting in general. Community composting
17 belongs in Parks. It makes sense. Parks produces a
18 huge amount of leaf and yard waste, and where does
19 that go? Right now, for the most part, it goes to
20 landfills and incinerators. Instead, it could be
21 processed on-site and turned into compost that is
22 then used to nurture the Parks own land. That's the
23 type of climate-local solutions that we should be
24 aiming for as a City. On one level, this is undoing
25 this proven climate solution to create a parking lot,

2 which according to AAA New York and the Center for
3 Zero Waste Design is non-necessary. There is an
4 existing parking lot that can be utilized. On the
5 other hand, there is this idea of democracy and what
6 type of city we want to build, and I understand that
7 it's the Parks land and I also understand it's our
8 land and it's our city and we get to decide how we
9 use our land, and it seems like it's undermining our
10 local democracy the way in which the Parks Department
11 has been operating, and I love the Parks Department,
12 and it pains me to see that there isn't this dialogue
13 and there isn't this maturity to be able to have
14 difficult conversations and come to the table and
15 find solutions that work. There is broad support for
16 Big Reuse from the Queens Borough President, 18
17 Council Members, 115 community organizations. There
18 have been multiple Parks own community input meetings
19 where universally people support it in NYCHA and
20 otherwise Big Reuse staying there. Over 3,000 letters
21 were sent to the Adams' Administration and, yet,
22 nothing seems to be enough, and it's been, for me
23 personally, disheartening to see that, like I love
24 our democracy, I love Parks, I love the City, and I
25 want to be able to get to a better solution, and it's

2 been sad to see that the Parks Department and its
3 current leadership, or the Adams' Administration, I'm
4 not sure who it's coming from, is unwilling to engage
5 with the local community so thank you for this
6 hearing, and I really am looking forward to a
7 solution that benefits all because that's possible.

8 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you.

9 BRANDON PACHUCA: Thank you, Chairman
10 Krishnan, and Members of this Committee on Parks and
11 Recreation for the opportunity to submit testimony.
12 My name is Brandon Pachuca. I'm a resident of the
13 Lower East Side, and I work in architecture and urban
14 planning as an urban data scientist and (INAUDIBLE)
15 engineer, focused on evaluating how our urban
16 environment can become more sustainable. Community
17 gardens such as Elizabeth Street Garden play a vital
18 role in our urban environment. They provide
19 communities with access to quality green space,
20 daylight, help mitigate water runoff, lower urban
21 heat island effect, and foster a sense of community.
22 These aspects align with the Committee's mission on
23 Parks and Recreation underlying the importance of
24 preserving such green infrastructure. I volunteer and
25 garden at the Elizabeth Street Garden, an

1 approximately 20,000-square foot community garden in
2 Little Italy Community Board District 2. Elizabeth
3 Street Garden provides hundreds of free programs on
4 the community such as poetry, concerts, movie nights,
5 tai chi, yoga, and educational classes for the
6 neighboring preschools, all offered at no cost to the
7 City and free to the public. These events unite the
8 community and provide a clean, safe space for the
9 physical and mental health of all. When I lost my
10 mother two years ago to a battle of cancer, grief and
11 depression became my reality. When I found Elizabeth
12 Street Garden, it brought me back to life. It offered
13 a way for me to put my garden skills to good use and
14 gave me a sense of community when I needed it most.
15 The City, specifically the Department of Housing
16 Preservation and Development, is currently seeking to
17 destroy the garden and build a seven-story,
18 approximately 92,761-square foot mixed-use building
19 containing 123 units of affordable housing,
20 guaranteed for 60 years, 4,000 square foot of ground
21 floor retail, and 11,000 square foot office space,
22 and a 6,600-square foot publicly accessible green
23 space. The proposed development, if implemented,
24 would not only erase a precious green space from an
25

1 area with an already significantly low access to
2 quality green space, but also potentially disrupt the
3 community's sense of belonging and the garden's
4 positive impact on physical and mental health. This
5 is not just a matter of losing a garden but a threat
6 to the very fabric of the community. Elizabeth Street
7 Garden is awaiting a decision from the New York Court
8 of Appeals which will rule on whether the City met
9 its obligation when it declared that there would be
10 no negative impacts by removing a 20,000-square foot
11 community garden. This decision will have
12 longstanding implications for environmental review at
13 the City and State levels. The City framed this
14 argument as green space versus affordable housing.
15 This is a false choice between two profoundly
16 essential pieces of the urban fabric. This is why
17 Elizabeth Street Gardens submitted a plan to the
18 Mayor's Office that preserves the garden and achieves
19 it's housing goals within the community district at
20 underutilized sites. Over the past month, we have
21 launched a letter-writing campaign in our community
22 and have sent over 100,000 letters to the Mayor's
23 Office, HPD, and the Administration. Instead of
24 working with us to find a viable solution, the City
25

2 insists on fighting in court and spending thousands
3 in taxpayer dollars. I call upon this Committee and
4 the City of New York to formally recognize community
5 gardens as essential cornerstones of communities that
6 stitch together the urban fabric, reject the notion
7 that we can only have more housing or green space,
8 restore the 2.6 million funding for Green Thumb, and
9 support for our mission for 1 percent of the NYC
10 Fiscal budget for Department of Parks and Recreation,
11 embrace Elizabeth Street Garden and work with us to
12 find a solution to meet our housing goals and
13 preserve a one-of-a-kind garden. Come by the garden
14 yourself with your friends, family, or loved ones to
15 see how a community garden can give people a place to
16 thrive. Thank you for your time.

