

CITY COUNCIL  
CITY OF NEW YORK

----- X

TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

of the

COMMITTEE ON PARKS AND  
RECREATION

----- X

January 27, 2021  
Start: 1:02 p.m.  
Recess: 3:01 p.m.

HELD AT: Remote Hearing, Virtual Room 2

B E F O R E: Peter A. Koo  
Chairperson

COUNCIL MEMBERS: Peter A. Koo  
Diana Ayala  
Joseph C. Borelli  
Justin L. Brannan  
Darma V. Diaz  
Mark Gjonaj  
Robert F. Holden  
Mark Levine  
Francis P. Moya  
Kevin Riley  
Carlina Rivera  
Eric A. Ulrich  
Jimmy Van Bramer

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

Mitchell Silver  
Commissioner  
Department of Parks and Recreation

Sam Biederman  
Assistant Commissioner  
Department of Parks and Recreation

Bill LoSasso  
Director  
GreenThumb  
Department of Parks and Recreation

Lynn Kelly

Jessica Saab

Aziz Dehkan

Raymond Figueroa

Shahela Begum

Alexis Mena

Maureen O'Brien

Joseph Reiver

Sarah Williams

Kara Goad

Brenda Thompson Duchene

Barbara Adamson

@

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25

SERGEANT AT ARMS: PC recording done.

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Cloud recording is started.

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Backup is rolling.

SERGEANT AT ARMS LUGO: All right, thank you. Sergeant Hope, you may take it away with the opening.

SERGEANT AT ARMS HOPE: Thank you, Sergeant Lugo. Good afternoon and welcome to the New York City Council remote hearing on Parks and Recreation. At this time would all panelists please turn on your videos. I repeat, all panelists please turn on your video.

UNIDENTIFIED: Can we just, ah, hold, please. Just a technical issue. OK, all good. You can, ah, begin.

SERGEANT AT ARMS HOPE: Thank you. Once again, welcome to the New York City Council remote hearing on Parks and Recreation. At this time will all panelists please turn on your videos. Thank you. To minimize disruption, please place all electronic devices to vibrate or silent mode. If you wish to submit testimony you may do so at [testimony@council.nyc.gov](mailto:testimony@council.nyc.gov). I repeat,

1 testimony@council.nyc.gov. Chair Koo, we are ready  
2 to begin.  
3

4 CHAIRPERSON KOO: [gavel] Thank you for  
5 joining our virtual hearing today before the  
6 council's Committee on Parks and Recreation. I would  
7 like to acknowledge my council, ah, my fellow council  
8 members. Darma Diaz, Gjonaj, Moya, Riley, Borelli,  
9 Ayala, and Diana Diaz. OK. So if more people, more  
10 member comes we will acknowledge them later. Good  
11 afternoon. I'm Peter Koo, chair of the City Council  
12 Committee on Parks and Recreation. I would like to  
13 welcome you to our virtual hearing that will examine  
14 the state of community gardens and urban agriculture  
15 and consider a related piece of legislation.

16 Community gardens play a critical role in the life of  
17 our city. They help provided needed green space in  
18 areas that were once lacking, foster a greater sense  
19 of community among local residents, provide  
20 educational opportunities for our children,  
21 contribute to decreasing the effects of climate  
22 change and produce and [inaudible] numerous kinds of  
23 food products through urban agricultural practices.  
24 I have been a supporter of gardens for a long time  
25 and I'm proud that I have one of the largest gardens,

1 if not the largest, garden in the city. Evergreen  
2 Community Garden in Kissena Park, which is about five  
3 acres large and beloved by my community. Urban  
4 agriculture is typically defined as the process of  
5 growing food in cities, in addition to other  
6 activities, such as food processing and distribution,  
7 food waste and collection. The benefits of urban  
8 farming are numerous, as in addition to providing  
9 food for the community. They are also centers of  
10 learning, where children can learn about nature and  
11 how food is produced, while being safe spaces that  
12 deliver environmental benefits, such as reduced city  
13 heat, decreased storm water runoff, and save the  
14 soil. The city's [inaudible] rules permit  
15 agricultural activities in almost all of the city  
16 zones, which presents us with a promising home that  
17 there are no outright rules that should impede the  
18 growth of this activity. The council in its growing  
19 food equity plan along with so many parks and open  
20 space advocates have recognized the need for urban  
21 agriculture support and call for various policy  
22 proposals to support their growth, including having a  
23 central office or entity that focuses on facilitating  
24 the growth and maintenance of urban agriculture. The  
25

1  
2 increasing support for educational programming, for  
3 farming and gardens, determining what vacant lots or  
4 land are suitable for agriculture and gardening.

5 Supporting economic empowerment for gardeners and  
6 farmers, and improving the availability and

7 accessibility of data regarding urban farms and their  
8 use. I'm also curious to examine with more detail

9 what the administration's plans are to increase

10 support for urban farming in community gardens and

11 how they can make it less burdensome on gardeners to

12 make the best use of gardens and farms they operate.

13 My view is that the city should make it more

14 welcoming and less restrictive for those who seek to

15 open a garden or farm in a safe and a reasonable way.

16 We will consider Intro number 1059, sponsored by my

17 colleague, Council Member Diana Ayala. This bill

18 will require the Parks Department to conduct a study

19 on the prevalence of community gardens engaged in

20 urban farming and agriculture and to provide

21 recommendation to the mayor and the council on how to

22 better support and increase such farming and

23 agriculture. I look forward to exploring it in

24 greater detail today and hearing what the

25 administration and advocates think about the

1  
2 legislation. Thank you, and welcome all of you. At  
3 this time I would like to invite Council Member Ayala  
4 to offer a statement on the bill she has sponsored.

5 COUNCIL MEMBER AYALA: Thank you, Chair  
6 Koo, um, and before I give my remarks I also wanted  
7 to recognize former Council Member Espinal, who was  
8 the original, ah, sponsor of the bill and thank him  
9 for his efforts in helping us craft it. Ah, good  
10 afternoon, and thank you for being here today. I am  
11 Council Member Diana Ayala and I am looking forward  
12 to having my bill, Intro 1059, heard today. This  
13 bill would require the New York City Department of  
14 Parks and Recreation to conduct a study on the  
15 prevalence of urban farming and agriculture and to  
16 submit a report on its findings. Such a report shall  
17 include, but should not be limited to, ah, an  
18 understanding of the number of community gardens  
19 under the jurisdiction of the Parks Department  
20 presently engaged in farming and/or food processing,  
21 ah, the amount and types of food produced at such  
22 gardens, information on the types of equipment used  
23 by such gardens for agricultural purposes, including,  
24 but not limited to, greenhouses, hydroponic systems,  
25 food processing systems, and composting systems, a

1 list of resources provided by the Department of Parks  
2 and Recreation and other government agencies to aid  
3 in farming and food processing, information on the  
4 availability of potential sites throughout the city  
5 that could be developed for urban agricultural  
6 purposes, information on the feasibility of costs  
7 associated with expanding, and the number of farmers'  
8 markets operating in the Department of Parks and  
9 Recreation, um, property, and the number of community  
10 gardens that engage in urban agriculture, and it also  
11 asks for recommendations on how the city can provide  
12 more technical assistance and financial resources to  
13 expand the number of community gardens that engage  
14 in, ah, urban agriculture. This bill is obviously  
15 really important to me and I'm sure to my colleagues,  
16 um, as many of us have many community gardens that  
17 are engaged in urban farming and agriculture. Ah,  
18 East Harlem and the South Bronx suffer from many  
19 health disparities and community gardens in my  
20 district especially have played an important role in  
21 offering access to healthier food options and to  
22 offering much-needed access to green space respites  
23 during this very difficult time. I'm hopeful that  
24 the study will help us, ah, gain much-needed  
25

1  
2 information to support the growth and the  
3 sustainability of urban farming and agriculture in  
4 the city, and I am now happy to turn this hearing  
5 back to Chair Koo. Thank you.

6 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Thank you, Council  
7 Member Ayala. We are also joined by Council Member  
8 Holden, Council Member Brannan, and Council Member  
9 Van Bramer. I will now turn it over to our  
10 moderator, committee counsel Chris Sartori, to go  
11 over some procedural items.

12 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you, Chair Koo.  
13 I'm Chris Sartori, senior counsel to the Committee on  
14 Parks and Recreation, and I'll be moderating this  
15 hearing. Before we begin, I would like to remind  
16 everyone that you'll be on mute until you are called  
17 on to testify, at which point you will be unmuted by  
18 the host. During the hearing I'll be calling on  
19 panelists to testify, so please listen for your name  
20 to be called as I'll periodically be announcing who  
21 the next panelists will be. We will first be hearing  
22 testimony from the administration, followed by  
23 testimony from members of the public. During the  
24 hearing, if council members would like to ask a  
25 question of the administration or of a specific

1 panelist, please use the Zoom raise hand function and  
2 I'll call on you in order. We'll be limiting council  
3 member questions to five minutes, which includes the  
4 time it takes to answer those questions. For members  
5 of the public, we'll be limiting speaking time to  
6 three minutes in order to accommodate all who wish to  
7 speak today. Once you are called on to testify,  
8 please state your name and the organization you  
9 represent, if any, when it is your time to speak. We  
10 will now call on representatives of the  
11 administration to testify. We will be hearing  
12 testimony from Mitchell Silver, commissioner of the  
13 Department of Parks and Recreation, Sam Biederman,  
14 assistant commissioner of the Department of Parks and  
15 Recreation, and Bill LoSasso, director of GreenThumb.  
16 And at this time I will administer the affirmation to  
17 each representative of the administration. I will  
18 call on you each individually for a response, so  
19 please at this time raise your right hands. Do you  
20 affirm to tell the truth, the whole truth, and  
21 nothing but the truth before this committee and to  
22 respond honestly to council member questions?  
23 Commissioner Silver?

