



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

**City Council Committee on Parks
Oversight Hearing
October 22, 2020**

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

The past seven months have been hard on us all. New Yorkers have had to bear immeasurable hardships, including the mental and emotional toll of responsibly practicing social distancing, which for many of us means more time in tiny apartments and yearning to feel some grass under our toes. We all look forward to the day when we can safely return to our offices, frequent our local bars and restaurants without worrying about capacity, and embrace our friends and loved ones, without masks and without anxiety. But until then, we need our parks and open spaces now more than ever as they provide a crucial outlet for New Yorkers to take care of their physical, mental, and emotional health.

Parks and other green spaces are also one of the city's most valuable environmental assets and are a major source of the city's urban canopy, which mitigates climate change, and provides clean air and habitats for native wildlife.

The 2.6 million street and park trees that the Parks Department is responsible for remove 1,300 tons of pollutants from the atmosphere and store one million tons of carbon each year. Trees are vital for mitigating urban heat island effect and can lower temperatures by up to nine degrees, cut air conditioning use by 30%, and reduce heating energy use by a further 20-50%. NYC's parks contribute to our resiliency by capturing almost 2 billion gallons of stormwater runoff.

Unfortunately, funding for parks was gutted in this year's budget. We understand that difficult financial decisions had to be made due to the city's dire economic situation, but we opposed the

cuts to the Parks Department because parks are so important at this moment. That's why, along with other members of the Play Fair for Parks coalition, we are asking the Council to reallocate funds back to the Parks budget to ensure that we obtain ample support to keep these spaces safe for public use now.

First and foremost, we need our Parks employees back. We all agree that parks are critical city infrastructure. But these green benefits could not be realized without the Parks employees, particularly gardeners, horticulturalists, and maintenance workers, who work tirelessly to ensure the health of these spaces. Second, we need to restore funding for critical operations such as repairs, maintenance, pruning and cleaning to keep our parks in adequate condition for our residents. And last, we need improved park access, in particular in low income neighborhoods and communities burdened by pollution. Seventeen percent of New Yorkers still live further than walking distance from a park, meaning that we need more parks in communities that historically lack open spaces and the local environmental benefits of a nearby park.

While the COVID-19 crisis has caused the City to cut agency budgets across the board, it has also exposed the desperate need this city has for parks maintenance, improvements, and access. NYLCV, as founding members of the Play Fair coalition, ask for the Council's help to reallocate funds back to the Parks Department budget in this time when it is so desperately needed.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.



PUBLIC ADVOCATE FOR THE CITY OF NEW YORK

Jumaane D. Williams

**TESTIMONY OF PUBLIC ADVOCATE JUMAANE D. WILLIAMS
TO THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEE ON PARKS AND RECREATION
OCTOBER 22, 2020**

Good afternoon,

My name is Jumaane D. Williams, Public Advocate for the City of New York. I would like to thank Chairman Peter Koo and the members of the Parks and Recreation Committee for holding this oversight hearing on improving the equity of green space throughout the City in light of the coronavirus pandemic. I would also like to acknowledge the land on which we are present for this hearing as Lenape tribal territory and thank the original inhabitants who were forcibly removed from their land on which we live.

New York City is home to over 19,000 acres of natural areas. From forest to streams and wetland, we are lucky to live in a city with a strong ecosystem. These green spaces have been correlated with improved mental health, curtailing violence, and creating a safe space for all New Yorkers. In spite of this, efforts to provide equitable access to green spaces have been another issue exacerbated by the pandemic.

The coronavirus has hit low-income communities in many ways, and access to green spaces is not removed from that list. While 8 in 10 New Yorkers have access to an open green space within walking distance, over 1.1 million New Yorkers do not have access to a park within a 10-minute walking distance. I am equally concerned with a long-documented issue, as not only do we have problems accessing open green spaces in neighborhoods of more color, but inadequate maintenance of our green spaces often discourages visitors. In spaces where they are used, many spaces are too small to accommodate our densely populated neighborhoods.

The current pandemic has revealed what many of us have known for a long time, open park spaces are disproportionate, mostly within lower-income communities and communities of more color. For many, the covid-related playground and court closures removed any opportunity for neighbors to enjoy their already limited green-space. Whereas New Yorkers were encouraged to “go get some sun,” not everyone had the opportunity to walk to a green space. I commend the city in its efforts to open at least 40 miles of open streets for pedestrians during the pandemic.

To be clear, lacking open park spaces has been a problem since before the pandemic. A 2019 study revealed that for every New Yorker, we have 146 square feet of open green space.



PUBLIC ADVOCATE FOR THE CITY OF NEW YORK

Jumaane D. Williams

Throughout this decade, many folks have called for administrations to transform unused vacant lots for additional spaces, similar to community advocates who transformed vacant lots into the community gardens we see now throughout the 1970's and 1980's. I am looking forward to hearing how the New York City Parks and Recreation Department has followed this work in transforming vacant lots into accessible open green spaces for New Yorkers, and how this effort has been increased during the pandemic where people already do not have access to a lot of green spaces.

We also have a responsibility to upkeep these spaces as well. Parks are not something we can compromise to fund, it is simply what has to be done. A \$84 million budget cut, at a time when park maintenance is important that ever and when foot traffic has exponentially increased during the pandemic, will only yield a higher maintenance charge in the future. I am concerned that the budget cuts have impacted how the city's parks and recreation department takes care of erosion, garbage, plant care in the same capacity it did before.

Lastly, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the complicated history of our major green spaces in New York City, which were previously burial grounds for free Black people in New York City and many of our poor New Yorkers. We remember the city using eminent domain to claim these spaces, removing famous New Yorkers while leaving the rest behind. I hope as we move to address our current lack of adequate and equitable access to open green spaces, we also ensure our efforts do not erase New Yorkers, whose graves we have all walked on if we have ever stepped foot on these major green spaces. Thank you.



**EDIBLE
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NYC**

Testimony Submitted by

**Kate Brashares, Executive Director, Edible Schoolyard NYC
Before The New York City Council Committee on Parks and Recreation
on *Improving the Equity of Green Space throughout the City
in Light of the COVID Epidemic***

October 22, 2020

**The Case for School Gardens:
A Key Strategy for Improving Equity of Green Space in NYC**

My name is Kate Brashares and I am the Executive Director of Edible Schoolyard NYC. Thank you to Chairman Peter Koo as well as the members of the Committee on Parks and Recreation for holding today's hearing on improving the equity of green space in New York City.

Edible Schoolyard NYC's mission is to support edible education—hands-on garden and food education—for every child in New York City. We partner with New York City public schools to cultivate healthy students and communities, transforming children's relationship with food and the environment. Today, we provide direct services and school garden support to seven public schools serving nearly 3,000 students and their families in Brooklyn, East Harlem, and the Bronx, as well as professional development to hundreds of educators across our city.

In this current period where COVID-19 has exacerbated so many barriers and systemic inequities in our city, school gardens are an important community resource that can, and should, be made available to all students and families as part of a comprehensive plan to improve equity of green space across New York City.

"So many problems are tied together, and they could all be solved by having a school garden."

This wisdom was shared by a fifth grader at P.S. 216 Arturo Toscanini in Brooklyn, which partnered with Edible Schoolyard NYC in 2010 to transform a cement parking lot into a flourishing half-acre, organic garden.

The student is right. School gardens provide tremendous community and environmental benefits such as distribution of locally-grown, organic produce and composting. These green spaces enable children to observe and understand where their food comes by making them part of a truly local food system. Garden education has also been shown to improve academic performance, especially in science and math; increase feelings of safety, peacefulness, joy and healing from trauma; and improve healthy eating attitudes and behaviors.

Importantly, school gardens support more equitable and culturally responsive education as well. They are welcoming spaces for all types of learners, including English Language Learners; school gardens encourage cultural, intergenerational, and community connections; and they





EDIBLE SCHOOLYARD NYC

are restorative green spaces for families who may not have easy access to yards and parks otherwise.

In fact, when we began this work with P.S. 216 over ten years ago, the surrounding community of Gravesend had the third lowest percentage of open green space in Brooklyn. Today, our flagship garden at P.S. 216 has vegetable beds, laying hens, fruit trees, an herb garden, vines and berries, pollinator-friendly perennial borders, gathering and seating areas, a kitchen classroom, playspace, composting, and a greenhouse. Last school year, P.S. 216's school garden served a school community of 725 students, families, teachers, and volunteers through garden classes, family and community events, and a weekly pay-what-you-can farmstand. The P.S. 216 school garden is also part of a network of Edible Schoolyard NYC school gardens across seven public school sites in Brooklyn, East Harlem, and the Bronx, serving nearly 3,000 students and their families.

While our school gardens are primarily learning and community-building spaces, during the coronavirus pandemic and while school sites were closed, our gardens pivoted to food production, serving as a hyper-local food source for the community. Since July, we have donated over 350 pounds of fresh produce from our school gardens to neighborhood food pantries, families, and community members. And while Covid restrictions kept the school garden temporarily closed to the general public during the summer, we have now been eagerly and safely welcoming our students back into our garden community for outdoor learning knowing that being outdoors lowers the risk of contracting Covid-19 and that replacing screen time with movement and hands in the dirt is more important than ever for physical, mental, and socioemotional well-being. We also continue to see first-hand the transformative power of school gardens, especially in this uncertain and traumatic time.

This summer, one of our school partner sites, P.S./M.S. 7 in East Harlem, was designated as a Regional Enrichment Center serving students whose parents are essential workers. The students were able and encouraged to be out in our school garden during the day. Our garden manager worked closely with the staff and assisted with garden activities and learning projects, including planting, watering, and harvesting fruits and vegetables during the peak growing season. Towards the end of the summer, the students and teachers were able to take home and cook their harvest. We saw again what we've known to be true—school gardens offer not only educational enrichment and a safe outdoor space, but also foster joy, wonder, comfort, and community.

Now that we have returned to school, the use of outdoor space and school gardens is more important than ever. In addition to physical health benefits, our students will require significant socioemotional support and enrichment as they recover from the trauma and disruption caused by COVID-19. As one fourth grader said about a NYC school garden: "Do you know why I like being here? Because this place is peace".