17 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you for your
18 testimony. Thank you to this panel for your
19 testimony.

20 I want to mention also Council Member
21 Julie Menin is on virtually.

22 Now, I'd like to call up Iyeshima Harris,
23 Chrissy Word, and Joseph Reiver.

24 Iyeshima, you may start.

2 IYESHIMA HARRIS: Thank you. Can you hear
3 me well? I'll try to use my outer voice.

4 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Very nice to see
5 you.

6 IYESHIMA HARRIS-OUEDRAOGO: Thank you to
7 Chairman Krishnan and Members of the Committee on
8 Parks and Rec for the opportunity to provide this
9 testimony today. My name is Iyeshima Harris-
10 Ouedraogo, and I am the Director of Advocacy and
11 Programs at Green Guerillas. Green Guerillas is a
12 non-profit organization that supports community
13 gardeners and activates youth engaged in food justice
14 across the city since 1973. As an organizer of the
15 Green Guerillas Council of Gardeners, a dynamic
16 coalition uniting community gardeners across New York
17 City, I want to highlight several crucial
18 recommendations for advancing a sustainable and
19 equitable food system. Oh, it wasn't on. Oh, wow. A
20 sustainable and equitable food system in our city.
21 Recent 10 percent New York City budget cuts,
22 particularly to the Department of Parks and
23 Recreation, have severely affected New York City
24 Green Thumb. This essential agency has seen a
25 significant reduction in its budget, hindering its

2 capacity to provide technical assistance, necessary
3 supplies, and adequate staffing, thus impeding its
4 ability to effectively support community gardeners.

5 Therefore, if this budget cut does get enacted, we
6 call upon the City to invest in program areas that
7 already exists in order to alleviate those burdens.

8 So we recommend the City to increase funding to the
9 Parks Equity Initiative and allocate 300,000 dollars

10 of those funds to create a pilot program empowering

11 garden groups to access funds directly through a

12 simplified application and reporting process that

13 fosters equity and sustainability. We call on the

14 City to continue to invest in a Greener NYC to

15 empower local organizations in providing youth with

16 green jobs, infrastructure, and advocacy

17 opportunities to community gardeners. We also call on

18 the City to increase funding to Get Stuff Clean

19 initiative to enable the partnering of Health and

20 Mental Hygiene Rat Academy to address rodent

21 infestation and illegal dumping that's affecting

22 community gardeners while also strengthening

23 collaboration between DSNY and Green Thumb and

24 enhancing the relationship and outreach of the

25 Department of Health Rat Academy Training Program for

2 community gardeners. We also encourage the City to
3 restore funding of 2.6 million dollars to Green
4 Thumb. We also support the Play Fair Coalition in
5 asking for the Mayor to dedicate 1 percent of his New
6 York City Fiscal budget to the Department of Parks
7 and Recreation. Community gardeners have been left to
8 fend for themselves for decades. It is time for the
9 City to invest in communities and uplift the benefits
10 community gardens contribute to neighborhood success.
11 These budgetary constraints facing New York City
12 Parks Green Thumb Division underscore the urgent need
13 for a platform to focus on protecting and enhancing
14 vital services and initiatives integral to the well-
15 being of our city and its residents. Thank you so
16 much for considering our recommendations.

17 CHRISSEY WORD: Good morning, Chair
18 Krishnan and Members of the Committee. Thank you so
19 much for the opportunity to speak today. My name is
20 Chrissy Word, and I'm Director of Education at City
21 Parks Foundation, and today is my birthday...

22 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Happy birthday.

23 CHRISSEY WORD: Thank you. I almost
24 considered when this hearing was shifted to not come
25 today but decided very quickly that that was a bad

2 decision because this is a very, very important
3 issue.

4 City Parks Foundation is an organization
5 dedicated to enriching and sustaining our urban green
6 spaces for the benefit of all New Yorkers. Today, I
7 would like to highlight the significant impact of our
8 Learning Gardens Program and advocate for the
9 continued support and expansion of community gardens
10 across New York City. City Parks Foundation's
11 Learning Gardens Program operates in multiple
12 neighborhoods across the city, primarily in Bronx,
13 Queens, and Brooklyn, engaging youth, offering
14 afterschool and summer sessions, that engage school
15 children in hands-on community garden activities and
16 STEM learning and primarily growing food, and these
17 are children that are coming from historically
18 marginalized neighborhoods that really need these
19 community green spaces. Children learn the
20 fundamentals of gardening from planting seeds to
21 harvesting crops to discovering the crucial role of
22 pollinators such as bees and butterflies. We engage
23 paid high school and college interns to assist to
24 produce upwards of 2,000 pounds of fruits and
25 vegetables each year. We also introduce children to