24  
25 COMMISSIONER SILVER: Yes.

2 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you.

3 Commissioner Biederman?

4 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER BIEDERMAN: Yup.

5 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Ah, Director LoSasso?

6 DIRECTOR LOSASSO: Yeah.

7 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. And at  
8 this time I will invite Commissioner Silver to  
9 present his testimony.

10 COMMISSIONER SILVER: Thank you, Chris.

11 Ah, good afternoon Chair Koo and members of the Parks  
12 Committee. My name is Mitchell Silver. I'm the  
13 commissioner of New York City Parks. It's good to  
14 see all of you once again and to offer greetings to  
15 the new faces on the committee as this new year  
16 begins. Joining me on today's panel are our  
17 assistant commissioner of community outreach and  
18 partnership developments, Sam Biederman, and Bill  
19 LoSasso, our director of GreenThumb. Additionally,  
20 we have staff from our agency watching this panel, as  
21 well as the public testimony that will follow on the  
22 council's hearing live stream. GreenThumb is an  
23 amazing division of New York City Parks, initiated in  
24 1978 as New York City was in the midst of a financial  
25 crisis and significant social upheaval. When

1 GreenThumb was created it was able to assist  
2 neighborhoods in revitalizing local spaces and  
3 creating new and important community resources.  
4 GreenThumb continues that mission today by providing  
5 programming and material to support over 550  
6 community gardens in this city, including workshops  
7 that cover garden basics, as well as organizing  
8 topics. These are all volunteer initiatives that  
9 demonstrate the strength of community bonds and what  
10 can be achieved when local government works in close  
11 partnership with New Yorkers. To help provide more  
12 detailed background about our GreenThumb division and  
13 the various efforts we undertake alongside our  
14 community garden partner groups and to help maximize  
15 potential of these special gardens throughout the  
16 city, I would now introduce the director of our  
17 GreenThumb division, Bill LoSasso.

19 DIRECTOR LOSASSO: Good afternoon, Chair  
20 Koo and members of the Parks Committee. Thank you,  
21 Commissioner Silver, for your remarks. I am Bill  
22 LoSasso and I serve as director of GreenThumb at NYC  
23 Parks. Accompanying me today are Assistant  
24 Commissioner Sam Biederman and director of government  
25 relations, Matt Drury. We are very pleased to be

1 here today to discuss GreenThumb community gardens,  
2 the tireless work of New York City's volunteer  
3 gardeners, the efforts that we have made at  
4 GreenThumb to support community gardening and urban  
5 agriculture in New York City. As there has not been  
6 a recent hearing on GreenThumb specifically, and  
7 since there are new members joining both the council  
8 and the Parks Committee, please allow me to quickly  
9 explain GreenThumb, our model, and our support of  
10 community gardening and urban agriculture. As you  
11 know, GreenThumb is the community gardening program  
12 of NYC Parks with a mission of helping to create a  
13 more sustainable, resilient, healthy, and equitable  
14 New York City. Founded in 1978 to support the  
15 resident-led community gardening movement that had  
16 arisen during a time of disinvestment and abandonment  
17 of public and private property, we support a growing  
18 network of over 550 community gardens and tens of  
19 thousands of volunteer community gardeners with the  
20 provision of free access to public land, materials,  
21 technical assistance, operational support, public  
22 programming, and community engagement. We also serve  
23 thousands of New Yorkers who are interested in  
24 community-led environmental stewardship through  
25

1 public programming, as well as hundreds of thousands  
2 of annual visitors to [inaudible] gardens who enjoy  
3 this cherished public open spaces. GreenThumb  
4 community gardens are unique public spaces that are  
5 stewarded by volunteer New Yorkers and which help  
6 catalyze sustainable, healthy, and equitable  
7 communities. Gardens thrive through a partnership  
8 between New York City government, community  
9 gardeners, and countless partners who are  
10 collectively, who collectively care for these spaces  
11 in a shared spirit of service. GreenThumb gardens  
12 reflect the history and the diversity of New York  
13 City's neighborhoods and they serve as platforms for  
14 neighborhood beautification, social cohesion,  
15 teaching and learning, cultural expression, food  
16 production, health, environmental justice,  
17 resilience, and more. Reflecting the unique  
18 personalities and needs of our city's neighborhoods,  
19 GreenThumb gardens range widely in size and nature,  
20 and host a variety of activities, from botanical  
21 horticulture and food gardening to passive  
22 recreation, special performances, and programming,  
23 providing opportunities for New Yorkers to  
24 participate and collectively engage with their  
25

1 neighbors. It is important to note that it is not  
2 GreenThumb who determines how each garden will be  
3 used, but rather each individual garden group. Our  
4 core philosophy is that the local community  
5 volunteers that make up the garden groups best  
6 understand the needs and wants of their community.  
7 Within this context, we invest that value by helping  
8 these groups realize their unique vision for each  
9 garden. That means that whether gardeners plant  
10 ornamental gardens, food gardens, or both, we support  
11 them in that undertaking. Thanks to increased  
12 support from city government in recent years,  
13 including the City Council's discretionary  
14 allocations, the Parks Equity Initiative, A Greener  
15 NYC, and most recently the Play Fair Advocacy  
16 Campaign, GreenThumb has experienced tremendous  
17 growth and an expanded ability to support gardens.  
18 Specifically, this has allowed us to provide new and  
19 higher-quality materials to increase the number of  
20 annual workshops, to develop new specialized  
21 trainings for gardeners, and to work with emerging  
22 garden groups to initiate approximately 20 new  
23 community gardens since 2016, with an additional 50  
24 new gardens planned in the next three years through  
25

1 an innovative partnership with NYCHA. With the  
2 additional funding provided by Play Fair in fiscal  
3 year 2020 we were able to make unprecedented levels  
4 of investment in gardens. This includes addressing  
5 long-needed infrastructure improvements, including  
6 the installation of new fencing, signage, and  
7 sidewalks, new workshops and trainings for gardeners,  
8 an expanded provision of materials, including lumber  
9 for raised beds, compost tumblers, and expanded  
10 operational support to the addition of new GreenThumb  
11 staff. GreenThumb has supported urban agriculture  
12 since its founding, providing tools, equipment,  
13 training, and materials that support food production  
14 in GreenThumb gardens. Food production has occurred  
15 in gardens since the beginning and this has been a  
16 growing trend in recent years. Greet has adjusted  
17 its programming and support accordingly to remain  
18 responsive to the needs of our network. We have  
19 developed new workshops and trainings on growing  
20 food. We've permitted garden groups to sell their  
21 own produce to support on-site efforts and formed new  
22 partnerships to provide additional supplementary  
23 support for food-producing gardens. Today 83% of  
24 gardens on New York City Parks property grow food in  
25

1 some way and we estimate that a significant amount of  
2 food is grown in gardens each year, though the scale  
3 of production tends to be somewhat limited given the  
4 relatively limited size and capacity of these  
5 gardens. In addition, some gardens are able to  
6 distribute food to their community to support healthy  
7 food access through farm stands and local donations.  
8 Navigating the COVID-19 pandemic has of course proven  
9 challenging for all New Yorkers in so many ways, but  
10 we are proud to have been able to continue supporting  
11 gardens, including those growing and distributing  
12 food during this difficult time. We adapted our  
13 annual distribution of free plants to gardeners and  
14 hand delivered 110,000 plants to hundreds of garden  
15 groups throughout the city in May, including 45,000  
16 food-producing plants and thousands of seed packets.  
17 This represents the largest plant distribution in the  
18 history of GreenThumb. Working with the Department  
19 of Health and Mental Hygiene we developed protocols  
20 to ensure that gardens could safely remain open to  
21 garden groups throughout the pandemic and that  
22 allowed garden-managed farm stands to continue  
23 operating to support the safe distribution of healthy  
24 food during a time of need. In addition, while  
25

1 observing all applicable safety measures, we were  
2 able to work with garden groups and partners to  
3 renovate 15 gardens, about 375, with new raised  
4 planting beds to increase, to support increased food  
5 production and deliver over 2000 cubic yards of  
6 topsoil and compost to garden groups across the city.  
7 Specific to the legislation being heard today, Intro  
8 1059, NYC Parks shares the council's interest in  
9 transparency and providing any information about the  
10 wonderful work being carried out by our partners and  
11 volunteers. We appreciate the intent of the  
12 legislation and look forward to discussing this bill  
13 further with the council. In closing, we thank the  
14 City Council for convening this hearing. We  
15 appreciate every opportunity to shine a spotlight on  
16 the tireless work of our dedicated volunteers that  
17 steward community gardens across New York City and  
18 showcase the work that we have been doing at  
19 GreenThumb to support them. We look forward to  
20 answering council members' questions and afterwards  
21 our agency staff will be viewing the public's  
22 testimony via the council's hearing live stream.  
23 Thank you.

1  
2 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. And at  
3 this time I will now turn it over to questions from  
4 Chair Koo. Panelists, please stay unmuted, if  
5 possible, during this question and answer period.  
6 Thank you.

7 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Ah, thank you, Counsel.  
8 We are also joined by Council Member Rivera and  
9 Council Member Levine. Commissioner Silver and  
10 Assistant Commissioner Sam Biederman and director of  
11 GreenThumb Bill LoSasso, thank you, thank you for  
12 coming to today's testimony. So I have a few  
13 questions. Ah, Commissioner, how many community  
14 gardens are there in the city, broken down by agency?  
15 How many GreenThumb gardens are there in the city and  
16 how many other agencies [inaudible]?