We urge the NYC Council Committee on Parks and Recreation to include existing and new school gardens as a critical part of the solution to ensuring and improving equitable access to green spaces, especially for communities of color and low-income communities that have been disproportionately affected by the devastating impacts of Covid-19. Specifically, we ask the Committee to consider funding to create more school gardens across our city and enhance





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current school gardens to support outdoor learning; to support staff who can help nurture school garden spaces and teach garden education, and to train educators across New York City to incorporate garden education into their instruction.

We also encourage the City Council to review and pass Int. 1663-2019 to help increase equity in green space by establishing an Office of Urban Agriculture and an Urban Agriculture Advisory Board. The Office of Urban Agriculture would conduct outreach, receive comments and respond to questions regarding urban agriculture, make recommendations about protecting and expanding urban agriculture, develop, in cooperation with other agencies and stakeholders, a comprehensive urban agriculture plan and make annual reports on progress made on such plan.

Whether it's hanging planters along the school fence or installing raised beds in the schoolyard, every public school can and should have a school garden. And, we believe every New York City student and school community deserves to benefit from the green and restorative space, socioemotional learning and academic enrichment, and connection to the land and community that school gardens can offer.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Should you have any additional questions, please reach out to us at 347-565-0100. We would welcome the opportunity to continue this critical conversation.





Sara Roosevelt Park Community Coalition
<http://sdrpc.mkgarden.org/>

City Council Committee on Parks Oversight Hearing re: *Improving the Equity of Green Space throughout the City in Light of the COVID Epidemic.*

October 22, 2020

Hello. My name is K Webster I'm the President of the Sara Roosevelt Park Community Coalition [SDR Park]. Thank you for this chance to speak on Park Equity, especially as it has been impacted by COVID 19.

Our Park is a one block-wide park that spans eight blocks from the Lower East Side to Chinatown in Manhattan. The Bowery is one block away. It serves several distinct neighborhoods. It has eight high schools along it, most serving ELL students of color from low-income backgrounds. It has NYCHA complexes and housing created for the deaf, low-income tenements, and increasingly new luxury condos that shadow the park. There are several homeless shelters and homeless service providers close by. There are many long-time community organizations that help the park such as University Settlement, Chinatown Planning Council, the Tenement Museum - and the Bowery Residents Committee's low-income Senior Nutrition Center occupies one of four parkhouses inside the park. The other three parkhouses are occupied by the Parks Department to serve all five NYC boroughs. Their cars and trucks park inside the park, taking park space and creating a dangerous situation for bicyclists and parkgoers – the buildings are not open to this neighborhood.

Our Coalition stewards many areas of the park. In the middle section is the M'Finda Kalunga GreenThumb Garden, The Tenement Museum staff's Forsythe Gardens, the Hua Mei Bird Sanctuary, Betty Hubbard Memorial, Audubon NY, The Homeless Memorial, and Rivington Neighbors Gardens. The Horticultural Society cares for plots at Hester Street at the southern end, the former head of Battery Park City Gardens along with tenants from 10 Stanton Street attempt to steward the Northern end. We have been active in this park for four decades.

Coalition members have struggled for most of those decades trying to create and maintain positive use in this park for the public. In the late 70's pimps and drug dealers owned this park until the neighborhood fought hard to make it make it viable for children and elders. We still struggle with violence here.

In the early months of COVID 19 we had people sleeping in the pathways in all areas of the park – desperate to be in the open air where it was safer than crowded shelters. Garbage mounted. I'd never seen it this bad. And that is saying something.

In the early days of COVID our Coalition went around and posted information for the street homeless on how to prevent its spread. But there was nowhere for them to wash their hands. There were no masks to hand out.

The Parkhouse bathrooms are not open 24/7 (you can't without supervision) which leaves the homeless population to use the flower beds as a latrine.

The southern end of the Park is a bit safer thanks mostly to the heavy use by the Chinatown community's elders and parents around the newly renovated playground.

The northern end is dangerous and unusable to the public. Few parents will bring their children to either playground. Nor do the abutting high schools use it. Inside playgrounds, drugs are sold, blow jobs occur in the open, construction workers smoke weed, the spray shower is a bath for the homeless who lost their shower facilities to gentrification. People defecate and urinate in the plots (there's even an actual toilet in one of them that is used as if it's a working toilet) trash has been everywhere. No one other than the homeless, who get chased out of everywhere else sit there. Homeless people who are struggling with mental health are rampant – as both victims and victimizers. We are constantly trying to keep housed neighbors from being pitted against the unhoused.

Our intrepid Park workers who remain after budget cuts and our volunteer Coalition gardeners continue to try to maintain a public park. Our Council Member and Borough President fund capital projects as they can. This narrow, poor, homeless-centered community park is kept afloat by them and by our volunteers and low-paid Park workers who work to save it *daily*. Together we make it possible for it to still have a bit of beauty and human kindness.

We've asked to have the northern parkhouse returned for neighborhood use for decades. Changing a park with this level of misuse, only works by the community taking charge of it, building relationships, asking *everyone* to help out as neighbors. We've done it in areas where we have anchors of community use.

Although Parks Department agrees it shouldn't be used for storage, they say there is no other financially viable site to put the supplies for all Manhattan parks – which means this poor park bears that burden too.

We aren't a conservancy because we don't believe in creating yet another layer between the public and their government's Parks - nor in massive private fundraising for well-off neighborhoods that makes some parks nice and other parks like ours.

I've been doing this for decades, my colleagues in the park have been doing it a few decades longer. Our park has the feel of being used as a dumping ground for uses that NO wealthier whiter communities would tolerate.

The public and the Parks Department are stewards of our parks. Parks Department's mission is to care for them. Give them the tools they need to do so. They are the last democratic meeting spaces in this city and in the time of COVID they have been the only places where a family of four or more living in tenement apartments here could breathe, meet friends, and feel alive. They served as a life-raft for the homeless who were trapped in congregate living spaces.

Those of us who live here, who work in here, who - despite dangers from unstable human beings living on the edge in inhumane conditions, who clean up needles and human feces, who plant and tend gardens here, are asking that this city put its money where its mouth is in terms of equity.

Thank you.

K

K Webster
President
Sara Roosevelt Park Coalition
<http://sdrpc.mkgarden.org/>



New York City Council Committee on Parks and Recreation
Oversight: *Improving the Equity of Green Space throughout the City in Light of the COVID Epidemic.*

October 22, 2020

Adam Ganser, Executive Director

My name is Adam Ganser and I am the Executive Director of New Yorkers for Parks (NY4P). We are New York City's only independent parks and open space advocacy and research organization, and we co-founded the Play Fair Coalition. Thank you for inviting me to speak today.

This administration has prioritized parks equity with many lasting accomplishments. The COVID crisis, however, has revealed significant structural inequities in our parks system, both in access and funding, that require a new emphasis in the immediate and long term.

Our parks system relies on hundreds of small parks to provide open space for the majority of New Yorkers. As a result, parks that serve the majority of low-income households are less than half as big as the parks serving high-income households. And these small parks are wholly reliant on public funds.

These smaller parks have been more susceptible to closures during the pandemic, with catastrophic results. According to data from The Trust for Public Land, more than 1 million New Yorkers in central Brooklyn, Queens and the East Bronx lost access to their park or playground this year.

The COVID-related economic crisis has also had an inequitable impact on New Yorkers and their parks. Despite record use during the pandemic, the parks department budget was cut by 14%, second highest among all agencies. Those cuts have led to drastic reductions of staff and maintenance. Not surprisingly, the areas most impacted by the closures and staff reductions are the same areas where the largest numbers of New Yorkers have died or become seriously ill with COVID, and are primarily communities of color.

As we look to an increase in COVID cases this fall, the City must aggressively plan to ensure all New Yorkers have access to open space.

Immediate Priorities:

- Identify funding to ensure a full seasonal parks staff;
- Unfreeze capital funds for critical improvements to our parks;
- Eliminate onerous legal requirements that make it nearly impossible for not-for-profit parks partners to support their open spaces.

Further we must not lose sight of the opportunity to adopt system change ideas that address the historic challenges of our parks system:

- Identify a more resilient and equitable public funding model for our parks system;
- Prioritize creative new park development in the outer boroughs as part of an equitable economic recovery.

For both, I would respectfully point the Council to a [report](#) New Yorkers for Parks co-authored with the New York Building Congress and an [Op-Ed](#) I co-wrote with Carter Strickland from the Trust for Public Land.

This is a critical moment for our parks system with significant opportunities to make lasting change for a better New York

Thank you.

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For over 100 years, [New Yorkers for Parks](#) (NY4P) has built, protected, and promoted parks and open spaces in New York City. Today, NY4P is the citywide independent organization championing quality parks and open spaces for all New Yorkers in all neighborhoods. www.ny4p.org



October 21, 2020

New York City Council
Committee on Parks and Recreation
250 Broadway
New York, NY 10007

Dear Chair Koo and Members of the Committee on Parks and Recreation,

The Municipal Art Society of New York (MAS) has been providing input on the city's parks and public realm since our founding in 1893. With this unique historical perspective, we have observed the evolution of how our open spaces have functioned to meet the needs of a growing city and provide the space for recreation, celebration, respite, and connection with nature. We continue to value the role of parks in helping communities reduce stress, maintaining mental and physical wellness, and anchoring livable neighborhoods.

Parks make communities happier, healthier, safer, cleaner, greener, and more resilient. Investments in parks have been a key strategy for community revitalization and economic development. Despite this relationship, new park space has not always been adequate to meet the needs of growing neighborhoods. For example, in the proposed Special Flushing Waterfront District, new open space is limited to a new 2,000 square-foot public plaza. While there would be a new shore public walkway required as a result of the rezoning, no additional public green space would be provided, despite welcoming over 1,700 new residential units and nearly 1.5 million square feet of commercial space. New development has a key role to play in expanding park equity by not only providing the minimum required open space, but further improving conditions for both new and current residents.