2 the diverse cultural and artistic uses of various
3 plants, enriching their cultural awareness and
4 creative expression. This is especially important in
5 a city that is home to diverse immigrant communities
6 and whose gardens reflect that makeup. But we know
7 that the benefits of community gardens extend beyond
8 the educational. They provide a vital resource for
9 local communities by offering low-cost and free fresh
10 produce. They help combat urban heat islands, improve
11 air quality, and support local biodiversity. Until
12 the Administration's budget cuts this year, they
13 provided critical composting services to communities,
14 the environmental benefits of which are well-
15 documented and spoken of today. City Parks Foundation
16 works closely with New York City Green Thumb and many
17 other community gardening groups including Green
18 Guerillas and volunteers who manage an incredible
19 network across the city. These organizations and
20 thousands of community gardeners they support provide
21 invaluable services to our green spaces. Reduced
22 funding can result in fewer resources and staff such
23 as the Community Engagement Coordinators who provide
24 key community education and mediation in the most
25 democratic spaces in our city. For the first time in

2 many years, the Green Thumb Grow Together, an event
3 that has brought thousands of gardeners together to
4 learn from and activate with one another, was greatly
5 reduced and nearly halted due to budget cuts. This
6 event and many other programs and services are
7 essential in sustaining the rich social and
8 biodiverse environments of the city's nationally
9 acclaimed community gardens. We call on the
10 Administration to restore and increase funding to
11 community gardens. Additionally, we urge the Council
12 to increase funding to the Parks Equity Initiative so
13 more community gardeners can access the resources
14 they need and to expand the work of Partnerships for
15 Parks, a jointly operated program by City Parks
16 Foundation and the Parks Department to continue to
17 support these efforts. We call for increased funding
18 to a Greener NYC and for 1 percent of the City budget
19 to be allocated to funding Parks. This investment is
20 essential for combating climate change and
21 maintaining and expanding green spaces that are vital
22 to our city's environmental health and community
23 well-being. Thank you for your time.

24 JOSEPH REIVER: My name is Joseph Reiver.

25 I'm the Executive Director of Elizabeth Street Garden

2 and, on behalf of Elizabeth Street Garden, I thank
3 you and your Committee Members for holding this
4 oversight hearing on the importance of New York
5 City's community gardens. In seeking to better
6 support community gardens, the Council must
7 prioritize protecting existing gardens that are at
8 risk of being destroyed. Elizabeth Street Garden is a
9 roughly 20,000-square foot community sculpture garden
10 cherished by many people from the surrounding
11 neighborhood as well as people from around the city
12 and the world. Currently, over 150,000 people visit
13 the garden annually. The volunteer-based non-profit
14 of the same name manages the space, offering hundreds
15 of free public programs for the community throughout
16 the year, including wellness, live music, poetry,
17 movies, screenings, and educational events from the
18 local public schools, like PS-130. The City,
19 specifically the Department of Housing Preservation
20 and Development, is currently seeking to destroy the
21 garden to build 123 units of senior affordable
22 housing, affordable for 60 years, luxury ground floor
23 retail, and over 11,000 square feet of office space
24 for one of the development partners. In our efforts
25 to preserve the garden, we are seeking a solution

2 that saves the garden and achieves much need
3 affordable housing at existing alternative sites
4 within the Community Board and Council Districts.
5 Such a solution could achieve more housing and more
6 public open space in a neighborhood already
7 underserved in terms of affordability and public open
8 space. ESG's proposal to Mayor Adams can be read at
9 elizabethstreetgarden.com/proposal. It's also
10 attached to my testimony. ESG is awaiting a decision
11 on the case before the New York Court of Appeals, the
12 outcome of which will either uphold or severely
13 weaken environmental law at a City and State level.
14 While this work is deeply personal to me and many
15 community members, preserving Elizabeth Street Garden
16 reflects citywide issues, including the lack of true
17 public green space, environmental law, and the need
18 to prioritize community gardens as vital
19 infrastructure. It is common knowledge that community
20 gardens help maintain air quality, collect stormwater
21 runoff, benefit mental and socioeconomic health, and
22 cool down our city which is considered to be one of
23 America's hottest heat islands due to urban
24 development. Yet, the odds of City government
25 creating any new community garden are slim to none.