17 COMMISSIONER SILVER: Um, thank you for  
18 that question, Chair Koo. Ah, as it was stated, we  
19 have over 550 community gardens. Ah, that's part of  
20 our GreenThumb program. Ah, there are other gardens,  
21 ah, through NYCHA and we have worked with NYCHA to  
22 help them to manage about 50, ah, of those gardens.  
23 I know they had some informal spaces and could number  
24 in the hundreds. But in terms of the ones I'm  
25 familiar with for Parks is over 550 and for NYCHA

1 there's about 50 that we'll be working to help  
2 manage, ah, those NYCHA residents for those gardens  
3 on NYCHA property.  
4

5 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Can we have a breakdown  
6 of like, of gardens by borough, like Queens how many,  
7 Bronx how many?

8 COMMISSIONER SILVER: We, we can supply  
9 you. Ah, Bill LoSasso certainly has those numbers  
10 and we can supply those with you, ah, after this  
11 hearing, but we certainly have the breakdown of how  
12 many gardens per borough.

13 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Thank you.

14 COMMISSIONER SILVER: Commissioner  
15 Biederman, can you...

16 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Yeah, sure.

17 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER BIEDERMAN: And I  
18 would just add that, you know, for, um, you and your  
19 staff, Council Member, and for anyone following  
20 along, the GreenThumb website is a great resource for  
21 this information as well. Um, there's a great map  
22 where you can see all of the gardens laid out, ah,  
23 across the city.  
24  
25

1  
2 CHAIRPERSON KOO: OK, yeah. So how many  
3 gardens currently engage in urban agriculture and  
4 where are they located?

5 COMMISSIONER SILVER: Well, let me answer  
6 first and then I'll turn it over to Bill LoSasso.  
7 Um, as it was stated, about 83%, um, do some level of  
8 food production. Because of the scale of the garden  
9 it may vary. Ah, so if it's 83% of 550, we can  
10 certainly do the math. Ah, but I'll turn it over to  
11 Director LoSasso to see if wants to, ah, provide more  
12 clarity to your question.

13 DIRECTOR LOSASSO: Thank you,  
14 Commissioner. Thank you for the question, Chair Koo.  
15 Ah, of the 377 gardens that are located on Parks  
16 Department property, ah, 314 last we were able to  
17 count, ah, currently grow food in some way, as Mr.,  
18 as Commissioner Silver mentions, is 83%. Um, these  
19 food-producing gardens are located throughout the  
20 city in all five boroughs and I don't have it, ah,  
21 available right now, but I would be able to provide  
22 a, a map showing food-producing gardens, um,  
23 throughout the city.

2 CHAIRPERSON KOO: OK. So what is the  
3 average cost to maintain a community garden,  
4 Commissioner?

5 COMMISSIONER SILVER: Again, that varies.  
6 Each garden is different. Ah, these are not just  
7 gardens but community spaces. And they're volunteer-  
8 led. Ah, so they do some of their own fundraising or  
9 volunteer contributions, but the GreenThumb also  
10 supports them in various ways. So that's very  
11 difficult, because some do food production, some do,  
12 before COVID would do some community events, ah, and  
13 the [inaudible] different about what they could  
14 accommodate, so that's very, very difficult. I'll  
15 see if Director LoSasso has some additional  
16 information, but it's very difficult to say on  
17 average how many of each of the gardens, ah, spend  
18 money, ah, to manage those volunteer spaces.

19 CHAIRPERSON KOO: OK, so who...

20 DIRECTOR LOSASSO: Thank you,  
21 Commissioner.

22 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Yeah, go ahead.

23 DIRECTOR LOSASSO: And it is very  
24 difficult to estimate. Um, some garden groups, ah,  
25 have small budgets. Some have larger. Ah, what

1 we've done in recent years, of course, as I  
2 mentioned, is, is realized, ah, significant new  
3 resources thanks in large part to the council's  
4 provision of supports. We've been able to really  
5 exponentially increase the support that we're giving  
6 at GreenThumb and there's another, ah, a number of  
7 other support mechanisms that they available  
8 themselves of, including grants from nonprofits  
9 across the city.

11 CHAIRPERSON KOO: So, Director LoSasso,  
12 you, ah, just mentioned, um, 15 new gardens in the  
13 next three years. So where will those gardens go?

14 COMMISSIONER SILVER: Um, those are  
15 currently located on NYCHA property. Ah, several  
16 years ago when the former, um, chair of NYCHA, ah,  
17 was concerned about the gardens on NYCHA property. I  
18 believe there were in excess of 700. We worked with  
19 NYCHA to do an evaluation. Some could just could  
20 have been a small plot or flowerbed. Others were  
21 advanced gardens. We we've worked with NYCHA. They  
22 felt that GreenThumb would be better suited, ah, to  
23 support those gardeners on NYCHA campuses and so for  
24 the past couple years, um, Director LoSasso evaluated  
25 those gardens that made the most sense, that kind of

1  
2 fit the standard of what we believe would be a  
3 community garden and so we'll be working with NYCHA  
4 to bring those into our portfolio. Not GreenThumb  
5 per se, but we'll provide some of the technical  
6 support for those gardeners on NYCHA campuses. What  
7 Director LoSasso did say as well is that we've added  
8 20 new gardens since 2016. But these 50 are existing  
9 gardens, but they're on NYCHA property.

10 CHAIRPERSON KOO: I see. So who is  
11 responsible for maintaining the gardens? The farmers  
12 or the Parks Department?

13 COMMISSIONER SILVER: Primarily the  
14 volunteer effort with support from the GreenThumb  
15 team. We'll supply soils, equipment, so it's a joint  
16 effort. All these gardens are volunteer gardens.  
17 They have the new signage, will explain, ah, the  
18 hours that they should be open. Ah, but again,  
19 during COVID we adjusted those rules. But as a  
20 partners between our volunteers and the Parks  
21 Department with resources from both the city and  
22 again thank the City Council, from the City Council  
23 as well, and other grantees.

24 CHAIRPERSON KOO: So the gardeners are  
25 responsible for, for what? Ah, for maintaining the

1 gardens and your department is responsible for  
2 administration?

3  
4 COMMISSIONER SILVER: That's fair to say.  
5 But it's also support. We offer a lot of technical  
6 support by way of training, by way of resources. Ah,  
7 some of these gardens are small or large. Ah, but,  
8 again, they could be for food production, they could  
9 be for [inaudible]. Some have planting beds where a  
10 community person would just be responsible for their  
11 planting bed, but then would collectively make sure  
12 that is well maintained. But the volunteer groups,  
13 ah, each garden has a volunteer group. They are  
14 responsible primarily for maintaining, ah, the, the  
15 community garden.

16 CHAIRPERSON KOO: So, ah, how many  
17 fundraisings, ah, gatherings your department allowed  
18 to maintain the community gardens, how many  
19 fundraisings they can do?

20 COMMISSIONER SILVER: Commissioner  
21 Biederman or Director LoSasso, I, I don't, I'll let  
22 them respond to that question.

23 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER BIEDERMAN: I'll  
24 defer to Bill on that.

25 COMMISSIONER SILVER: OK.

1  
2           DIRECTOR LOSASSO: Um, garden groups are  
3 now permitted to host fundraisers at, ah, community  
4 gardens. It, ah, was a change that we happy to make  
5 recently in response to feedback we got from garden  
6 groups, um, that hosting a limited amount of  
7 fundraisers on site would support them and garden  
8 groups are now allowed to host two fundraisers every  
9 year to support their efforts in the operation of the  
10 garden.

11           CHAIRPERSON KOO: So if a community  
12 garden can no longer be sustained by the, ah, by the  
13 gardening group maintaining it, what happens to the  
14 garden?

15           DIRECTOR LOSASSO: Yes, thank you, Chair,  
16 for the question. Um, it is rare, but on occasion  
17 garden groups will disband. But what we have found  
18 in GreenThumb in, in recent years that there's a lot  
19 of interest in community gardening throughout New  
20 York City. So we have a community engagement team,  
21 ah, of nine outreach coordinators who work with, ah,  
22 council members and community boards and members of  
23 the public, um, to find interested parties that  
24 continue stewarding the space, ah, and we've had  
25 really good success, ah, on the limited amount of

1 occasions where, ah, a space has become available.  
2  
3 So we've been able to keep them active with the  
4 neighborhoods.

5 CHAIRPERSON KOO: OK. So how often are  
6 the GreenThumb licensing agreements renewed?

7 COMMISSIONER SILVER: It's every four  
8 years. They're renewed every four years, and as  
9 Director LoSasso just stated, ah, we do listen and  
10 make some adjustments and, ah, so this year we did  
11 allow for the fundraising, but every four years we  
12 have to renew all the agreements.

13 CHAIRPERSON KOO: So, Commissioner, can  
14 you take us through the process of how the new rules  
15 are established in these license agreements?

16 COMMISSIONER SILVER: I'm going to defer  
17 that question to Commissioner Biederman.

18 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER BIEDERMAN: So,  
19 um, thank you for the question and thank you,  
20 Commissioner. Ah, this most recent round of, ah,  
21 license renewables was preceded by a more robust  
22 engagement with, ah, garden groups and garden  
23 advocates than, ah, GreenThumb had really ever done  
24 before and it did result in some significant changes  
25 to the license. Um, but so we reached out, I

1 believe, with a draft license, I believe, um, many  
2 months in advance of the signing date, ah, to get  
3 feedback from garden groups, get feedback from  
4 advocates. Then, you know, we take that back to the  
5 agency, discuss it with, um, our general counsel and  
6 the city law department just to make sure everything  
7 is kosher, and then we finalize the license. So  
8 that, that would be the process.