When we look at existing park infrastructure, playgrounds are indispensable for equitable access. Early in the pandemic, many of these spaces were closed, eliminating vital open space for communities whose closest park is a playground. As part of this network, Jointly Operated Playgrounds (JOPs) are crucial to the provision of quality and accessible parks and open space in the city, particularly in underserved neighborhoods. JOPs have figured prominently in the City's open space policy and have been continuously identified as key infrastructure necessary to accomplish citywide and long-term open space goals. The City needs to protect and enhance these spaces, especially as schools and their surrounding communities continue to struggle with in-person attendance, remote-learning, and community use after hours.

On the planning and investment side, the Community Parks Initiative (CPI) is the City's most important park equity program. Parks selected under the CPI program are in low-income, densely populated, and growing neighborhoods. These are the communities that need parks the most, and the very same ones that have been most impacted by COVID-19. The CPI program should be expanded into more neighborhoods, and should include investment for strategic reimagining of not just parks, but the public realm in its entirety.

While there have been plenty of critiques about how interventions in response to the pandemic have been implemented, we've heard little opposition to the concept of reimagining city streets, sidewalks, parks, and plazas to better serve New Yorkers. The biggest roadblock to progress in this case isn't a debate on the merits, but rather how open space is embedded into the City's planning, investment priorities, and land use decisions.

New York has an opportunity to foster proactive planning, integration, and management of its public realm. Unlike many other cities of its size, New York lacks a central position within its government responsible for planning and maintaining the public realm. Instead, the City segments oversight of these essential pieces of infrastructure across a vast array of agencies. It has become clear that parks alone cannot meet the open space needs of our city. We need a seamless public realm network instead of our current approach to governing public spaces with different rules, competing priorities, and disjointed leadership. A Director of the Public Realm could help expand the impact of parks as part of an overall system of open spaces.

Parks have become our living rooms, our gyms, our classrooms, our dining halls, and so much more. Access to light, air, and open space makes people healthier, parks greener, and cities stronger. We need design tools, analysis, coordination, and investment that responds to the lessons we have learned this year.

Sincerely,

Tara Kelly
Vice President of Policy & Programs



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New York Restoration Project

**Testimony, Committee on Parks and Recreation, Oversight- Improving the Equity of Green Space throughout the City in Light of the COVID Epidemic
October 22, 2020**

Good Afternoon, Chairman Koo and Committee on Parks and Recreation Members. Thank you for your leadership in advancing open space in New York City, and thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

Let me start by stating the obvious: COVID-19 has turned our city upside down and we are all still reeling from its impacts - physical, mental and financial. Recovery has not been easy, nor swift, with new and often conflicting information daily.

But one thing has remained constant: New Yorkers have flocked to their parks and open spaces in record numbers. We need our parks now, more than ever.

This is why it was shocking to all of us in the open space community, that the City cut funding to New York City Parks so drastically in the FY21 budget, while the Administration simultaneously pointed to parks and open space as a part of New York City's COVID-19 recovery. This makes no sense and is antithetical to parks equity.

Many of these cuts will directly impact access to and maintenance of our parks and gardens, especially in low-income communities that were also hardest hit by COVID-19.

How is that equitable? How is that fair?

New York Restoration Project, like many of our colleagues, relies on Parks Equity Initiative funds to steward gardens and to build new open spaces for New Yorkers in the least-green neighborhoods. We work in communities that do not have the support of resourced conservancies or volunteer stewardship groups, so cuts to publicly funded programs, like the PEI and A Greener NYC hit doubly hard.



NEW YORK
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It makes no sense to us that, currently, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) has paused over \$50M in funding for capital projects to qualified and experienced parks nonprofits, like NYRP and our colleagues, who could be delivering critical services during the pandemic and in its wake.

How is that equitable? How is that fair? How does that make sense?

We know that the City is broke, but the projects on pause by OMB were funded to respond to long-standing need, and the steep increase in open space usage during COVID-19 has only made the expediting of these projects more necessary.

To be clear: delaying these projects means delaying our ability to properly address food insecurity, access to green space, and critical maintenance- all which speak to true parks equity. We ask that the Council please work with us to get the critical projects 'un-stuck' at OMB so that we can truly be a part of New York City's COVID-19 recovery.

Thank you.

Hello,

My name is Frank Wu and I am the President of Court Square Civic Association, a local civic in a sub-neighborhood within Long Island City in Western Queens, composed of some of the fastest growing areas in NYC if not the USA prior to Covid19.

I am testifying as part of the Play Fair Coalition with New Yorkers 4 Parks to strongly ask, advocate, and share the need for improved funding to support our public green spaces in NYC.

It's true the City and the State are in a highly precarious budget situation, and many issues are being looked at which require funding such as housing, transportation, education, and others, however for too long Public Green Spaces have never received their fair share of public funding in NYC.

For most large anchor parks, private non-profit organizations have provided maintenance and programming for these large spaces, not NYC Parks, and for smaller pocket parks it's groups like a local Civic, or neighborhood beautification group that provide that green space new love and investments. In a system like this, public green spaces can become highly inequitable as certain areas receive more private investments than others.

At Court Square, as we have seen our local Queens Public Library close, we have installed a new Free Little Library at the Park, and also recently organized a neighborhood pop-up playground day in conjunction with playground:NYC thanks to a Citizens Committee Grant.

In today's political environment where we are looking at "me" vs "you" tribal viewpoint, which is exacerbated by the way new residential buildings are built, as "walled oasis", public green spaces and parks provide us the physical space where all residents can connect to one another, old residents, new residents of all socio-economic backgrounds, and stitch together a better community for the neighborhood and thus NYC.

We ask, with understanding that public green spaces need maintenance (and thus a source of ongoing funding) that the City maintain and increase its investment in NYC Parks as part of the Playfair Coalition.

In final thoughts, there has been discussion of high income residents leaving in favor of lower cost states. The point we'd like to make is, it has always been cheaper to live elsewhere than NYC, however people choose to live here because of the vibrancy of the city. If one drastically starts reducing service however including those relating to public green space, people will leave New York City for those reasons, and we hope the City Council understands the economic impact of that if they continue to pull back on Parks investments.

**Testimony of Susan M Donoghue, President, Prospect Park Alliance
New York City Council Committee on Parks and Recreation Hearing
October 22, 2020**

Thank you Chair Koo and all committee members. I am Sue Donoghue, President of Prospect Park Alliance, the non-profit organization that helps to maintain Prospect Park in partnership with the City.

COVID-19 has made it resoundingly clear that parks and open spaces are essential to the well-being of our communities. Prospect Park is truly "Brooklyn's Backyard," and welcomes more than 10 million visits each year from every zip code in Brooklyn and beyond. As a community park, Prospect Park is a critical gathering space for family reunions, birthday parties and all manner of picnics and barbecues. Its 585 acres provide fresh air and respite to Brooklyn residents, who have the least amount of green space per capita in all of New York City. Making Prospect Park a welcoming and accessible space for the diverse communities of Brooklyn is a key part of our mission, and without the support of the City and our elected officials our work would not be possible.

Visitorship to city parks during the pandemic has increased significantly: in Prospect Park we are seeing a record number of visitors at all hours and all days, along with numerous unpermitted events and gatherings; and a significant uptick in park patrons exploring every inch of the park, including more fragile areas such as the park's woodlands. At the same time, we are experiencing significant budget cuts, and Prospect Park Alliance relies on the New York City Parks Department for general maintenance and upkeep of the park.

Historically, the Parks Department budget has been a very small percentage of the city budget, despite the fact that parks comprise a large percentage of city land and are used by a significant portion of the population. Since the pandemic, the Parks Department has experienced \$84 million in cuts — about 14 percent of its total annual budget of \$587 million — the department has 45 percent less staff to handle more work, and maintenance hours have been reduced by 25,000 hours a week.¹ In Prospect Park, we have seen a 20 percent decrease in NYC Parks staffing, which has been further challenged by fatigue among remaining staff, resulting in an increase in call outs and absences. In addition, Prospect Park Alliance also has seen cuts due to the pandemic, with 11 percent in staff reductions, which has left us unable to fill open positions on our Lakeside maintenance crew, and required cutting our Parade Ground maintenance crew and nighttime summer weekend cleaning crew.

Prospect Park Alliance has attempted to make up for this decrease in funding by launching new volunteer programs, including a series of "It's My Park Days" and the launch of a "Green and Go Kit" program, which provides patrons with trash grabbers, gloves and bags. The response has been overwhelming, and demonstrates how much New Yorkers love their parks, but it is not a sustainable approach to maintaining our parks. We applaud the City Council for taking up this issue, and hope to work with you and our Parks and Open Space Partners to advocate for increased funding for parks.

¹ New York Times, Trash Piles Up in Parks, Just When New Yorkers Need Them the Most, Aug. 27, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/27/nyregion/nyc-parks-trash.html>

**Testimony of the Randall's Island Park Alliance (RIPA)
to the
New York City Council
Committee on Parks and Recreation
Thursday, October 22, 2020**

My name is Anne Wilson and I am the Senior Director of Planning for the Randall's Island Park Alliance (RIPA). I am speaking on behalf of RIPA regarding "Improving the Equity of Green Space throughout the City in Light of the COVID Epidemic."

Randall's Island Park is located in the East River between East Harlem, the South Bronx, and Astoria, Queens. As nonprofit steward, RIPA develops and maintains the Park and provides and facilitates extensive public programming. To do so, we work in close partnership with the NYC Parks Department.

Due to COVID, like many nonprofits, RIPA's operating budget has taken an enormous hit. We have furloughed staff, cut budgets, and creatively restructured, and it has been a tough year – while, in the meantime, the Park has seen record-breaking public use, especially coming from neighboring communities in East Harlem and the South Bronx.

Our challenge is made more difficult due to the loss of funding for the Parks Department. Normally, during the busy outdoor season a RIPA staff of 70 works alongside 30 Parks workers to maintain the Island's 330 acres of public parkland; in 2020, Parks staff was reduced to only 10, with threats of further cuts. We have also seen a stop on procurements for even the most basic OTPS needs. We have watched our sister parks struggle with such reduced resources alongside greatly increased usage – a losing equation.