2 If the above knowledge were formally recognized by
3 this Council and the City, the City would reject any
4 false choice of housing versus green space and
5 embrace gardens like Elizabeth Street Garden along
6 with a solution that achieves up to five times the
7 amount of housing at alternative underutilized sites.
8 Instead, the City is currently spending thousands of
9 taxpayer dollars to fight the community in court and
10 perpetuate misleading narratives about the garden.
11 The political case surrounding Elizabeth Street
12 Garden is a prime example of the failure of the City
13 government to achieve viable solutions that address
14 climate change, our public spaces, and the housing
15 crisis without any loss to the people of New York.
16 The case of Elizabeth Street Garden, itself, is a
17 prime example of how the people of this city can
18 maintain and govern vital public space iconic to New
19 York at zero-dollar cost to the City. I call upon
20 this Committee and the City of New York to formally
21 recognize community gardens as essential cornerstones
22 of communities that stitch together the urban fabric,
23 reject the false choice of green space versus
24 housing, and restore the 2.6 million in funding for
25 Green Thumb and support the mission of at least, at

2 the very least, 1 percent of the New York Fiscal
3 budget to the New York Department of Parks and
4 Recreation. A copy of our proposal, Elizabeth Street
5 Garden's proposal, to Mayor Eric Adams is attached to
6 this testimony, and it includes a report to save the
7 garden as a conservative land trust at zero-dollar
8 cost. I encourage this Committee to take a look at it
9 because it shows how community gardens can actually
10 become self-sustainable and financially self-
11 sustainable and independent from City budget while
12 also having support from the City obviously. That
13 report has a lot of financial information and shows
14 how Elizabeth Street Garden has achieved this under
15 duress from trying to be destroyed by the City. Thank
16 you, Council Member.

17 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you for your
18 testimony and for including those materials too.

19 Next, we'll call up Clare Miflin,
20 Sherrise Palomino, and Justin Green.

21 You may start.

22 CLARE MIFLIN: Thank you. I'm Clare
23 Miflin from the Center for Zero Waste Design. I agree
24 with everything you said about the need to support
25 community gardens, which are also being hit by the

2 defunding of community compost. New York City's own
3 2021 Food Forward Plan has an initiative to bolster
4 community-owned waste management initiatives stating
5 that the City will identify and address barriers to
6 community composting, not defund it. It is also City
7 Law that Parks yard waste must be separated in
8 composting, but very little is. Until recently, it
9 was from Western Queens where Parks yard waste and
10 food scraps went to Big Reuse were made into compost
11 for gardens, parks, and street trees. Big Reuse needs
12 to stay. I'm an architect. I've done construction
13 administration for Parks, Bushwick Inlet Park in
14 Williamsburg I did. I know Parks can accommodate
15 construction staging on the neighboring lot or on the
16 site or on a sliver of Big Reuse's site. There's no
17 choice here. The new park can be built. Big Reuse can
18 stay. Parks vehicles can be parked. There's enough
19 space. The City needs to scale this model up citywide
20 as this is nutritious compost, free of plastics and,
21 if New York City wants healthy soils in its parks and
22 street trees, it needs about 50 times as much. We've
23 calculated how much would be needed to make the soil
24 citywide green spaces healthy, and they need to be
25 healthy. I don't know if you've been upstate Harriman

2 or Minnewaska State Park recently, but the trees have
3 no leaves. There's been an outbreak of spongy moth
4 caterpillars, which have decimated and eaten all the
5 leaves. If the trees are healthy, if they get enough
6 moisture later in the year, they could grow new
7 leaves and survive. This could happen in the city. We
8 need our street trees to be healthy, and compost can
9 store six times its weight in stormwater, keeping
10 that water there, keeping the trees healthy. It's
11 also a fundamental question of what kind of city do
12 we want New York City to be. Do we want to support
13 community gardens and composters which can provide so
14 many volunteers to support street trees and parks and
15 bring thousands of inspirational green jobs to
16 maintain green infrastructure? Do we want to educate
17 and engage and inspire New Yorkers to separate their
18 food scraps and put them to good use? Do we want a
19 green, vital, and resilient city that uplifts
20 community initiatives? Or do we want a city where
21 nobody knows where their food comes from, where their
22 food scraps go to, where we rely on centralized green
23 infrastructure and just give out fines if New Yorkers
24 do the wrong thing? Thank you.

2 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you for your
3 testimony.

4 Justin.

5 JUSTIN GREEN: Hi, Chair. Thanks so much
6 for having this hearing and your support for our
7 community composting site and for community
8 composting in general. I really appreciate the
9 Council's support for our efforts and, frankly, super
10 frustrated with Parks and the City for not listening
11 to elected officials as other supporters have noted.
12 It was supported by the community input meetings that
13 Parks had, two community input meetings came back
14 unanimous in the design for the new Queensbridge Baby
15 Park that we should remain, literally unanimous, like
16 every breakout group came back in support of us
17 remaining. Parks is ignoring that community input
18 meetings that they organized. In addition to both
19 Community Boards, Community Board 1, Community Board
20 2, all elected officials, 3,000 letters, all asking
21 for us to remain on site. The City invested over half
22 a million dollars in building out our community
23 composting site. It is looked at as a leader and a
24 model for the nation. I mean it's great that the City
25 and Green Thumb have become models for community