10 CHAIRPERSON KOO: So what are the new  
11 rules?

12 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER BIEDERMAN: Well,  
13 the license, the licenses, um, as licenses go it's  
14 not the longest license, but there are many details  
15 in it. Um, so there are some just and significant  
16 changes. Um, as Bill mentioned, one of them is, ah,  
17 explicitly stating that gardens have the ability to  
18 have two fundraisers a year. That's, that is a  
19 change. Ah, another significant change would be the  
20 lifting of a, an explicit liability of a requirement.  
21 So in previous licenses, ah, the gardens were made,  
22 um, the garden groups were explicitly made liable for  
23 what happened in the garden. That language was  
24 lifted. This was, um, thanks to feedback from the  
25 gardens. That language was lifted from the license,

1  
2 ah, so there is no strong liability requirement in  
3 the license now.

4 CHAIRPERSON KOO: So how much time are  
5 the gardeners given to look over any new rules in the  
6 license agreement before they have to sign on?

7 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER BIEDERMAN: Ah,  
8 Bill, I, I, um, I think that process actually started  
9 before I returned to the Parks Department. How many  
10 months was that?

11 DIRECTOR LOSASSO: Ah, I don't know  
12 offhand. I, I want to say there was a couple months  
13 provided and then when there were some questions and  
14 some need for clarification we were happy to extend  
15 the deadline to make ourselves available to speak  
16 with garden groups that needed additional time to  
17 review, ah, the documents, either themselves or, or  
18 with their garden groups. Um, so we were committed  
19 to making sure that we made ourselves available to  
20 answer any questions or to provide any necessary  
21 clarifications.

22 CHAIRPERSON KOO: So what happen if the,  
23 what happen to the gardens if certain groups do not  
24 sign the new license agreement?

1  
2 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER BIEDERMAN: So,  
3 um, the groups that, um, ah, there were some groups  
4 that still had questions about the license  
5 agreements, um, and as, ah, Director LoSasso said,  
6 um, continued to have questions and they didn't sign  
7 on the initial signing date. So, ah, we worked with  
8 them and, ah, made ourselves as available as we could  
9 to answer as many questions as we could of these  
10 licenses. The good news is that at this date I,  
11 almost every garden group has signed the license.

12 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Yeah.

13 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER BIEDERMAN: It's  
14 about, ah, really only a handful of groups left, I  
15 think about five left, um, who haven't signed. Now I  
16 think this goes to show this is a demonstration of  
17 what happens to the groups that don't sign the  
18 license. We make every effort to reach out to them.  
19 Um, you know, we want these relationships to work.  
20 We want these garden groups to, ah, to continue to  
21 volunteer on the gardens that they've built. So, um,  
22 we make every effort to get them [inaudible].

23 CHAIRPERSON KOO: So, so, are there any  
24 current garden groups that have not signed the new  
25 lease? You mentioned you have five, about?

2 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER BIEDERMAN: Yes,  
3 there's about five who haven't signed the new  
4 license.

5 COMMISSIONER SILVER: Correct.

6 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Ah, are there any  
7 public hearing meetings that gardeners can attend to  
8 express their ideas or concerns?

9 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER BIEDERMAN: So,  
10 sorry, sorry.

11 COMMISSIONER SILVER: So the [inaudible]  
12 the GreenThumb, ah, keep in contact. We have  
13 outreach coordinators, so any [inaudible] public  
14 meeting clearly a lot of stuff we do now, everything  
15 we do is [inaudible] by Zoom, but there's regular  
16 contact throughout the years. It was stated in both  
17 my testimony and Director LoSasso. So in terms of  
18 public meeting, ah, we used to have these larger  
19 annual events. Ah, because of COVID we weren't able  
20 to do that. But certainly there are a lot of  
21 opportunities and then, um, almost certainly the  
22 gardeners, um, meet among themselves. But I will  
23 now, I'm sorry, defer to Commissioner Biederman and  
24 LoSasso. But I, I just want to make sure I  
25 understand what you mean by public meeting.

1  
2 Everything we do in the Parks Department is public  
3 whether it's online or in person. Ah, but our effort  
4 is to reach out, give the support in any manner, and  
5 to listen to the community gardens and see how we can  
6 help them out in any way.

7 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Commissioner, I want to  
8 go back to the five, ah, groups that have not signed  
9 the agreement. Ah, why haven't they signed it and  
10 does that mean they are closed if they don't sign the  
11 new agreement?

12 COMMISSIONER SILVER: They're not closed.  
13 Ah, the, Commissioner Biederman is actively working  
14 with each of them. It's down to five or six. Ah, in  
15 some cases we're having difficulty reaching them.  
16 Ah, it's a variety of reasons. It's not the same for  
17 each. But my staff has been very diligent. As we  
18 sit down and people would express concern, the  
19 gardeners, we go over, ah, the language, ah, to see  
20 exactly how we could address their concerns. So  
21 there is just really, ah, a few left. So at this  
22 point we have 99% of all the gardens that signed. We  
23 will continue working with them. Ah, so I'll see if  
24 Commissioner Biederman wants to add to that. But  
25 they are, like I said, about five or six left.

1                   ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER BIEDERMAN:  Yeah,  
2  
3 I haven't got anything to add to that, Commissioner.  
4 Thank you.

5                   CHAIRPERSON KOO:  So what are their  
6 concerns?  Why are they, why aren't they signing the  
7 new lease.  Can you name a few concerns that they  
8 have?

9                   ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER BIEDERMAN:  Some,  
10 um, some of the, um, concerns are about that  
11 liability.  [inaudible] that I, um, that I detailed  
12 earlier, there are, I think we found in some gardens,  
13 ah, previous gardens that, ah, declined to sign at  
14 first and then signed later, it seems to be a  
15 question, mostly questions that required  
16 clarification, ah, rather than adjustment, um, for a  
17 lot of these gardens, so we continue to work to  
18 clarify those issues and liability, you know, is a  
19 complicated thing and, ah, so we do our best to  
20 answer those liability questions, ah, as, um, as we  
21 can, you know, as they come in.  Um, you know, a  
22 couple of gardens, ah, it's different from garden to  
23 garden.  So liability is, tends to be the most common  
24 issue.  Some gardens, you know, they're hard to  
25 reach, ah, depending on the, ah, organization of the

2 garden. So it does vary from garden to garden with  
3 these five gardens left.

4 CHAIRPERSON KOO: So you mentioned that  
5 they are hard, some gardeners they are hard to reach.  
6 Ah, how do you reach them, by email, by telephone, or  
7 by mail?

8 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER BIEDERMAN: All of  
9 the above, ah, Councilman.

10 CHAIRPERSON KOO: All the above?

11 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER BIEDERMAN: Yeah.

12 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Hmm. So if they  
13 haven't returned your mail or haven't returned your  
14 answer, so how do you contact them?

15 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER BIEDERMAN: Um,  
16 the GreenThumb team continues to, ah, attempt to  
17 reach out, by phone, by mail, and by email. I, I  
18 have a thousand percent confidence in, um,  
19 GreenThumb's dedicated outreach team. They are  
20 dogged when they [inaudible] time to reach out. So,  
21 ah, they, they are on the case.

22 CHAIRPERSON KOO: So I will hope as a  
23 last resort you will go there, you know, go to the  
24 garden and find them there, because I guess  
25 sometimes, like senior citizens, they have a hard

2 time to, ah, listen to the phone or, or they don't  
3 read the email, or things like that, no?

4 COMMISSIONER SILVER: Right, but they're,  
5 Commissioner, ah, Chair Koo, they're not there every  
6 day.

7 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Oh.

8 COMMISSIONER SILVER: So, ah, not like a  
9 park where you have staff. Some are there once a  
10 week, twice a week, three times a week, so it's not  
11 like, you'd have to probably sit there for a couple  
12 of weeks and I'm not sure we're committed to doing  
13 that.

14 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Really?

15 COMMISSIONER SILVER: But [inaudible]  
16 staff will reach out, ah, to find, ah, the gardeners  
17 and get in contact with them so they sign this  
18 agreement.

19 CHAIRPERSON KOO: So, Commissioner, are  
20 any of the meetings you mentioned before are made  
21 aware to the public? How are you communicating the  
22 meetings?

23 COMMISSIONER SILVER: I'll defer to  
24 [inaudible]. I'll defer to, ah, Director LoSasso for  
25 that question.

1  
2                   DIRECTOR LOSASSO: Thanks for the  
3 question, ah, Chair Koo. We've worked directly with  
4 the garden groups since they are a party to the  
5 agreement, um, so we've worked directly with the  
6 garden groups rather than engaging, ah, the public.  
7 We, ah, as Commissioner Biederman mentioned, we, ah,  
8 keep in touch with them through our outreach  
9 coordinators, through events that we have through,  
10 through various events that we do in the gardens, um,  
11 and we did a pretty robust survey this year, ah, this  
12 most recent licensing round as well, to get as much,  
13 ah, feedback as we could, as we prepared for the  
14 four-year relicensing, and that's where a lot of the  
15 good suggestions that we got came from and we were  
16 able to make some updates to the license that were  
17 beneficial for the garden groups.