The answer to greater equity in terms of green space in New York City is to restore funding for its Parks Department. If anything, COVID provides a case for more support than ever: the pandemic has underscored the universal and absolutely crucial need for our public parks. Over the past six months, New Yorkers have come increasingly to depend upon free, safe, clean outdoor spaces for recreation, relaxation, and exercise. This is, of course, especially true for those without the means to leave the City. With sufficient upkeep, public parks can and should provide a safe space where all New Yorkers can breathe freely and come together in difficult times – an essential resource, serving our most basic well-being.

NYC Parks Department funding should be not only restored but in fact expanded during this crisis: a pandemic that is sending us all outdoors, and that is especially impacting already under-resourced areas like those adjacent to Randall's Island Park.

First of half, I want to thank whoever is reading my testimony and hope he/she/they are doing well. As a member of the Friends of Mosholu Parkland– an organization located in the Bronx that focuses on improving the green spaces along Mosholu– I was a bit disappointed during the hearing because during the pandemic instead of sending a powerful message to community that we are here to help and heal a whole, the city decided to cut parks budget.

It's not a coincidence that Covid-19 affected communities of color and on top of the numerous absence of essential resources needed to uplift these communities, are also in the process of losing their few parks and the people who used them. Without local nonprofits and community organizers our parks would've been inaccessible to the community. It's sad that parks have become a privilege for many of us– This is not what the Indigenous tribes who lived on this land envisioned the use of nature. In their understanding, nature brought people together but in today's age park is a commodity for many low-income residents. We need to do better because we deserve to have clean and renovated parks.

Lastly, during the hearing a member kept saying that they were in the process of working with The DOE to open the playgrounds. Because of the statement, I went to visit some of the playgrounds, tennis courts, and most of them were closed from the public



**New York City Council Oversight Hearing: Improving the Equity of Green Space throughout the City in Light of the COVID Epidemic
October 22, 2020**

Testimony By: Sarah Charlop-Powers, Natural Areas Conservancy, Executive Director

My name is Sarah Charlop-Powers and I am the Executive Director of the Natural Areas Conservancy. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the topic of Improving the Equity of Green Space throughout the City in Light of the COVID-19 Epidemic. The Natural Areas Conservancy is a nonprofit organization that was formed in 2012 to increase the capacity of NYC Parks and its partners to restore and manage the 10,000 acres of forests and wetlands under the agency's jurisdiction.

In my testimony today, I wish to highlight the importance of forests and wetlands in providing equitable access to parks and to nature for New Yorkers, especially during the pandemic. There are large natural areas in every borough, distributed between more than 50 parks. According to a 2014 study, 50% of New Yorkers experience nature primarily in NYC Parks. I also wish to highlight the work of NYC Parks over the three and a half decades to manage forests and wetlands, and in particular their accomplishments in FY20 due to increased support for this work resulting from the PlayFair campaign. And I'd like to emphasize the importance of increasing our investment in access to all green space as part of an equitable recovery from COVID-19.

The NAC strongly supported the PlayFair campaign, and was enthusiastic about the decision of the City Council and Mayor to add \$43 million of expense funding to the NYC Parks budget in FY20. These funds included \$4 million to support the management of 7,300 acres of forested natural areas. In a single year, these funds were used to hire 47 seasonal staff who planted more than 20,000 new trees and shrubs, engaged 2,000 volunteers, improved 40 miles of trails, and restored 900 acres of parkland.

The FY21 budget, which included a 14% cut to the budget of NYC Parks, was passed during a period of unprecedented visitation to New York City's parks. This summer, our staff conducted interviews in all five boroughs of visitors in natural areas. 65% of the people we interviewed said that they were spending more time in natural areas than prior to COVID-19. In our interviews, people highlighted how natural areas are uniquely suited to the needs of this moment — offering ample space for social distancing, and a respite from the stresses of life during both a pandemic and a recession.

As we look to the future, investing in the care of one third of our city's park system that is forests and wetlands should be high on the list of priorities for directly addressing issues of equity and access to parks. Investing in consistent access to natural areas in the form of clearly marked trails would allow New Yorkers to more effectively access thousands of acres of existing parks in every borough. And investing in the care of forests and wetlands also provides countless other benefits to our city, including combating extreme heat, capturing carbon, and strengthening our connection to the natural world.



To achieve these goals would require a new 10 year capital allocation of at least \$5 million per year to support forest restoration and improvements to trails, as well as expense funding to bring back the staff needed to support stewardship, conduct ranger programming, maintain trails, plant trees, and provide the basic level of care to our parks that New Yorkers deserve.

Thank you again for your leadership during this challenging time and for the opportunity to testify about this important topic today.



NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL
COMMITTEE ON PARKS AND RECREATION

October 22, 2020

Testimony of Carter H. Strickland, Jr.
New York State Director, The Trust for Public Land

Thank you, Chairperson Koo and Members of the Committee, for the opportunity to testify on the topic of improving the equity of green space throughout the City in light of the COVID-19 epidemic.

My name is Carter Strickland and I am the New York State Director of The Trust for Public Land, a national non-profit organization that creates parks and protects land for people, ensuring healthy, livable communities for generations to come. One of The Trust for Public Land's guiding principles – supported by numerous studies – is that parks and open space are critical infrastructure that make cities and their residents healthier, happier, more prosperous, cleaner, greener, and more resilient. Since 1978, The Trust for Public Land has worked with New York City residents to improve their neighborhoods by creating public spaces where they can safely play, connect with nature and each other, and create resilient communities.

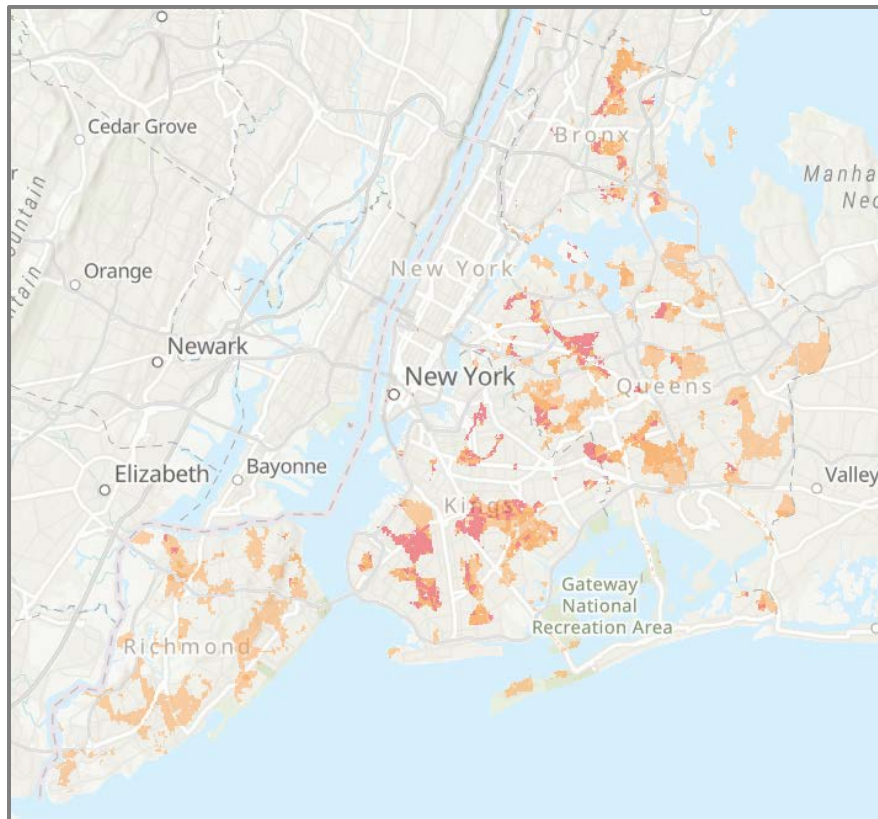
Through our signature Green Schoolyards program, we have created over 210 pocket parks on school grounds by working with community members, local and state elected officials, New York City schools and other agencies to transform locked and barren asphalt lots into open community spaces with trees, turf fields, play equipment, and more.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, parks and open spaces have been critical gathering spaces for New Yorkers when cafes, museums, art galleries, gyms, movie theaters, restaurants, and many other businesses were closed for months (or are still closed). Remaining open and free, parks played a critical role in allowing New Yorkers to get out of their apartments and see their friends, family, and fellow citizens outside while maintaining the appropriate social distance. Parks helped people deal with anxiety, stress, and loneliness, and also move and exercise, and most parks saw record visitors at all hours of the day. It is not an exaggeration to say that parks were critical infrastructure to help the city through this crisis.