2 gardening, but there is a real opportunity and we
3 have been a model and a leader in the City and the
4 nation for community composting. We started in
5 community gardens to address the soil in those
6 community gardens. We came out of community gardens.
7 Community composting came out of the effort to
8 improve soils in Two Coves and Queens, Brooklyn
9 Grange. That's where we started our efforts, and we
10 started to help grow food for the city, for residents
11 with the waste we were generating and burdening other
12 communities with. So community composting, our site,
13 are a real integral part of urban agriculture, and
14 we've helped both East New York Farms, we've helped
15 dozens of community gardens with their composting
16 sites by providing compost, assisting them with
17 setting up composting setups and providing browns and
18 picking up food scraps so assisting in their
19 composting efforts, which are all based out of that
20 composting site. If we lose that, community gardens
21 will lose a huge support for their composting
22 efforts, which as we know, New York City soils need
23 compost, they need that amendment, and they will lose
24 that when we lose our site, especially Western Queens
25 which has been so dependent and so real supportive of

2 us being there so we ask. Again, I know you've been
3 working with Parks, but it brings up, just for one
4 more second, I think it brings up an issue about
5 Parks and their lack of taking public input seriously
6 and taking elected officials seriously and it brings
7 up a process question there for me about how
8 decisions should be made on our space, our community
9 spaces, and how we can actually have real input on
10 how those spaces are used. Thanks so much for your
11 time.

12 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you for your
13 testimony and for Big Reuse's work, and we will
14 continue to push as a Council, as we've been doing,
15 in support of you all too, and I appreciate the work
16 that you do.

17 JUSTIN GREEN: Appreciate it.

18 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Sherrise.

19 SHERRISE PALOMINO: Good afternoon. My
20 name is Sherrise Palomino, and I'm the Director of
21 Advocacy and Programs at New Yorkers for Parks. We
22 are a founding member of the Play Fair for Parks
23 Coalition, which includes over 400 organizations from
24 across the city. Thank you, Chair Krishnan, for this
25 timely hearing. I'm grateful for the opportunity to

2 address the significance of community gardens and
3 urban agriculture in New York City.

4 We are navigating the challenges posted
5 by Mayor Adams' Executive Budget that reduces New
6 York City Parks' budget by 55 million dollars,
7 putting these vital spaces at risk. Community gardens
8 and urban agriculture initiatives serve as vital
9 spaces for community engagement, social interaction,
10 and education. Community gardens contribute to the
11 urban ecosystem in numerous ways. They enhance
12 biodiversity by providing habits for various
13 pollinators, birds, and beneficial insects. These
14 gardens help in reducing urban heat islands,
15 mitigating air pollution, and managing stormwater
16 runoff through natural absorption. By transforming
17 vacant lots into vibrant green spaces, community
18 gardens contribute to the beautification and
19 ecological balance of our city. There is an urgent
20 need to reverse the hiring freeze and increase
21 staffing. Mayor Adams' budget reduces the agency's
22 ability to deliver core services that are critical to
23 equitable access to these vital spaces. I urge the
24 City Council to consider the reduction of the
25 Executive Budget's impact, not just on staffing but

2 the maintenance of community gardens and our larger
3 Park system along with the impacts on environmental
4 sustainability. The crises of the last few years have
5 shown us that we are overdue for a transformative
6 investment in our Parks system. By investing in our
7 Parks system and restoring the 55 million dollars in
8 cuts and pushing to set us on a path to 1 percent of
9 the City budget for Parks, we can ensure a safer,
10 healthier, and more vibrant city for generations to
11 come. Thank you.

12 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thanks so much.
13 Thanks to you all for your testimony.

14 Now, we'll call up Anneliese Zausner-
15 Mannes and Sharon Brown.

16 You may start.

17 ANNELIESE ZAUSNER-MANNES: My name is
18 Anneliese Zausner-Mannes. I co-founded Nurture BK
19 when the City shut down compost collection during
20 COVID so District 40, shoutout Council Member Rita
21 Joseph. First, I guess as a community organizer, I
22 want to thank you, Council Member Krishna, for what
23 you said about advocating for smaller community
24 groups to have more access, distinguishing resources,
25 and licensing agreements because that is a huge item

2 that scares and weans people away from coming
3 together. I'm the daughter of immigrants and
4 definitely language barriers. There are a lot of
5 different reasons that people are blocked so I
6 appreciate that. I also want to take a moment and
7 celebrate the people who are stewarding this land.
8 Many people work in community spaces for free.
9 They're doing this work in community, and there is no
10 reward except taking care and stewarding the land.
11 When we talk about parks and when we talk about trees
12 and vegetation, we can't do so without thinking about
13 the cycle of life and thinking about what that means
14 for our urban landscape and the health of our soil.
15 When Mr. Burr spoke about naturally grown foods,
16 specifically community gardens and urban farms, he
17 did not speak about the growing amount of plastics
18 that we're finding in our food, and so much so I
19 think Harvard a few years back released a study that
20 it's in our bodies, right. Babies are now being born
21 with microplastics. This is a way that PFAS and waste
22 is finding its way into our soil. This is especially
23 poignant when we're talking about equity and access,
24 which you also spoke to, in terms of the
25 neighborhoods and keeping this land as clean as