18                   COMMISSIONER SILVER: And at this point  
19 I'm [inaudible] very early [inaudible] in my  
20 administration, because I see Raymond Figueroa and I  
21 see Aziz, and there are others, very early on and  
22 there were some concerns about GreenThumb. I think  
23 it was my first year as commissioner that we sat down  
24 to express, ah, just concerns, um, about GreenThumb  
25 and so, ah, I've clearly stated, I don't know if they

1  
2 knew, I wrote an article way back when I was in my  
3 thirties about the GreenThumb gardens. That was  
4 right before, ah, Bette Midler was going to war with  
5 Guiliani and [inaudible] Kelly here, so I've had a  
6 long history with GreenThumb. It was a pleasure to  
7 meet with the GreenThumb advocates and so I told my  
8 staff we're committed to see what we can do. So in  
9 terms of public meetings, as Director LoSasso said,  
10 I've gone to a lot of these harvest events. There  
11 was an annual program at [inaudible], ah, sorry, at,  
12 um, Coastals College, which I was going to, and so  
13 there were a lot of opportunities to broaden, ah, our  
14 reach, ah, to let both the gardeners but also other  
15 advocates that believe in these important public  
16 spaces come together and, and speak out. And I enjoy  
17 those annual events. I've learned a lot. Some of  
18 the most powerful speakers I've met, ah, have been  
19 there. And then took my own GreenThumb tour to  
20 [inaudible] and others just to see our incredible  
21 public spaces we have here.

22 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Thank you. So how does  
23 the gardening handbook relate to the actual license  
24 agreement? And is there any conflict between the two  
25 that can sometimes lead to confusion among gardeners?

1  
2                   DIRECTOR LOSASSO: I, I can speak to  
3 that. Ah, so the gardener handbook is a document  
4 that really we prepared to be a one-stop of as much  
5 applicable information, ah, to help garden groups  
6 succeed as possible. Some of it, the information in  
7 the handbook, includes gardening 101 tips. Some of  
8 it is direction to gardeners on what do I do if, ah,  
9 a contractor shows up at the garden and wants to work  
10 on the building immediately adjacent to a space, who  
11 do I contact, you know, what rights do I have to make  
12 sure that a permit is issued. Um, who do I contact  
13 if I want to get, ah, a permit to use a hydrant to,  
14 to water the garden, and are there any other  
15 applicable regulations or rules that govern activity  
16 in the space. So we've outlined some rules, for  
17 example, from the Department of Buildings that  
18 outlines, um, how big a shed could be or how big a  
19 structure could be in the garden before it needs a  
20 permit. And we've really created it to be a  
21 resources for the garden groups, ah, to bring as much  
22 information into one place as possible. To our  
23 knowledge there is no conflict, um, between the, the  
24 handbook and the license. We've, we've gone through  
25 it, ah, pretty closely, ah, to make sure that that is

1  
2 the case and any time that there has been a needed  
3 clarification we've sat down with garden groups and  
4 gone over it line by line, and we've really found  
5 that to be helpful to, to explain the contents, um,  
6 where it comes from, and how it can be used  
7 [inaudible] garden.

8 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Thank you.

9 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER BIEDERMAN: And,  
10 um, if I could add one thing. When there is an  
11 update to the handbook, this is some, um, something  
12 we committed to in conversation with, um, Aziz  
13 Raymond that, ah, when, um, when [inaudible] would  
14 make an update to the handbook that all the gardeners  
15 would be notified both via email and via, um, US mail  
16 so that, um, that those updates were, everybody was  
17 on the same page, everybody knew about them, there  
18 was transparency about them.

19 CHAIRPERSON KOO: OK. So I have one more  
20 question, and then I'll turn it over to my other, my  
21 colleagues in the committee. So regarding the  
22 licenses are there any future changes being  
23 contemplated to further support urban agricultural  
24 practices when it comes up for renewal again in a few  
25 years?

1  
2                   COMMISSIONER SILVER: Ah, well, it is  
3 three years away from now since this one had just,  
4 ah, been resigned. Ah, as Director LoSasso said,  
5 urban agriculture is, is voluntary. Ah, we do not  
6 prevent them from doing it. If they do we can  
7 certainly offer them the guidance. Ah, but that  
8 clearly is up to the volunteer efforts, ah, because  
9 it does change what you do in your garden, so it is  
10 not prohibited, but it is not mandated. It's up to  
11 each garden. So we can certainly have a conversation  
12 about urban agriculture. As you know, it's seasonal  
13 and it's, ah, a very small supplement to overall city  
14 food production, but is something we can certainly  
15 have conversations with community gardeners to  
16 express, ah, the interest in increasing food  
17 production. Again, because the footprint is so small  
18 it would be a very small supplement, but I'm sure it  
19 would be still important, ah, to a local community.  
20 So we certainly can have the conversation, but it is  
21 something we would not want to mandate. We could  
22 encourage but we could not mandate garden, gardeners  
23 shift from horticulture to food production.

24                   CHAIRPERSON KOO: So are there any rules  
25 that, ah, each garden, how much is charged individual

1 farmers, individual farmers? Ah, I'll give you a  
2 plot, how much they have to pay, the garden, for  
3 administration?  
4

5 COMMISSIONER SILVER: I think, ah, Chair  
6 Koo, I want to make sure we make the distinction  
7 between urban farm and urban agriculture. Ah, a lot  
8 of the food production that is happening on gardens  
9 are just given away. In some cases they're being  
10 sold to help support the garden itself. But it's  
11 not, since these are very small lots, 25 x 100, some  
12 could be larger, so urban ag really isn't something  
13 we're going to be looking at a full-scale urban farm.  
14 Um, community gardens are somewhat different. I'll,  
15 I'll defer that to Director LoSasso, see if wants to  
16 add the that. Ah, but I believe people just come in,  
17 they agree to take care of a plot or do a certain  
18 function, and they're part of that community gardens  
19 network, ah, but I don't believe there's a fee  
20 charged to someone, ah, to actually be able to grow  
21 either horticulture or food in their garden.  
22 Director LoSasso?

23 DIRECTOR LOSASSO: Thank you,  
24 Commissioner. Um, we do not permit a mandatory fee.  
25 Some groups, ah, are permitted to charge what is

1 usually a nominal fee to support the basic operation  
2 of the garden, \$10 or \$15 to help support them buy  
3 seeds or, or buy shovels, or put on events for the  
4 community. But we do have a requirement that there  
5 also be an alternative to any kind of membership  
6 fees. So we want to make sure that gardens are  
7 accessible to everyone, that financial means is not a  
8 barrier being a member to a GreenThumb garden. So if  
9 somebody is not able to, to pay a plot fee or a basic  
10 membership fee, they are able to do some additional  
11 work around the garden or perhaps host, host open  
12 hours or, or share a special skill that they have  
13 with the garden group. So we've done everything we  
14 can to work with garden groups to make sure that  
15 gardens, ah, don't have any barriers to membership,  
16 and, and gardens are supportive of that. Our  
17 GreenThumb community gardeners are very much  
18 community-centered and community-minded and they're  
19 always interested in bringing more people into the  
20 garden and not creating barriers.

22 CHAIRPERSON KOO: So, ah, Director, I  
23 have one more question for you. Ah, so suppose a  
24 senior citizen, they want to do something on the  
25 garden, right, they have some free time, you know,

1  
2 they retire, is there a waiting list for them to sign  
3 on the, the community garden, or it depends in which  
4 area you live in?

5                   DIRECTOR LOSASSO: Ah, thank you, Chair  
6 Koo. There may be a waiting list to get access to a  
7 plot. Some gardens, many gardens are relatively  
8 small in scale, as Commissioner Silver mentioned, and  
9 there's only so many plots that can be fit. But what  
10 we have found is that all garden groups find  
11 innovative and creative ways to broaden membership  
12 and to allow people to join the group. So even if  
13 they don't have access to an individual plot in the  
14 first year or two, they do have a way to be a part of  
15 stewarding the garden or perhaps participating in a  
16 communal plot. And each, each group makes its own  
17 determination on how plots are allocated, but  
18 membership is very broadly defined and we find that  
19 groups are very welcoming, although sometimes there  
20 may be a small wait to get access to a growing plot.

21                   CHAIRPERSON KOO: OK. So if they're  
22 interested to join they just, how do they join? I  
23 mean, they just look up the GreenThumb, ah, directory  
24 or what?

1  
2                   DIRECTOR LOSASSO: There's a lot of  
3 different ways. The best way is to, to go to a  
4 garden and introduce yourself and you will find some  
5 of the most welcoming and inviting people in the  
6 world stewarding GreenThumb gardens and gardeners  
7 will be happy to give a tour of the space and tell  
8 you the history of it. A lot of the history of these  
9 gardens is amazing, um, and if they're not able to,  
10 to reach the group or, or they want to just reach out  
11 directly to GreenThumb, we have a whole team that can  
12 facilitate introductions to, to provide pathways to  
13 membership.

14                   CHAIRPERSON KOO: Thank you. I finished  
15 my questions. Ah, I want to turn it over to Counsel,  
16 our moderator.

17                   COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. Ah, thank  
18 you Chair Koo. Ah, we'll now move on to questions  
19 from other council members. Ah, I will call on  
20 members to ask their questions in the order that they  
21 have used the Zoom raise hand function. If you would  
22 like to ask a question and you have not yet used the  
23 Zoom raise hand function please raise it now. Ah,  
24 council members, again, please keep your questions to  
25 five minutes. The Sergeant at Arms will keep a timer

1 and will let me know when your time is up. Ah, you  
2 should be once I have called on you and the  
3 sergeant has announced that you may begin, ah,  
4 asking, ah, your questions. Ah, first we will hear  
5 from Council Member Barron and she will be followed  
6 by Council Member Riley.