The Committee is doing a great public service by holding this hearing to examine whether the benefits of parks are flowing to all New Yorkers in an equitable way. As you may know, The Trust for Public Land rates the park systems of the 100 largest cities in the United States in our annual ParkScore index. In recent years, other cities have invested more in their park system and in park amenities, pushing New York City down to No. 11. That is not good enough for the biggest and best city in the country, and our reports provide a roadmap for increasing the City's ranking. One indicator we use is the

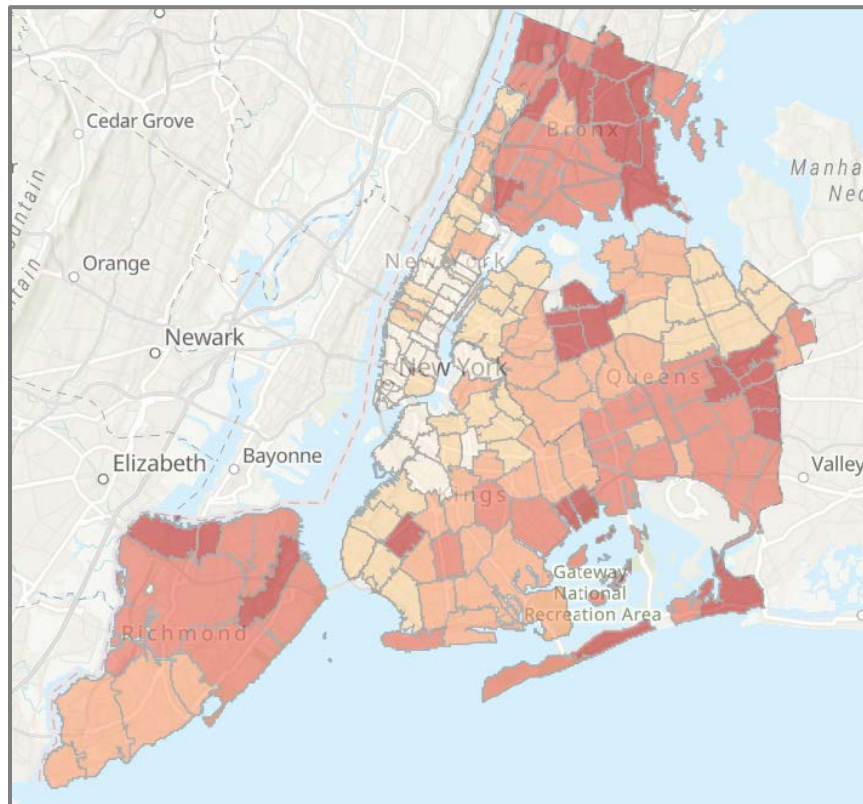
number of residents who live within a 10-minute walk of a park, and on that metric New York City does very well with 99% of its residents living near a park – in a normal year. However, that seemingly equitable distribution of parks is vulnerable for two reasons.

First, because of the COVID-19 pandemic schoolyards and playgrounds were closed from approximately April 1 to June 23 of this year. That effectively eliminated park access in those communities. The Trust for Public Land’s research team mapped the impact of schoolyard, playground, and other closures and found that the closures resulted in an additional one million New Yorkers who lost park access during this critical period – dropping the citywide access score from 99% to 86%. Many places lost access as a result of playground, schoolyard, and other closures, such as Central Brooklyn, Eastern and Southern Queens, Eastern Bronx, and Central Staten Island. The park deficit areas in the closure period are shown in the spatial analysis below, where orange indicates high park need and red the highest park need:



We have made our spatial analysis available online so visitors can explore the data (the analysis and maps are at the website <https://www.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=4d082c62efb44e56b105366fb92335b3&extent=-8287910.233%2C4941135.2385%2C-8185178.8669%2C4998463.0097%2C102100>). (The screenshot above is produced by turning on only the data layer for park need during early summer 2020).

Our analysis also shows that there was great overlap between those areas that lost park access, as shown above, and those areas most affected by COVID-19 (the darker-shaded areas in the following map):



(To replicate this map and also zoom into particular areas, go to the web address above and turn on the data layer for COVID-19 cases by ZIP code.)

Clearly, the normally high park access in New York City is highly vulnerable to disruption. We need to make our park system more resilient by building more parks with overlapping service areas, as we would do with other infrastructure systems in order to ensure continuity of operations.

Second, park size is not equitably distributed and is smallest in low-income and minority neighborhoods, regardless of population or need. Specifically, an analysis that The Trust for Public Land undertook this summer found that in New York City:

- Parks within a 10-minute walk of a majority of low-income households are on average 2.0 times smaller than parks within a 10-minute walk of high-income households (6.4 acres compared to 14 acres) and serve almost twice as many people (211,000 compared to 124,000 people per acre);
- Parks within a 10-minute walk of a majority of non-White populations are on average 3.2 times smaller (9.3 acres compared to 29.8 acres) and each park

acre serves 1.4 times more people (230,000 compared to 163,000 people per acre) than parks that are within a 10-minute walk of a majority White population;

- Parks that are within a 10-minute walk of a majority Black population are on average 3.8 times smaller than parks that are within a 10-minute walk of a majority White population (7.9 acres compared to 29.8 acres); and
- Parks that are within a 10-minute walk of high-proportions of non-White population (over 67%) are on average 5 times smaller (6.7 acres compare to 33.2 acres) and are within a 10-minute walk of 1.8 times as many people (221,000 compared to 125,000 people per acre) compared to parks that are within a 10-minute walk of high-proportions of White population.

The impact of these disparities was highlighted by the New York Times this summer in several stories, including *New York City Has 2,300 Parks. But Poor Neighborhoods Lose Out* (July 15, 2020), found at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/15/nyregion/nyc-parks-access-governors-island.html>. Among other things, it is harder to maintain safe social distancing in smaller parks and with very little tree canopy, such parks do not provide the cooling effect of larger parks, leaving nearby residents more vulnerable to heat waves.

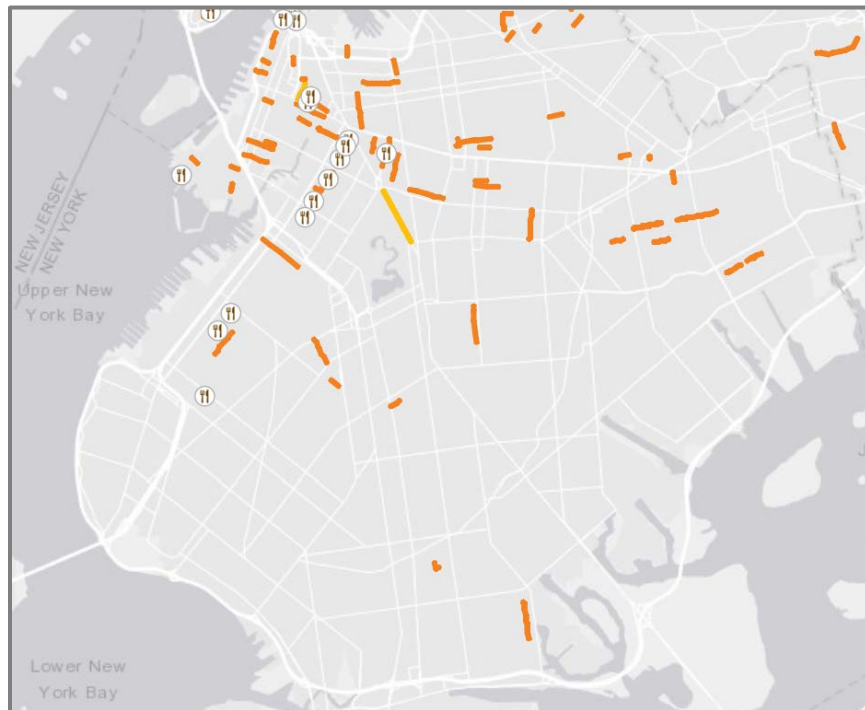
Unfortunately, on this measure New York City is not better than the rest of the country. In a report entitled *The Heat is On*, The Trust for Public Land found that across the United States, parks serving primarily nonwhite populations are half the size of parks that serve majority white populations and serve five times more people, and parks serving majority low-income households are, on average, four times smaller and serve four times more people than parks that serve majority high income households. The report is located at <https://www.tpl.org/the-heat-is-on>.

How can we improve park equity in New York City? We have to start by acknowledging that our legacy park system, while wonderful in many ways, does not fully address inequities of our present population. To fix this problem we need to build new parks that will address inequitable distribution of parks and park size. See Carter Strickland and Adam Ganser, *Build new parks where they're needed most*, New York Daily News (July 27, 2020), located at <https://www.nydailynews.com/opinion/ny-oped-build-new-parks-where-theyre-needed-most-20200727-lneuedoja5d5tbkl7j4aoud5e4-story.html>.

One way that the City can make targeted investments in high need areas is to create a program of investing in more green schoolyards. Every community has a public school and most of those schools have dedicated outdoor spaces that need renovation to be used as community parks. We estimate that there are at least 200 more schools that could receive a green schoolyard, with each one providing additional park access to 4,000 to 30,000 New Yorkers within a 10-minute-walk. And if we strengthen the funding for keeping the existing schoolyards open, as well as for new schoolyards, we can ensure that the next crisis will not eliminate park access for the neediest New Yorkers.

This investment will also benefit education. As part of the city's outdoor learning initiative more than 1,100 public schools recently received approval to spend a portion of their school day outside, where the risk of COVID-19 transmission can be lower. Green schoolyards contain educational spaces that can be used for this very purpose.

Another way that the City can address inequities is to open up our streets for some park-like activities. Streets take up one-third of the city's land area and, like schools, are in every neighborhood. Similar to schools, we can target the Open Streets initiative to those areas that need them most. Unfortunately, the streets opened this summer do not address inequities fully. See *De Blasio's move to open NYC street to pedestrians leaves out low-income neighborhoods, map shows*, NY Daily News (May 21, 2020), located at <https://www.nydailynews.com/coronavirus/ny-coronavirus-open-streets-equity-map-20200521-ossiqlxhjc6ba6ymggqy576pi-story.html>, and *Mayor's 'Open Streets' Leave Out Neighborhoods That Need It Most*, StreetsBlog (May 21, 2020), located at <https://nyc.streetsblog.org/2020/05/21/mayors-open-streets-leave-out-neighborhoods-that-need-it-most/>. More streets have opened up since those articles were written, but the latest information from the Department of Transportation (map found at <https://www1.nyc.gov/html/dot/html/pedestrians/openstreets.shtml>) shows that there are significant gaps in coverage in high need areas such as this portion of Brooklyn:



In conclusion, New York City's park system is great but can be made more equitable by building more parks that will serve more New Yorkers. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this important issue.

Testimony for Parks Oversight re: Improving the Equity of Green Space throughout the City in Light of the COVID Epidemic

I live on the LES, and I'll address Covid and East River Park.

This 2.1 mile long park has become absolutely vital to community health and wellbeing, yet the City still plans to raze it and rebuild it eight feet higher to make the ESCR levee. I worry if we'll see a Spike in infections as air quality is affected by the loss of 991 trees and 45 acres of green space.

Now, four of the adjacent NYCHA campuses have cut down mature trees and fenced off their green space for years of FEMA repairs, sewer and storm hardening. For the thousands of residents, ESCR is double jeopardy for their respiratory system. This spring, just 40% of the park will be open but who wants to run or picnic around construction?