2 possible, truly clean. I'm here advocating for
3 community composting, not only to stay for Big Reuse
4 to obviously stay in their space as a huge steward of
5 that land, collecting compost from all over, multiple
6 boroughs, and also collecting overages. I'm not sure
7 if we're familiar with the fact that a lot community
8 gardens don't have space to process everything
9 themselves, and Big Reuse would go around to these
10 community gardens and pick up the things that they
11 could not process themselves, which is kind of
12 amazing, and bring it here which kept it circular.
13 I'm going to just condense and say I believe I was
14 told the statistic that the most expensive part of
15 waste is the transportation, and I think that's
16 really, for me, what's most, and Clare spoke about
17 it, Eric, I feel like everyone who's spoken to this
18 idea of a circular system and what it means for our
19 city to have access in a central location so I'm
20 inviting Parks to seriously consider not only
21 allowing Big Reuse to continue composting under the
22 Queensbridge, but to expand access points across the
23 city so that non-profits like Big Reuse that pick up
24 overages are able to keep the process local,

2 partnered with Parks because it just very simply
3 makes sense, so I'm here for logic really. Thank you.

4 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you so much
5 for your testimony and all that you had said and your
6 work.

7 Sharon Brown.

8 No? Okay. We'll move to virtual now. We
9 have several witnesses on virtual. We have Chrissy
10 Remein.

11 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: You may begin.

12 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Chrissy, are you
13 there?

14 Okay, we'll move on to Elizabeth Oporum.

15 ELIZABETH OPURUM: Good morning,
16 everybody. Just give me one second. I just need to
17 (INAUDIBLE)

18 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Sure.

19 ELIZABETH OPURUM: Good morning,
20 everybody. My name is Elizabeth Oporum, and I am the
21 Board Secretary of the Garden by the Bay. The Garden
22 by the Bay is a 15,000-square foot urban garden that
23 has been created in response to us being in a food
24 desert. I just wanted to quickly talk about some of
25 the importance of having equitable access to nature

2 spaces for better mental health outcomes, holistic
3 nervous system regulation, and improved soul
4 wellness. Soul wellness refers to a lifestyle where a
5 person decides to place joy at the center of their
6 lives through the adaptation of practices, habits,
7 and mind structures in order to live more fulfilling
8 and healthy and robust lives. Having access to
9 equitable green and blue spaces impacts soul
10 wellness, and having that access means having access
11 to holistic resources to increase self-awareness,
12 change mental health outcomes, and to deepen the
13 connection with nature, which exponentially increases
14 the level of care for the land that we live on. This
15 access also directly influences the way in which we
16 deal with trauma, how we have avenues for self-
17 expression, and how one may handle the dualities of
18 life along with how we can use nature to heal
19 ourselves and regulate our nervous system so we can
20 make well-informed, levelheaded, calm, and fluid
21 decisions on a consistent basis. At the Garden by the
22 Bay, we actually grow certain herbs such as mint and
23 rosemary, whose essence brings feelings of happiness
24 and helps relieve mental and emotional stress. These
25 plants can be used in meditation practices, to spark

2 reflection, build peace and comfort of self which is
3 crucial to building upon the relationship with
4 nature. Essentially having outlets for ways to
5 positive transmute the various negative implications
6 of the social, economic, emotional, and environmental
7 well-being of generationally overlooked and
8 marginalized people is more than necessary for urban
9 areas, especially when there is more concrete than
10 there are trees or accessible bodies of water. We
11 have seen throughout history...

12 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Your time is expired.
13 Thank you.

14 ELIZABETH OPURUM: How neglected aspects
15 of life dimensions affect quality of life. Recently,
16 I found one of my friends was murdered by her
17 children's father which caused grief and all other
18 aspects associated with that to arise to the surface.
19 I know I needed to allow myself to go through the
20 process and to go through the stages of grief so I
21 can honor my friend and still be a functioning member
22 of society. I headed to the water but, when I got
23 there, the entrance at Beach 47 of the Boardwalk, I
24 was met with a locked gate with signage referring to
25 protecting the birds. It wasn't like that a few weeks

2 ago but, essentially, this entrance was recently
3 locked and not being able to sit and enjoy the
4 healing benefits of the saltwater only furthered my
5 sadness, but I remember that I could go to the Garden
6 by the Bay and be provided with the respite that I
7 needed and more, which is exactly what I did so being
8 able to have that access to a sacred space like the
9 garden allowed me to not only try and meet my grief,
10 my pain, and my anger in real time, it helped me to
11 regulate my nervous system and continue to process my
12 trauma in a healthy and effective way. We're just
13 asking just to please help to keep sacred spaces like
14 the Garden by the Bay thriving so our community can
15 have healthy options to maneuver through much of the
16 inevitable aspects of life. Thank you for your time
17 today.

18 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you so much
19 for your testimony.

20 Now, we have Francine Nolan-Rogers.

21 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Your time has started.

22 FRANCINE NOLAN-ROGERS: I'm here.

23 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Yeah, we can hear
24 you.