8 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time starts now.

9 COUNCIL MEMBER BARRON: Thank you, thank  
10 you so much. Thank you to the chair and to the panel  
11 for participating and sharing the information. I did  
12 not hear most of the, ah, testimony, but I do have a  
13 specific question that I would like to pose. Ah,  
14 first of all, oh, I'm so sorry. Commissioner Silver,  
15 thank you for the work that you continue to do.  
16 We've had a great partnership in developing the major  
17 parks in my community and having them refurbished and  
18 restored, so I want to thank you for that. And  
19 commendations to Marty Mahr for the great work that  
20 he has continually done in our community and the  
21 staff that works with him. My question particularly  
22 goes to a garden that's in my community. Ah, it's a  
23 garden that has been operated for perhaps maybe as  
24 much as 15 years or more. And it's the Green Valley  
25 Garden on [inaudible] Avenue. We had to battle,

1 first of all, to keep it as a garden. There were  
2 plans from the city to take it over and include in  
3 some development that was being conducted, ah, and we  
4 had to fight and battle and get a lawyer to prove  
5 that it was in fact a protected garden and we were  
6 successful with that battle. Subsequently there was  
7 development that was planned across the street and  
8 the height of that building would have had a negative  
9 impact on the sunlight that would have been able to  
10 reach the garden. So we negotiated, ah, I'm very  
11 much concerned about housing but gardens are  
12 important as well, and we had the developer lower the  
13 building substantially so as to not be as much of a  
14 hindrance to the sunlight. The, ah, developer agreed  
15 that they would in fact, again, after negotiations,  
16 that they would in fact participate in installing a  
17 grow light so that there would be some compensation  
18 for the sunlight that was diminished during that  
19 growing season. But now it appears that we have a  
20 bit of a problem. I've been told that there needs to  
21 be a more substantial building constructed or  
22 structure erected to accommodate what would be the  
23 electrical outlets and poles and all of that thing.  
24 So I don't know if you or someone on your staff can  
25

1  
2 speak to that topic and give us some input as to what  
3 is the process in proceeding so that we will be able  
4 to get that grow light installed and have that  
5 service provided, which the developer said that they  
6 would do.

7                   COMMISSIONER SILVER: Well, first thank  
8 you, ah, for your comments, Council Member Barron.  
9 I'm not familiar with the details. I will see if,  
10 ah, Director LoSasso does, ah, so I'll see whether he  
11 has any information about that specific garden.

12                   COUNCIL MEMBER BARRON: OK.

13                   DIRECTOR LOSASSO: Thank you,  
14 Commissioner, and Council Member, ah, thank you very  
15 much for your support of gardens. Um, in my entire  
16 tenure at GreenThumb you've been a strong supporter  
17 and I know that the garden groups are very  
18 appreciative of that, so thank you.

19                   COUNCIL MEMBER BARRON: Thank you.

20                   DIRECTOR LOSASSO: Ah, I am familiar with  
21 the space and it's, um, ah, a bit of a technical  
22 question, ah, as you alluded to [inaudible]. The,  
23 the specific challenge here, and I will be happy to  
24 follow up offline with more details, ah, if you're  
25 interested, is that installing electricity into a

1 structure, um, cannot occur, ah, unless that  
2 structure is registered with the Department of  
3 Buildings. And the existing structure is not  
4 currently registered with DOB. We, we did have a  
5 chance to speak with the garden group and it's, ah, a  
6 great garden group, it does a lot of great work in  
7 the neighborhood...

9 COUNCIL MEMBER BARRON: Yes.

10 DIRECTOR LOSASSO: ...as, as you know, um,  
11 and does a lot of, ah, food-related work, very  
12 pertinent to the topic of this hearing, um, and tried  
13 to outline, um, where the technical challenges were  
14 and what may be some possible paths forward. One of  
15 them would be, um, getting, ah, another greenhouse, a  
16 prefabricated greenhouse that already met DOB  
17 specifications, um, that could be more easily  
18 electrified. And, and I don't want to speak too  
19 deeply on it because I'm not an electrician, but I, I  
20 would be happy to get more information for you and,  
21 and follow up if, if you have further questions.

22 COUNCIL MEMBER BARRON: OK, because it's  
23 been a, a struggle, as I said, from the beginning.  
24 But, ah, I'm used to struggling when the causes are  
25 righteous and just cause and, as you alluded, this

1 particular garden has been around for years and the  
2 contributions that they made to the community are  
3 truly outstanding...

4  
5 DIRECTOR LOSASSO: Yeah.

6 COUNCIL MEMBER BARRON: And they have a,  
7 the beehive and the bees come and get the honey and  
8 all of that. The, ah, local honey and that's so  
9 important as well. So I look forward to talking with  
10 you afterward as well as my staffer, Ms. Anita  
11 Fisher, who is my liaison in this, to find out  
12 specifically what needs to be done and what the  
13 timeframe that we can establish to accomplish that,  
14 because the building is up...

15 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time expired.

16 COUNCIL MEMBER BARRON: ...so now the  
17 sunlight is being impeded. So I just want to, ah, be  
18 sure to get back to you so that we can progress, and  
19 thank you so much to the panel and to the chair, once  
20 again, for allowing my question. Thank you.

21 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you, Council  
22 Member Barron. Next we'll hear from Council Member  
23 Riley. He'll be followed by Council Member Ayala,  
24 followed by Council Member Levine.

25 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time starts now.

1 COMMITTEE ON PARKS AND RECREATION 51  
2 COUNCIL MEMBER RILEY: Thank you, and  
3 thank you, Chair Koo, and to the panel for this  
4 presentation today. I'm very supportive of community  
5 gardening and, and my question is, ah, has the Parks  
6 Department ever, ah, seen a community group abandon  
7 their garden and if so, um, what is the process of  
8 another group possibly taking over the garden, or is  
9 that garden completely just dismantled? Also, um, is  
10 there any way that community group, who has a  
11 community garden, sell the produce that they're  
12 actually making in the garden to the community?

13 COMMISSIONER SILVER: Um, well, first,  
14 welcome, Council Member Riley. I will defer that  
15 question to Director LoSasso.

16 DIRECTOR LOSASSO: Thank you,  
17 Commissioner, and thank you, Commissioner, ah,  
18 Council Member Riley. Um, on occasion GreenThumb  
19 gardens can become inactive. That's the term that we  
20 use at GreenThumb, um, and that just means that the  
21 group that was stewarding it for, for whatever  
22 reason, um, disbanded. Sometimes people can move  
23 from the block or people's interest can change and  
24 the space will become an inactive. It's rare, ah,  
25 but it does happen. Um, and typically when that's

1  
2 happening our, our team at GreenThumb has an idea  
3 that the group is beginning to dwindle and we start  
4 working proactively to find interest in the  
5 neighborhood to keep the space active. So we have a  
6 community engagement team whose sole job is to work  
7 with communities [inaudible] GreenThumb gardens to  
8 engage, ah, elected officials and community boards  
9 and members of the public and nonprofits and CBOs to  
10 introduce them to community gardening and with  
11 community gardeners. So we've had a lot of success  
12 reactivating spaces. So, um, I'm confident that if a  
13 space were to become inactive in relatively short  
14 order we could reactive it, similar to how we've done  
15 in the past. And your second question about sales,  
16 um, several years ago, predating me, but I think a  
17 couple licenses cycles ago the Parks Department did  
18 begin allowing GreenThumb gardeners on Parks property  
19 to sell the produce that they grow. And this was,  
20 again, in response to feedback we got from community  
21 gardeners and, ah, as I understand it, what the Parks  
22 Department heard was that being able to sell the  
23 produce would give them a way to distribute it the  
24 community, of course, but to help support the  
25 operation of the garden, and sell some tomatoes or

1 cucumbers when the, when the crop comes in at the end  
2 of the year. You can then buy soil or more seeds or  
3 more plants for the next year. So we do permit that,  
4 provided that all of the revenue goes back into  
5 supporting the garden.

6  
7 COUNCIL MEMBER RILEY: Thank you. That,  
8 that answered my questions. Thank you so much.

9 DIRECTOR LOSASSO: Thank you, Councilman.

10 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you, Council  
11 Member Riley. We'll now hear from Council Member  
12 Ayala, followed by Council Member Levine.

13 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time starts now.

14 COUNCIL MEMBER AYALA: Thank you. Um, so  
15 my question is has, has the Department of Parks and  
16 Recreation or GreenThumb done any type of analysis on  
17 what, ah, neighborhoods are most in need of new urban  
18 agricultural sites?