The mitigations in local parks will not absorb the volume of park users. Therefore, I am recommending

1. Free ferry access so local residents can get to other waterside parks
2. A Parks 'concierge' who helps local residents find activities in parks citywide, when to go, how to get there. The goal is to support access to space where people can be distant, get exercise and fresh air, and enjoy the marvelous environment, etc. I have a 1 page vision statement for what I call the Open Space Gateway - Active Tourism Campaign here <https://bit.ly/gateway-2020> (inclusive of underutilized campus, grounds and other open spaces).

I am also part of a community environmental quality monitoring group that is currently gathering baseline data in East River Park, with plans to monitor air, soil, etc during the years of ESCR construction.

Thank you for keeping parks open during the Pandemic!

sincerely,

Wendy Brawer
30 year LES resident and sustainable design professional



New York City Council
Testimony of Brooklyn Borough President Eric Adams
Committee on Parks and Recreation
October 22, 2020

Hello, my name is Eric Adams, and I am Brooklyn's borough president, representing more than 2.6 million residents who call Brooklyn home. I want to thank Council Member Peter Koo, chair of the Committee on Parks and Recreation, for convening this hearing on "Improving the Equity of Green Space Throughout the City in Light of the COVID Epidemic."

Parks are the lungs of our city. Deemed an essential public service during the COVID-19 epidemic, green spaces provide sanctuary for Brooklynites while helping them to maintain a healthy social distance. The availability to not only affordably, but safely, have an outlet for physical and mental rejuvenation is priceless.

To better understand Brooklyn parks, I released "The Pulse of Our Parks: An Assessment of Brooklyn's Open Space" on Monday, March 26, 2018, which analyzed 270 of the borough's parks that are more than half an acre in size to determine access to activities, comfort stations, drinking fountains, friends-of groups, programming, and publicly accessible Wi-Fi. At the time of the report:

- There were 877 parks in Brooklyn
- 27 percent of parks are associated with a non-profit or formal community group
- 89 percent have a drinking fountain
- 60 percent have a comfort station
- 12 percent have Wi-Fi access

While access does not mean equity, it is the first step in opening landscapes that can be used for physical and mental wellness. As we all know, minority and low-income communities were disproportionately affected by COVID-19. These communities largely reside within neighborhoods with the least amount of dedicated land to parks and open space.

This hearing seeks to improve the equity of green space throughout the City in light of COVID-19. I am submitting a few ideas that will address the inequality that has long plagued our city before the current pandemic.

Expansion of Existing Programs:

- Prioritize investments under the Community Parks Initiative in neighborhoods hardest hit by COVID-19 such as Brownsville, East New York, Sunset Park, and Bensonhurst and other underserved communities throughout New York City. Creating these spaces is integral to encourage physical activity, improve air quality, and utilize green infrastructure to enhance neighborhood inclusion.
- Parks Without Borders aims to make parks more accessible and welcoming. Considering streets and parks make up 40 percent of the public realm throughout the city, transforming underused spaces while making parks more accessible would be an equitable improvement to the hardest-hit neighborhoods.
- NYC Parks must expand Wi-Fi access to all parks through community and corporate partnerships and expansion of LinkNYC kiosks.

Community Engagement:

- Investigate duplicating the Open Space Alliance (OSA) model to other community districts across Brooklyn and New York City. The OSA is a non-profit conservancy that maintains, protects, and promotes open spaces over a large community, not just one specific park.
- The City should regularly convene existing friends-of parks groups to coordinate advocacy, best practices, and strategic investment, as well as support communities who are looking to start their own community-based park partnership.
- Cultivate the creation of park conservancies to foster the maintenance and operations of the green spaces.

Expanding Access:

- The largest share of public space in New York City is our street network. NYC Parks must work with the New York City Department of Transportation (DOT) to identify potential street conversions in communities with limited green space such as Bensonhurst, Borough Park, East Flatbush, and Flatbush in Brooklyn, and similar neighborhoods across New York City.
- In neighborhoods that are further afield from destination parks, NYC Parks and DOT should partner to develop a “Safe Routes to Parks” program to ensure residents can easily and safely access parks by foot and bicycle.
- We must also build new parks. This is why I have allocated funding to innovative expansion projects such as BQ Green, which would deck the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway to recapture land lost to Robert Moses-era highway projects. I have provided funding toward the creation of new parks in areas disconnected from healthy green space, like Bushwick Inlet Park and areas abutting the Prospect Expressway, and I encourage

the Council to commission a study to identify additional potential park and playground sites throughout New York City.

As borough president, I have allocated more than \$39 million of capital funding to various parks projects in fiscal years 2015-2021. The crux of my funding has been toward expanding access in a more equitable manner, including more than \$5 million to fund perimeter access projects on the underserved edges of both Prospect and Fort Greene parks. I will continue my advocacy for the inclusion of park space and open space in uniform land use review procedure (ULURP) decisions, as well as to ensure that New York City's budget has a dedicated "Percent for Parks" in future budgets that puts real financial resources behind our mission of advancing equity. We all recognize the importance and need for green space and I applaud the City Council Committee on Parks and Recreation for convening this important public hearing on improving the equity of green space throughout the city in light of the COVID-19 epidemic.

Thank you.

New York City Council's Committee on Parks and Recreation Oversight - Improving the Equity of Green Space throughout the City in Light of the COVID Epidemic

Testimony by Adam Martinek, Inwood Hill Park Conservancy

October, 22, 2020

Good afternoon, and thank you to the members of the Council for convening this hearing and to Chairman Koo for his continued leadership for shared green and open spaces.

My name is Adam Martinek, and I'm the President and Executive Director at the Inwood Hill Park Conservancy—a not for profit organization within Inwood (Northern Manhattan) dedicated to the stewardship of Inwood Hill Park's 145 acres. We create erosion barriers to prevent forest floods, we host free programs that allow visitors to engage the terrain on guided hikes, avian tours, and maintenance forestry. We educate our community on the environmental impact individuals play in affecting the longevity of Inwood Hill Park.

The work we do as a conservancy would not be possible without dutiful city workers like those that work within the New York City Parks Department who ensure plants, material and financial resources are available to assist us in the projects we do within our community. Today, honorable members of this Committee for Oversight seek to assist green spaces in light of Covid-19. I write to insist that the only way to improve green spaces is to retain and improve the quality of conditions for the workers who maintain it.

In the *Fiscal 2020 Executive Budget* approved and passed by this council last year was capped at \$92.8 billion. The bill was modified to reflect a gap of \$662 million dollars due to shortfalls from Covid-19. Within this shortfall, you have justified the loss of 14% of NYC Parks budget and 193 critical staff necessary to maintain 30,000 acres during a pandemic where restricted travel necessitated an increase in recreational relief; and now in this measure you propose the layoff 22,000 city workers who maintain your parks; who aid in the education of your children; who provide the childcare necessary for you to work; who tend to your elderly grandmother in a nursing home; who see to the mental hygiene of your peers— who are we kidding? Essential workers paved and cleaned the roads that drove you to this Committee hearing today—they are your chuffers as well. To put this into perspective: New York City spends the equivalent of Lithuania's GDP (\$91.4 billion) in annual expenditure/revenue appropriations. I refuse to believe this is a budget shortfall beyond the City's capacity to reconcile. City parks workers form the backbone of the landscape you see beyond the steps of City Hall and the green spaces woven into the cityscape around you. Honorable members should be doing everything within their power to keep city employees, not perpetually meet in Oversight Committee to negotiate the piecemeal reduction of the very essential workers New York needs the most.

Essential workers have maintained diligence and dignity amid the Covid-19 pandemic. They have shown New Yorkers like me what it is to be a public servant. I sincerely hope you recognize this is your opportunity to do the same.

I commend this statement to the Council Committee on Parks Oversight.



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

New York City
Urban Field Station
Fort Totten

To: NYC City Council Committee on Parks and Recreation

Subject: Testimony for the Oversight Hearing- Improving the Equity of Green Space throughout the City in Light of the COVID Epidemic

Date: October 22, 2020

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on this important topic. I'm a Research Social Scientist with the USDA Forest Service. Our team at the New York City Urban Field Station, which works in close collaboration with the NYC Parks Department and the Natural Areas Conservancy, has spent 18 years researching the use, value, meaning, and stewardship of green space. My testimony draws entirely on peer reviewed research including, our current study on the impacts of adaptation to COVID-19 on the management of green space and environmental stewardship.

It is well-documented in the literature that public open space is a critical resource to support public health and well-being, including physical, mental, emotional, social and spiritual well-being (Larson et al. 2016; Campbell et al. 2016, Svendsen et al. 2016). Our research found that for many New Yorkers, their neighborhood park is their only outdoor resource (Auyeung et al. 2016). And we know that during COVID-19 shelter-in-place and social distancing, this trend toward increased and localized park use has continued (Venter et al. 2020; Lopez et al. 2010). We also know from patterns of economic decline and disinvestment across the country, that it doesn't take much for these crucial green space resources to decline in maintenance, to be less welcoming, or even to become unsafe. This was experienced firsthand by New Yorkers during the 1970s fiscal crisis that led to subsequent budget cuts and disinvestment in parkland and maintenance, out of which emerged the public-private partnership model of Central Park Conservancy and later dozens of conservancies citywide.

Community organizations play a pivotal, but often unseen role in supporting public open spaces and activating them as social infrastructure -- leveraging significant person power, time, and resources. Over 800 community organizations engaged in environmental action -- what we call "civic stewardship groups" responded to our STEW-MAP 2017 survey, representing an estimated 540,000 members and staff and with budgets totaling approximately \$800 million (Landau et al. 2019). During times of disturbance, these civic stewardship groups act as '*green responders*.' After a crisis, first responders help to stabilize life and property. As part of longer-term recovery and preparedness cycles, stewards can help to rebuild communities and landscapes through environmental action. This pattern has repeated over time in New York City, with stewardship groups forming or adapting their work in response to the fiscal crisis of the 1970s, September 11th, Hurricane Sandy, and now COVID-19 (Campbell et al. 2019; Svendsen and Campbell 2010; Chan et al. 2015). The act of caring for local places can transform not only the physical environment, but also our relationships to those places and to each other.