2 FRANCINE NOLAN-ROGERS: Okay. Good
3 afternoon. Thank you to Chairman Krishnan and the
4 Members of the Committee on Parks and Recreation for
5 the opportunity to submit this testimony. My name is
6 Francine Rogers, and I am a member of the
7 Neighborhood Advisory Committee Community Garden
8 located in the Bronx. We are part of the Bronx Land
9 Trust. Our garden, the Neighborhood Advisory
10 Committee Garden, started in 1983 and has a rich 41-
11 year history of community involvement and has been a
12 vital green space in our South Bronx neighborhood.
13 One of the reasons our garden has been able to
14 survive over these past 40 years, over the highs and
15 lows, is the constant support and guidance from Green
16 Thumb staff along with the much-needed resources that
17 they provided, such as trees, plants, lumber, tools,
18 garbage bags to name just a few items. I want to
19 highlight our support (INAUDIBLE) very disturbed by
20 the recent 10 percent NYC budget cuts, particularly
21 to the Department of Parks and Recreation, that have
22 severely affected the NYC Green Thumb. This essential
23 agency has seen a significant reduction in its
24 budget, hindering its capacity to provide technical
25 assistance, necessary supplies, adequate staff, and

2 thus impeding the ability to effectively support
3 much-needed community gardens. Therefore, I join the
4 call for the City to invest in restoring 2.6 million
5 dollars for refunding the Green Thumb. Here are some
6 facts in my mind about community gardens. Before,
7 during, and after the COVID-19 crisis, green space
8 continues to be a refuge for exercise, fresh air, and
9 mental health. Gardens create peace and harmony in
10 our city. How many violent crimes have happened in
11 gardens? How many deaths were caused by community
12 gardens? How many muggings? How many heroin and
13 fentanyl sales were conducted in gardens? The answer,
14 zero. How many pounds of free surplus food have been
15 made available in food desert communities? How many
16 free family picnics and barbecues have occurred in
17 gardens? How many birthday parties, graduations, and
18 anniversaries have been celebrated in gardens? How
19 many science lessons and art projects have happened
20 in gardens? How many diverse cultural celebrations
21 have been sponsored by gardens? Answer, a vast
22 amount, more than can be counted. So why doesn't the
23 City Council want to give more funding, rather than
24 cutting this successful neighborhood model of peace
25 and safety. Every civilized society recognizes the

2 need and value of publicly accessible green space.
3 Gardens are self-managed, self-policed, and don't tax
4 any City services. Continue the support and increase
5 funding for the Green Thumb program and community
6 gardens that are based on sweat equity, build
7 volunteerism, and develop youth leadership and
8 empowerment. Thank you very much. Have a good day.

9 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you so much
10 for your testimony, Miss Rogers.

11 Now, we have Cory Hasson.

12 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: You may begin.

13 CORY HASSON: Thank you, Council Member.

14 I'm going to be delivering testimony on behalf of our
15 Executive Director, Lynn Bodnar Kelly.

16 Good afternoon. My name is Lynn Bodnar
17 Kelly, and I'm the Executive Director of the New York
18 Restoration Project. Thank you, Chair Krishnan, for
19 convening this hearing on urban agriculture, a topic
20 which is very near and dear to our organization.
21 NYRP's urban agriculture program was founded in
22 response to the pandemic in 2021. NYRP transitioned
23 many of our gardens into urban agriculture oases for
24 the surrounding neighborhoods. NYRP's urban
25 agriculture program has since doubled its capacity to

2 offer 165 workshops, skill shares, and technical
3 consultations in 2023 alone. The team's two full-time
4 and two seasonal staff serve NYRP's 52 portfolio
5 gardens citywide and our gardens for the City
6 partners. NYRP's implementation of the urban
7 agriculture program during the COVID-19 pandemic was
8 a decision that utilized our spaces to address the
9 growing program of food insecurity in low-income
10 communities. The program provides urban growers with
11 agricultural education and materials to successfully
12 feed themselves, their families, and neighbors. As
13 average temperatures rise during the growing season
14 and these growing seasons get longer, there are many
15 opportunities to grow new crops that were not
16 possible to grow in the region just 10 years ago.
17 NYRP's urban agriculture team helps growers
18 experiment with new topical crops regularly,
19 including ginger and turmeric, which is what we work
20 with the most. According to the Food Bank of New York
21 City, NYC residents make up half of all food-insecure
22 people living in New York State and the City's food
23 insecurity rate is 12 percent higher than the
24 national rate. Access to fresh and healthy food is
25 more important now than ever, and we need to ensure

2 that gardeners have the tools and support they need
3 to continue to feed themselves in the most vulnerable
4 communities. In food deserts where access to fresh
5 and affordable food is scarce, community gardens
6 serve as a lifeline to New Yorkers. New York City
7 must recognize the importance of this work as they
8 consider the upcoming budget by supporting and
9 funding these programs to expand urban agriculture.
10 As New York City continues to navigate from uncertain
11 times, community gardens and urban agriculture will
12 be critical in ensuring communities are safer,
13 healthier, and happier. Thank you for the opportunity
14 to testify.