19 COMMISSIONER SILVER: Well, let me, you  
20 say urban agricultural sites. We know where the  
21 gardens are located and where the gaps exist. Ah,  
22 so, ah, but we look at gardens in general, not urban  
23 [inaudible] in particular. I'll defer the rest of  
24 that question to, ah, Director LoSasso. But we do  
25 have maps spatially to show where there are gaps in,

1 I guess, a walking distance to GreenThumb gardens.

2 Ah, so I'll defer to, ah, Director LoSasso.

3  
4 DIRECTOR LOSASSO: Thank you,  
5 Commissioner, and thank you for the question, Council  
6 Member, and, of course, for your continued support  
7 of, of GreenThumb gardens. I know you have a lot in  
8 your district as well. Um, so as Commissioner Silver  
9 alluded to, we do look at neighborhoods throughout  
10 the city that don't currently have a garden. We  
11 would look specifically for siting a GreenThumb  
12 garden and let the group, of course, choose whether  
13 or not they want to grow food or they want to grow  
14 flowers, or a mixture of both. We have the long-term  
15 goal of establishing a GreenThumb garden within a 10-  
16 minute of every single New Yorker. It, it is  
17 ambitious and long term, but we have all seen that a  
18 neighborhood is a better, stronger neighborhood when  
19 they have a GreenThumb garden. So gardens are  
20 clustered. We have about 550. They're clustered in,  
21 in five areas, um, throughout the city largely. Um,  
22 so we've developed a set of criteria and, and a  
23 pretty robust map, which I would be happy to share  
24 after the hearing, showing those areas in the city  
25 that don't currently have a garden and we're

1 specifically focusing and prioritizing our efforts on  
2 trying to find those, those few remaining empty  
3 vacant lots in the city to potentially start a garden  
4 there, because I think we all know once a vacant lot  
5 is gone, it's probably gone for our lifetime. So we  
6 are focusing on those neighborhoods that aren't  
7 currently [inaudible].

9 COUNCIL MEMBER AYALA: OK, I appreciate  
10 that. I wanted to recognize Ray, ah, Figueroa from  
11 Friends of Brook Park, it's in my district. Love,  
12 love, love what they're doing in that garden. But I  
13 have two questions. I only have three minutes left.  
14 Um, what portion of the budget for green, um,  
15 GreenThumb or otherwise is devoted to promoting and  
16 supporting urban agricultural programs in community  
17 gardens and, two, um, do we know of any, any gardens  
18 that were either unable to or opted to not open  
19 during COVID?

20 COMMISSIONER SILVER: Bill, why don't you  
21 respond?

22 DIRECTOR LOSASSO: Of course. Um, I  
23 don't have an exact breakout, ah, Council Member, on  
24 urban agriculture-related portion of the budget, but  
25 I, I'm confident saying that it's hundreds of

1 thousands of dollars, ah, which was, of course, um,  
2 an exponentially large amount of support last year  
3 due to Play Fair. And that's primarily broken into  
4 providing, ah, clean topsoil that's chemically tested  
5 to, to be safe for growing food, providing really  
6 high-quality lumber for raised beds, ah, indirectly  
7 supporting urban agriculture through infrastructure,  
8 ah, supporting the gardens, and we've spent tens of  
9 thousands of dollars on providing free plant starts  
10 and seeds to garden groups throughout the city, and  
11 developing new workshops and public programming and  
12 trainings to support those that are interested in  
13 food production, and that ranges from gardening 101  
14 to really advanced gardening techniques.

16 COUNCIL MEMBER AYALA: OK, and regarding  
17 the question around the gardens that either opted to  
18 or were unable to open during COVID, is there a  
19 number?

20 DIRECTOR LOSASSO: Ah, I don't have a  
21 number, um, off the top of my head. I, I can get you  
22 an estimate. We don't know exactly, but what we did  
23 do is, was defer to each group. We worked very  
24 closely with Parks operations and the Department of  
25 Health to develop protocols to make sure that the

1 gardens could remain accessible to garden groups. So  
2 they were always open to garden groups during COVID.  
3 They were closed to the public during the height of  
4 it, in the interest of public safety, of course. And  
5 then we developed protocols as the situation evolved,  
6 ah, with operations and with the Department of Health  
7 to advise groups on maintaining social distancing and  
8 signage and what kind of PPE might be necessary to  
9 begin to invite the public back in. But we've always  
10 approached this through a lens of best practices of  
11 public health.

13 COUNCIL MEMBER AYALA: I appreciate it.  
14 I appreciate the support. Oh, I'm also on the bill.  
15 Um, this summer we had the, the garden at the  
16 Randall's Island, um, and they were just  
17 phenomenal, um, in terms of it. I know that Ray  
18 does this all of the time, too, in the South Bronx.  
19 Um, you know, contributing to the local food pantries  
20 was really critical, um, especially, you know, in the  
21 Eighth Council [inaudible] District, we were hit  
22 really hard and food disparities continue to be a  
23 real thing for us. So it would be really, it would  
24 be nice to, you know, at least do a study to have a  
25 better understanding of where food is being grown,

1  
2 how we're processing, who, you know, where, where  
3 this food is being distributed to, um, because I  
4 think that we, you know, we underestimate the  
5 importance of community gardens sometimes, um, and,  
6 and we've learned, I think specifically during this  
7 pandemic, how, how critical they offer in terms of  
8 helping us meet the, you know, supplement the needs,  
9 ah, in the community, ah, that has been deprived of  
10 an opportunity to really have access to fresh, ah,  
11 foods, ah, during this pandemic, um, for many  
12 reasons. So, you know, I thank you for that and I,  
13 you know, I look forward to, to passing this bill and  
14 hopefully getting, um, you know, some answers to some  
15 of our questions and figuring out how we can be more  
16 supportive, um, as a body so that we're, you know,  
17 we're able to really look at this more holistically.

18 DIRECTOR LOSASSO: Thank you.

19 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Thank you.

20 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you, Council  
21 Member Ayala. Next up is Council Member Levine. Ah,  
22 before Council Member Levine starts I will just ask  
23 if there are any other council members who have  
24 questions, please use the Zoom raise hand function  
25

1 now, and we'll go, move on to Council Member Levine.  
2 Thank you.

3  
4 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time starts now.

5 COUNCIL MEMBER LEVINE: Thank you, Chris.

6 Ah, thank you to Chair Koo for your great work in  
7 this hearing, and it's really a pleasure to see you,  
8 Commissioner Silver, really grateful for your  
9 leadership for parks in this city. I just want to  
10 say how precious I consider the community gardens.  
11 Ah, I really feel they are an essential component of  
12 the Parks system, not an appendage, and I feel like  
13 their value now in the pandemic and, and post  
14 pandemic is actually greater than ever, in part  
15 because just having any space for people to be  
16 outside right now, it's really a lifesaver. I can't  
17 imagine what the city would have been like without  
18 our Parks system and, and specifically community  
19 gardens. But I also think that, as Council Member  
20 Ayala was just, ah, saying very forcefully, um, we  
21 see more than ever just how critical access to fresh  
22 fruit and vegetables is to health. Ah, it really,  
23 ah, critical to closing health inequality that has  
24 been exposed by this pandemic, and so community  
25 gardens really have I think an even more important

1  
2 role to play going forward. And, ah, and I know you  
3 agree with that. I just wanted to ask a couple  
4 follow-up questions. So the current license  
5 agreement is dated 2019, correct? And I think, I  
6 might be confused on this. I think you mentioned a  
7 four-year term for that? So does that mean that this  
8 agreement expires, I guess, in 2023 and then it would  
9 be subsequently reviewed, renewed for another four  
10 years?

11 COMMISSIONER SILVER: That is correct.

12 COUNCIL MEMBER LEVINE: OK. And is that  
13 the normal cycle? This is an every-four-years  
14 process?

15 COMMISSIONER SILVER: Correct.

16 COUNCIL MEMBER LEVINE: Got it, OK.  
17 Thank you. Um, in, in terms of the liability  
18 obligations, ah, as, as defined in the agreement,  
19 which I know has been very contentious, um, just  
20 perhaps you can expand or, or clarify if, if garden  
21 volunteers, community garden volunteers, are, um,  
22 shoveling snow, ah, after, after a storm, ah, and,  
23 and they leave a spot undone accidentally are, are  
24 they then as volunteers liable to be sued as a result  
25 of that, according to the, this agreement?

1  
2           COMMISSIONER SILVER: Well, let me, I'm  
3 not sure the answer to that question. Let me defer  
4 that to Commissioner Biederman, ah, about the, the  
5 new liability clause in the agreement.

6           ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER BIEDERMAN: So,  
7 thank you, Commissioner, and, ah, thank you, Council  
8 Member, for the question. Um, the, so if in the  
9 unfortunate case there's an accident or a lawsuit,  
10 um, regarding anything that happens in the garden it  
11 would be left to a judge to decide, um, what the,  
12 who's liable or the accident [inaudible]. Ah, just a  
13 reminder, prior to this the licenses stated, prior to  
14 the current licenses, the licenses stated that, um,  
15 it was the garden groups were liable for everything  
16 that happened in the garden. That language was  
17 lifted and so now it is up for a court to decide in  
18 the, um, unfortunate instance that something like  
19 this should happen.

20           COUNCIL MEMBER LEVINE: And how, how  
21 often does such an instance occur?

22           ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER BIEDERMAN: It has  
23 not happened in my memory under, ah, my leadership  
24 [inaudible], yeah, it's exceedingly rare.

1  
2 COUNCIL MEMBER LEVINE: Ah, that, that's  
3 good to hear. Um, we just want to make sure that  
4 these volunteers who, I mean, I just have to say a  
5 word about the volunteers. I mean, the community  
6 garden volunteers in this city are absolutely  
7 incredible, ah, what they've done, ah, in many cases  
8 turning these spaces from abandoned vacant dangerous  
9 places to, ah, just thriving community gathering  
10 spots and sources of healthy food and environmental  
11 education and none of them are getting a, a penny for  
12 that effort. So I think at all times we want to  
13 uplift them and celebrate them and, ah, certainly,  
14 ah, we don't want them to feel that they're facing  
15 legal liability, ah, if they're just trying to do the  
16 best they can. But, um, I'm, I'm short on time so I  
17 just, I did want to ask about the study, ah,  
18 Commissioner, that you referenced, um, that I think  
19 is looking to understand food production. Ah, do I  
20 have that correct, at our community gardens, or am I  
21 confused? Sorry, forgive me. The, the study you're  
22 conducting now on community gardens?