Civic engagement is critical to public space. In addition to providing labor and increasing capacity, it strengthens democracy via empathy, innovation, and fostering social trust (Fisher et al. 2015). Civic stewardship can increase community and cultural relevance by providing locally tailored and specific programming, events, and activities (Campbell et al., in review). These civic stewardship groups work in specific geographic territories, support a wide range of open space types, have different capacities and levels of professionalization, and operate via organizational networks that span civic, public, and private sectors (Fisher et al. 2012; Connolly et al. 2013, 2014; Johnson et al. 2019). As such, we know that engagement is uneven across the landscape, and this has a special consequence for vulnerable communities, as well as a cost for government (Taylor 2009; Sampson 2012, 2017; Klinenberg 2018).

Our current COVID-19 research on environmental stewardship highlights that:

- Along with the increase in parks use, we have seen a decrease in the staffing and funding of local civic stewardship groups. These groups are currently working with limited capacity to continue to take care of our green spaces at a time where they are vitally needed.
- We have an over-reliance, but under-resourcing of civic stewardship groups in frontline communities.
- Many important civic organizations in our city lack access to information and resources due to limited networks and capacity; organizations have a need for greater strategic coordination to maximize their potential. There is a need to support collaborative partnerships in order to strengthen and sustain environmental governance capacity.
- Not an either/or, but a both/and approach is needed to support an interdependent, equitable system of stewardship across public, civic, and private sectors. The public sector provides crucial parks maintenance workers as paid jobs, but volunteerism and civic leadership provide important sources of personal meaning, community contribution, and social ties, particularly in these times of high unemployment and underemployment.
- Vibrant urban public open spaces require government and NGO programs that enable and foster civic engagement at all times of year and in all neighborhoods.

In sum, while it is important to focus on and care for the physical resource of parks and open space, it is not enough. We need to support people and organizations that care for these green spaces, so that they can truly function as equitable and inclusive social infrastructures.

Sincerely,

Lindsay K. Campbell, Research Social Scientist, USDA Forest Service

On behalf of the STEW-MAP Research Team:

Lindsay K. Campbell, Research Social Scientist, USDA Forest Service

Erika S. Svendsen, Research Social Scientist, USDA Forest Service

Michelle Johnson, Research Ecologist, USDA Forest Service

Sophie Plitt, Partnerships Coordinator, Natural Areas Conservancy in partnership with USDA Forest Service

Laura Landau, Doctoral student, Rutgers University in collaboration with USDA Forest Service

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**Testimony for NYC Council Committee on Parks and Recreation
Emily Nobel Maxwell, Cities Program Director, The Nature Conservancy in New York
October 22, 2020**

My name is Emily Nobel Maxwell and I am the director of The Nature Conservancy's Cities Program in New York. The Nature Conservancy is the world's largest conservation organization, and our more than 600 scientists and 3500 team members located in all 50 U.S. states and 70 countries work to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends. We have 90,000 members across New York State, 35,000 of whom reside in New York City. The Nature Conservancy's New York City Program promotes nature and environmental solutions to enhance the quality of life of all New Yorkers. In New York City, we are convening the NYC Urban Forest Task Force, advancing the science and policy of green roofs, supporting NYC Housing Authority (NYCHA) to conduct a tree inventory on their property, and conducting a comprehensive analysis of the state of NYC's urban forest that will be released early next year. Statewide, we work with government and non-government partners to tackle climate change, protect land and water, sustainably provide food and water, and build healthy cities.

In many ways, the title of this hearing itself, "Improving the Equity of Green Space throughout the City in Light of the Covid Epidemic," marks a tremendous step forward. I want to commend and to thank Councilmember Koo and this Committee for considering this broad and forward-looking approach. Green space, and potential for more of it, exist both within and beyond the boundaries of NYC parkland, and it is wise to approach it as such. Green space is crucial for the health and safety of New Yorkers and for the livability and economic recovery of NYC. The COVID-19 pandemic has put a spotlight on crucial societal issues that compel us to think about green space equity. As the world warms and weather patterns become more unpredictable, and as NYC faces [significant increases in the number and intensity of heat waves](#) in the coming decades, the role of parks and green spaces in mitigating the urban heat island effect will become even more critical. Simply put, our lives depend on nature, and City residents who have access to more nature and green space in their neighborhood will suffer less in a climate-changing world. However, these many functional benefits cannot be fully realized through the simple existence of parks and green spaces; sufficient commitment to their consistent and long-term operations, maintenance, and programming is required.

Before talking about the diversity of green spaces in NYC and opportunities to increase equity in relation to COVID-19 and other critical social issues and environmental issues, I must underscore that we are starting off with inequitable resources for parks and green spaces. Despite the laudable efforts of this committee and hundreds of advocacy groups across the city, NYC Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) is chronically underfunded. While managing, caring for and programming 14% of NYC's land, in a good year, [DPR receives less than one percent of NYC's total budget](#). The extreme cuts DPR experienced under the COVID-19 constrained budget are shocking considering both the crucial role parks play in providing safe and healthy respites for New Yorkers during this trying time and the tiny percentage of the NYC budget for which DPR's budget accounts. Disinvesting from parks makes no sense in the short or the long term given the role they can play in NYC's recovery – from safe recreational spaces to economic engines.

[Recent research](#) led by the New School with partners including The Nature Conservancy underscores the need for parks and open spaces. There is overwhelming and consistent public recognition of the many benefits of parks and open space. Eighty-eight percent of respondents reported that they currently consider parks and open space to be either "extremely important" or "very important" for their mental health. Eighty percent of respondents

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reported that parks and open space were either “extremely important” or “very important” for their physical health. Mental health was also identified as more important than physical health, highlighting the value of urban parks and open spaces for alleviating stress, anxiety and other mental health conditions, which are all the more critical in the face of COVID-19. The majority of respondents said they had some access to an urban park or open space, but the “perceived access,” or ease with which people feel they can reach desired urban parks or open space sites, differed based on location. We found that residents in Queens and Brooklyn overall have lower perceived park and open space access, as well as receive less of their desired features from these spaces. This is particularly concerning as studies show that neighborhoods in Queens disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 are also at higher risk for and incidence of conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, exposure to extreme heat, poor air quality, and heart failure.

New York City’s urban forest, composed of all the trees across New York City, is another core component of NYC’s green space. Our urban forest cools the air, offers shady respite from heat, sequesters carbon, increases energy efficiency, and contributes to New Yorkers’ health and wellbeing. Through our own analysis, and a collaborative partnership with NYC Environmental Justice Alliance, [Just Nature NYC](#), we have documented many inequities in our urban forest and therefore inequities in the important benefits trees provide New Yorkers. Our urban forest includes individual street trees, large stands of natural forested areas and everything in between. But the extent of the urban forest across the city as a whole and at different geographic scales is uneven. As of 2017, urban tree canopy (or tree cover), varies significantly across boroughs (from about 18% cover in Brooklyn to about 31% cover in Staten Island). City Council Districts range in cover from about 10% canopy to over 40% canopy. Investments both to manage and protect existing canopy, including the funding of the [Forest Management Framework](#), and to increase canopy in areas with less, are crucial to providing more equitable access to the benefits of trees, from shade and cooling to mental health, all even more important in the COVID-19 era, particularly in the most heat vulnerable and frontline communities.

As we consider additional opportunities for green space, we must also look to NYC’s rooftops. Of NYC’s 1 million buildings that are home to about 40,000 acres of rooftop space (that’s about equivalent to a whole borough), [our research](#) reveals that as of 2016, there were only about 730 green roofs (totaling approximately 60 acres). Further, these are largely concentrated in a few areas of the city and not serving those communities most affected by COVID-19 and heat stress, who might benefit most directly from additional green space and its benefits. While not all roofs may be appropriate for green roofs, we have a long way to go to take advantage of this opportunity. We encourage the City to advance green roofs on its own properties, including and especially NYC schools. It’s crucial that the City advance its implementation of [Local Laws 92 & 94](#) to advance green roofs, which may serve as a good job generator. It is also important to enact rulemaking for the improved [Green Roof Tax Abatement](#) to unlock that incentive to help expand green roof installation and stimulate NYC’s recovery, and that equity is attended to as the intent of these laws is implemented.

There are a few other areas of opportunity which bear consideration. NYCHA’s open spaces often serve as some of the only open space in neighborhoods that lack these amenities. There is a huge opportunity to improve, further green, protect, and enhance access to NYCHA’s open spaces, and we encourage the Committee to take a hard look at that opportunity. Further, NYC’s community gardens serve as vital green spaces, but lack sufficient protection and expansion opportunities which should be pursued. And lastly, while we must of course invest in our public sector,

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NYC's green spaces would not be what they are without a [vital civic sector](#) composed of non-profits and volunteers. The groups that steward, tend and advocate green spaces must be recognized, uplifted and resourced at the same time as we sufficiently invest in the public sector.

The protection, maintenance, stewardship, programming, access, and expansion of green space in NYC present tremendous opportunities to advance equity and drive NYC's COVID-19 recovery. In doing so, we can create a more racially and economically just city. Nature-based jobs can play both a crucial role in providing safe and healthy employment for New Yorkers and in enhancing green spaces to improve quality of life during and after the pandemic. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony. The Nature Conservancy is pleased to help advance this important discussion.

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**Testimony in Support of Increased Funding for Parks and Green Spaces
To the City Council Committee on Parks and Recreation by Brooklyn
Greenway Initiative Stewardship and Naval Cemetery Landscape Manager
Anna Bakis
October 22, 2020**

Brooklyn Greenway Initiative (BGI) is a private nonprofit that for two decades has been focused on the development, establishment, and long-term stewardship of the Brooklyn Waterfront Greenway, a vital and nearly complete component of the greenways network throughout NYC's five boroughs. As the "backbone" of the city's bike infrastructure network, greenways serve as safe and accessible green corridors for active recreation and non-motorized transportation. They are linear connectors of people and communities, providing public access to green space and the waterfront, commercial corridors, and job centers.