15 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you for your
16 testimony.

17 We'll try one more time with Chrissy
18 Remein.

19 CHRISSY REMEIN: Hi. Sorry. The computer
20 restarted there. Thank you so much. I'm Chrissy
21 Remein. I'm Riverkeeper's Policy and Planning
22 Manager. We thank the Committee on Parks and
23 Recreation for your stewardship of New York City's
24 community gardens and urban agriculture and for
25 offering us the opportunity to testify today.

2 Riverkeeper is a nearly 60-year-old non-profit,
3 member-supported organization devoted to the
4 protection and restoration of the Hudson River from
5 source to sea and safeguarding of drinking water
6 supplies through advocacy rooted in community
7 partnerships, science, and law. As part of our
8 mission, we sample water quality throughout New York
9 City, advocate for climate-adaptive stormwater
10 management and, whenever possible, work with our
11 partners in City agencies to development solutions
12 oriented towards stormwater management policy. To
13 that end, Riverkeeper developed critical green
14 infrastructure recommendations in our 2022 report,
15 Building an Equitably Green New York City. We
16 encourage the Council to review the recommendations
17 set forth therein for opportunities for improved
18 green infrastructure. Among many other important
19 benefits, community gardens act as critical green
20 infrastructure and open space across the city, both
21 passively managing stormwater and intentionally
22 collecting and managing stormwater through cisterns
23 and rain barrels. We support community gardens for
24 their contribution for reducing stormwater runoff
25 and, more, we support community gardens as a space

2 and place to connect communities to green space,
3 centers that foster community cohesion, improve air
4 quality, and mitigate the urban heat island impact.
5 New York City community gardens have a long history
6 of grassroots development, and their founders were
7 also some of the city's primary green infrastructure
8 advocates. Though our priorities for green
9 infrastructure usually center on stormwater
10 management and water quality, in order for the City
11 to adequately adapt and respond to climate change
12 impacts, we need all hands on deck and collaboration
13 across sectors, and I cannot express this enough,
14 community gardens are a truly unique space where sort
15 of all of the buzzwords that we use around climate
16 change really converge. They're a space for community
17 cohesion. They're a space for green infrastructure.
18 They're a space where words like, I don't know, words
19 like climate change, not vulnerability, but climate
20 change adaptation really can come to fruition so
21 Riverkeeper supports the city's community gardens and
22 encourages the City Council to extend to them the
23 support they need to continue to provide the multiple
24 benefits they offer local residents and the city's
25 environmental health and well-being. Thank you.

2 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you so much
3 for your testimony.

4 One more call for Sharon Brown, live
5 testimony.

6 SHARON BROWN: How are you?

7 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Good.

8 SHARON BROWN: I just have to preface it
9 by saying release the hostages, let Yahweh's people
10 go for Israel. Just remember Israel in everything
11 you're doing.

12 Okay, the gardens need to be funded. They
13 need to continue to be funded. They help the air
14 quality, and it should be in cooperation with feeding
15 those who are underserved, food deserts and things
16 like that. They need to have a program where they
17 provide seeds, not only food for people, but seeds
18 for people to plant their own garden so when they say
19 there's a food desert and they give people food,
20 that's very nice. You give someone a fish, they can
21 eat for a day. You give them fishing rod and all the
22 tackle and everything and you teach them how to fish
23 and they can do it for themselves so we also can
24 teach people how to plant and do things at their own
25 homes. Maybe there can be some kind of program where

2 they go to their homes and start gardens in the
3 community as well as the community gardens. It's very
4 important for it to help the air quality so trees are
5 very important. In these gardens, we shouldn't only
6 have things that are to the ground. We should have
7 some things that grow up like trees, and it won't be
8 in the way, it could probably be in the four corners
9 or something like that, and we could have fruit-
10 bearing trees and different things that grown on
11 trees. That can also be something that provides food,
12 seeds, and different things like that, and the
13 greenery from the trees will help the air quality so
14 usually most gardens have fruit, they can have
15 flowers, they can have fruit, and the trees would
16 help with the pollution a whole lot, with the oxygen
17 levels and things like that, it would help out. What
18 they call climate change and stuff like that, the
19 trees would be very helpful in strategic places and
20 all the greenery would help the air. Thank you.

21 CHAIRPERSON KRISHNAN: Thank you so much
22 for your testimony, Miss Brown.

23 That concludes our hearing for today. I
24 want to thank you all so much, both from the Parks
25 Department for your work to care for our community

2 gardens and support them, and, of course, the
3 gardeners out there who are doing this work every
4 single day. We appreciate you, and we in the Council
5 are proud to continue supporting you all. Thank you
6 all so much.

7 Thank you to our Committee Counsel, Chris
8 Sartori, Patrick Mulvehill, my team, Greg Clark,
9 Chuck Park, and all our Council Staff here today too
10 for a great hearing.

11 Thank you all. [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 July 18, 2024