BGI enthusiastically supports the Play Fair for Parks Campaign and stands with our partners in the Coalition in its call for more investment in New York City parks and green spaces. New Yorkers are depending on their green spaces now more than ever, and at this crucial moment it's important that the city's parks and green spaces have the capacity to care for and maintain these spaces in ways that are necessary and support increased usage. Investments that secure frontline green collar workers' jobs and increase their capacity for maintenance in our parks and open spaces need to be prioritized, specifically because these spaces are needed by New Yorkers now more than ever for their mental and physical health. All New Yorkers deserve access to parks and open spaces as a basic right, and this right shouldn't only be supported in select areas and neighborhoods.

BGI has seen an exponential rise in usage of our greenspaces and bikeway during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our Naval Cemetery Landscape has surpassed 2019 visitorship numbers in early October, despite a more than month-long COVID closure in the spring.



Similarly, over the last eight months, average bicycle use on the Greenway has climbed three times higher than the same period last year, with single-day spikes of almost 15,000 bikers, five times our previous busiest day, while average pedestrian use has doubled from 2019 levels.

Our data correlates with increased bike traffic over East River Bridges and patterns of use reported by CitiBike, who experienced their busiest month of all time in September 2020. Right now, the Greenway is providing critical safe passage for people commuting to essential jobs and safe space for solo exercise and stress-relief. We know that many of our partners in the Play Fair for Parks coalition have seen similar surges in usage of their parks, greenways, and open spaces.

Our coalition of over 290 organizations and groups has daily and direct experience with the city's parks and open spaces, and we have all seen not only increased usage, but have heard from visitors and patrons that our spaces are acting as vital assets in terms of health and general well-being in this time when New Yorkers' options for recreation are limited. New York City needs these vital open spaces more than ever, and it's important for the staff and stewards of these spaces to be able to safely and reliably meet this demand with a high standard of maintenance and care.

The New York City Council needs to prioritize funding for the city's green spaces in a way that directly addresses the inequity in funding and maintenance of various parks across the city. All New Yorkers deserve access to safe, clean, and well maintained open spaces, and the workers that support these efforts deserve to be considered as essential because of the significant impact they have on the city's ability to provide a necessary public resource.

BGI looks forward to continuing to work with our partners within the Play Fair for Parks Coalition to advocate for investment in all of the city's greenspaces to make our neighborhoods more resilient in the face of a changing climate and to give all New Yorkers access to nature.

Thank you to the City Council for considering the importance of this effort, and for dedicating time to the advancement and continued growth of the city's parks and green spaces.

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To: Committee on NYC Parks and Recreation, CM Peter Koo.

From: Carsten W Glaeser, Ph.D Consulting Arborist

Date: October 22, 2020.

RE: Expert testimony.

NYC COUNCIL HEARING: " NYC Parks and Recreation Budgeting for Green Space Maintenance and Care".

Parks Committee Chairman Peter Koo and others of the various Committees gathered here this morning, thank you for the invitation to share my thoughts and experiences with you on matters pertaining to the future of NYC Parks operations its impact to green space expansion and conservation amid agency budget cuts.

My name is Carsten Glaeser. I am an urban tree expert and horticulturalist. I operate a Queens based independent arboricultural and horticultural consulting firm. I am Certified Arborist an industry credential by the International Society of Arboriculture, a member of NYS Arborists Association and the American Society of Consulting Arborists (ASCA). I have a Ph D in Plant Science from CUNY Graduate Center. I also served in a number of positions over a 14 year period in the 1980-1990s with NYC Parks & Recreation in horticulture, arboriculture and the maintenance and operations. With that, I have accrued 35 years delivering an expertise in tree and landscape care and greening to a range of clientele that includes the City of New York and various mayoral agencies, the NYC Law Department, construction and engineering firms as well as to the tree owning public. I have testified before on matters pertaining to NYC Parks and Parks Forestry for the preservation of vital greening in public spaces especially our public shade trees.

TESTIMONY: Carsten W Glaeser PhD.

Expert testimony. NYC COUNCIL HEARING: " NYC Parks and Recreation Budgeting for Green Space Maintenance and Care with Stipulations".

Date: 10-22-20

There is no doubt that reasonable expansion of greenspace amid a dense human population such as here in NYC is not only essential for a healthy and positive living environment but more so for matters pertaining to the long and short term health and longevity of the people that reside here. It has been well documented by decades by empirical studies and peer-reviewed publications that greenspace populated by large trees in parkland and plazas and other public spaces offer direct quantifiable benefits and services to both people known to improve to peoples health, their psychological well-being and good feelings, longevity, and increases in work productivity. For the ecology and the environment includes the daily amelioration of the polluted air that we breath ladened with contaminated particulate matter, the interception and diversion of storm water and ensures a natural filtration of those waters back into local waters. Most important by these treed greenspaces is the deliver of significant improvements in the cognitive learning ability of school age children- in contrast to those school areas that are paved non-vegetated.

Yet amid this current threat of cuts to the agency budget, the very first class of employees to go is not the mid level bureacrats, the bean counters and administrators but to maintenance and operations and those of those personnel skilled and unskilled that ensure those greenspaces are maintained- the laborers, vehicle operators, gardeners and the agency tree care providers and program directors. I am witness to the calamity to parkland during those depressing years of the 1970s. And by my hiring by Parks in the early 1980s as a horticulturalist saw a period of park and greenspace transformation from the horribly bad to the good- by budget restoration through new private-public partnerships known as "conservancies"- the Central Park Conservancy and Prospect Park Conservancy. Experienced first hand was what parklands can and will look like after a decade of drastic budget cuts imposed by this very council upon the agency. We have seen it all before and in fact we are now beginning to see the very repeat of that time in various locations in Queens parkland- that we do not wish to return to. The increase in trash and debris, illegal dumping, abandoned and torched vehicles, increased criminal activity, gangland operation and their executions, prostitution, drug use and a deliberate decision by

agency managers to extirpate already established trees and other vegetation from the landscape by cutting and removal- because simply the horticultural care was no longer available.

It is now 2020.

In 40 years we have learned so much more about urban greening the how and why it is vital for a healthy existence especially in highly polluted and highly populated urban areas. There is no excuse to put New Yorkers through this experience again. Maintaining the current Parks Agency budget is vital but it must have strict vetting by this body of legislators and the Committee on Parks, through external industry advisements and through new legislation that ensures that whatever services NYC Parks delivers to the public in its M&O- is what the public is really getting.

Thank you again for allowing me to testify today. Chairman Koo I avail my expertise, should you and others of the Parks Committee require additional independent technical input on urban tree care and tree management protocols and methods. Good day.

Carsten W. Glaeser, MPhil, Ph.D, ASCA
Consulting Arborist / ISA Certified Arborist / NYS # 5198A
ISA Qualified Tree Risk Assessor



TESTIMONY: Carsten W Glaeser PhD.

Expert testimony. NYC COUNCIL HEARING: " NYC Parks and Recreation Budgeting for Green Space Maintenance and Care with Stipulations".

Date: 10.22.20

**Improving the Equity of Green Space throughout the City in Light of the COVID Epidemic
NYC Council Parks Committee Hearing
10.22.2020 Testimony of Heather Lubov, Executive Director of City Parks Foundation**

I'm Heather Lubov, Executive Director of City Parks Foundation, a non-profit that leads free sports, arts, and environmental education programs, and co-manages Partnerships for Parks, a joint program with NYC Parks, all to encourage New Yorkers to use and care for their neighborhood parks and green spaces.

The pandemic has made it resoundingly clear that parks and open spaces are essential to the physical and mental health of our city. Parks saw an unprecedented number of visitors this summer, which, combined with reduced funding, has put even more stress on already overwhelmed park workers. Thanks to drastic budget cuts, Parks maintenance workers are at only 45% of last year's staffing levels. On an average week in August, 400-500 parks were not being cleaned by staff at all and 311 complaints increased by more than 80%.

As a result, New York City is relying on a network of community volunteer groups as 'green responders' to help with litter removal, planting, and general care of our city's parks. Just this past Saturday, Partnerships for Parks and the It's My Park volunteer program supported clean-up projects in nearly 70 parks. These volunteer efforts can be mobilized quickly because they are part of an existing network of nearly 600 volunteer groups and 26,000 individual volunteers from all 51 Council districts that Partnerships for Parks has cultivated and supported for many years. The Council's own Parks Equity Initiative is making this network possible by funding regular coaching and capacity building for volunteer groups, micro-grants, and access to staff who facilitate connections for volunteers with the Parks Department and the wider community. This network of 600 groups has more than doubled in size since Parks Equity Initiative funding started 6 years ago. But volunteers are not a long term solution to park maintenance.

This spring, City Parks Foundation joined with more than 30 conservancies and parks stewards to form the Parks and Open Space Partners coalition to collaborate and share resources. We worked together to raise money to create the \$5 million NYC Green Relief & Recovery Fund, which is distributing grants to help maintain green spaces. But this temporary funding is a drop in the bucket and is also not a long term solution.

The pandemic, and city budget cuts, are simply magnifying long term inequities. According to the Trust for Public Land, parks that serve people of color are half as large and nearly five times as crowded as parks that serve a majority-white population. Parks serving majority low-income households are, on average, four times smaller and more crowded than parks that serve majority high-income households. Neighborhoods that are more than a 10-minute walk to a park may be up to 6 degrees warmer.

In the long term, we must rethink planning for and maintenance of our city's parks, plazas, gardens, natural areas, green streets, and NYCHA spaces as a comprehensive network of open spaces that meet the health, safety, economic, and environmental needs of communities. And we must consider alternative funding such as mill taxes or park impact fees. For example, through the creation of the Seattle Park District which collects property taxes to directly support the city's parks department, Seattle is now able to invest 62% more per capita than NYC does.

But in the short term, NYC must recognize parks as the essential infrastructure they are, and provide funding -- not 0.6% of the budget, but truly adequate funding -- to ensure that our parks are safe and well maintained for everyone.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and thank you for your support for City Parks Foundation.