23 COMMISSIONER SILVER: There's no, no, I  
24 think that the Intro 1059, ah, Council Member Ayala  
25 would like us to...

2 COUNCIL MEMBER LEVINE: Forgive me, yes.  
3 But, ah, and the administration's position on that  
4 is?

5 COMMISSIONER SILVER: Oh, we believe in  
6 transparency. We'd like to actually elevate the work  
7 that our community gardens are doing. So we'll work  
8 with the council and we believe in transparency. Ah,  
9 we're very grateful this is a one-time report that  
10 would give the council information they need to  
11 better understand what is happening in our community  
12 gardens, specifically urban agriculture. So we're  
13 certainly willing to work, ah, with the council. Ah,  
14 we believe in transparency and we believe in  
15 providing valuable information.

16 COUNCIL MEMBER LEVINE: Ah, thank you to  
17 you, Commissioner. Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thanks to  
18 Chair Ayala for, for your work in supporting, ah,  
19 these critical Parks spaces and the volunteers.

20 COMMISSIONER SILVER: And welcome back to  
21 the Parks Committee. It's good to see your face.

22 COUNCIL MEMBER LEVINE: Likewise.  
23 Thanks, Commissioner.

24

25

2 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you, Council  
3 Member Levine. Ah, we will now turn it back to Chair  
4 Koo, who has some additional questions.

5 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Thank you. Ah,  
6 Commissioner, I have one more question. Ah, there is  
7 currently approximately \$900,000 in city funding that  
8 has been [inaudible] and allocated to purchase a  
9 parcel of the Frank White Memorial Garden located on  
10 143rd Street in Council Member Levine's district that  
11 is currently at risk and for sale by a private  
12 entity. These funds were secured to allow the garden  
13 to continue to operate, but we are hearing Parks have  
14 not yet moved forward. Ah, what steps need to be  
15 taken so that the purchase can move forward?

16 COMMISSIONER SILVER: I'm not familiar  
17 with that specific garden. Ah, Director LoSasso, do  
18 you have information about that specific situation?

19 DIRECTOR LOSASSO: Yes, thank you,  
20 Commissioner, and thank you for the question, Chair  
21 Koo. So the Parks Department did receive ULURP  
22 approval to acquire a vacant parcel immediately  
23 adjacent to a garden, um, and capital funds have  
24 been, ah, provided, ah, through discretionary  
25 allocations from Council Member Levine and, and

1  
2 Borough President Brewer. But unfortunately the city  
3 and the property owner have not been able to reach a  
4 negotiated upon purchase price. My understanding is  
5 that process continues. Um, but at this point, ah,  
6 an agreed-upon price has not been reached.

7 CHAIRPERSON KOO: So can you, can your  
8 staff like get back to us by Friday with the next  
9 steps, ah, to, to ensure that we don't lose the  
10 community garden?

11 DIRECTOR LOSASSO: I, I will be happy to  
12 provide, um, follow-up information. But just to  
13 provide one clarification, Chair. The existing  
14 community garden is not at risk. This would be, ah,  
15 an expansion of the garden onto a parcel that is  
16 immediately adjacent to the...

17 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Yeah.

18 DIRECTOR LOSASSO: ...existing space.

19 CHAIRPERSON KOO: So, so...

20 DIRECTOR LOSASSO: I would be happy to  
21 get you follow-up information.

22 CHAIRPERSON KOO: OK, yeah, please follow  
23 up with us, yeah, because we don't want to lose the  
24 money or lose the site, yeah. So, ah, thank you very  
25

1 much. Ah, are there any other council members who  
2 have questions?  
3

4 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: No, Chair Koo, no  
5 more questions from members.

6 CHAIRPERSON KOO: So, ah, we can go to  
7 public hearing.

8 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you, Chair Koo,  
9 OK. Ah, we'll now turn to public testimony. I'd  
10 like to remind everyone that unlike our typical  
11 council hearings we'll be calling on individuals one  
12 by one to testify. As I stated earlier, each  
13 panelist will be given three minutes to speak, so  
14 please begin once the sergeant has started the timer  
15 and given you the cue to begin. Council members who  
16 have questions for particular panelists should use  
17 the Zoom hand raise function. And I will call on you  
18 in order after, ah, the panelist has completed their  
19 testimony. For panelists, once your name is called a  
20 member of our staff will unmute you and the Sergeant  
21 at Arms will give you the go-ahead to begin upon  
22 setting the timer. Please wait for the sergeant to  
23 announce that you may begin before, ah, delivering  
24 your testimony. At this time I'd like to invite Lynn  
25 Kelly from the New York Restoration Project to, ah,

1 speak, and she will be followed by Jessica Saab from  
2 New Yorkers for Parks.

3  
4 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time starts now.

5 LYNN KELLY: Thank you, Council Member  
6 Koo and the rest of the City Council. I appreciate  
7 the invitation to be able to speak today. My name is  
8 Lynn Kelly. I'm the executive director of New York  
9 Restoration Project. Um, for those of you that don't  
10 know us, ah, New York Restoration Project, we steward  
11 over 80 acres of parkland on behalf of the city, um,  
12 and we operate 52 community gardens, which is about  
13 20,000 square feet of actually food production right  
14 now throughout the five boroughs. Um, I think it's  
15 been well documented about the benefits of community  
16 gardens, um, health, mental, both mental and  
17 physical, and especially so within the onset of our  
18 pandemic. Um, it's proven itself time and time  
19 again, gardens, green space, are essential city  
20 infrastructure. What I want to point out, though,  
21 and there's also, um, been additional documentation  
22 on this through the Food Bank of New York City, New  
23 York City residents make up half of all food-insecure  
24 people in New York State and the rate here is rising.  
25 We're 12% higher than the national rate. So between

1  
2 rising unemployment, the impacts of the pandemic,  
3 access to fresh healthy food is at a premium and it's  
4 becoming harder and hard to obtain. And that's why,  
5 um, at the beginning of the pandemic NYRP took  
6 immediate action and we transitioned many of our  
7 gardens that were used for passive recreation into  
8 small mini urban agricultural oases in the city, um,  
9 for, and for the surrounding communities. We  
10 provided gardeners with starts for plants, like the  
11 not actually the seeds but the actual starts, extra  
12 tools, PPE equipment, in order to encourage increased  
13 growth of produce in these neighborhoods for  
14 distribution for free. And I'm happy to report that,  
15 um, our gardeners are the heart and soul of our  
16 network. Those volunteer gardeners grew over 90,000  
17 pounds, um, since the onset of COVID and that's  
18 equivalent approximately to \$180,000 worth of produce  
19 that's been provided for free throughout the city at  
20 no cost. Um, we really hope that the city and the  
21 City Council can help support the work of NYRP and  
22 our partners. Um, programs that allow New York City  
23 residents to grow their own food are critical. They  
24 need to be expanded. And we need to be able to seek  
25 creative partnerships with city agencies. We applaud

1 your efforts on, ah, behalf of New York City to  
2 advocate for this. I'm pleased to see so many of my,  
3 ah, gardener colleagues on this call, as well as New  
4 Yorkers for Parks. I wish we could come up with  
5 another 8 million dollars for the Play Fair Campaign  
6 again for community gardens. Um, but I'm here in  
7 solidarity, ah, and hope that we really see this as  
8 an opportunity for food production on some small  
9 scale in New York City. Thank you.

11 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. Next  
12 we'll hear from Jessica Saab from New Yorkers for  
13 Parks. She'll be followed by Aziz Dehkan from the  
14 New York City Community Garden Coalition.

15 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time starts now.

16 JESSICA SAAB: Good afternoon. My name  
17 is Jessica Saab and I am the advocacy and  
18 communications project manager at New Yorkers for  
19 Parks. I want to thank the Committee on Parks and  
20 Recreation for hosting today's hearing. Community  
21 gardens play a critical and often overlooked role in  
22 our city's open space network. With over 550  
23 community gardens citywide these spaces which are  
24 created and maintained by dedicated volunteers drive  
25 grassroots neighborhood development, create space for

1  
2 our vibrant multicultural communities and help  
3 address food insecurity on a local scale. Many  
4 gardens are the site of food production directly, but  
5 others also act as sites for community-supported  
6 agriculture distribution as well as composting. They  
7 also provide a means for young New Yorkers to  
8 directly interact with land in ways that are often  
9 not available to residents in our dense city. During  
10 the pandemic some community garden groups stepped up  
11 even more, establishing community [inaudible],  
12 connecting networks of mutual aid, and growing  
13 additional food for neighbors. In 2019 New Yorkers  
14 for Parks launched the Play Fair Coalition and  
15 Campaign, which sought to increase the expense budget  
16 for New York City Parks. One of the key pieces of  
17 our budget platform was an 8 million investment into  
18 our community garden network. We were thrilled when  
19 the City Council secured this funding, which marked  
20 the first-ever system-wide investment for community  
21 gardens. This funding allowed New York City Parks to  
22 hire 15 additional outreach coordinators for the  
23 GreenThumb division, provide fencing and sidewalk  
24 improvements, and provide materials for gardens  
25 citywide. While this funding was not renewed in the

1  
2 FY21 budget, we hope that the City Council and  
3 mayor's office will continue to value and invest in  
4 our community garden network and the incredible  
5 network of dedicated volunteers who maintain them.  
6 We are also testifying today in support of Intro  
7 1059, which would require New York City Parks to  
8 undertake a report to aggregate community gardens  
9 citywide that are engaged in urban agriculture.  
10 Having a detailed accounting of where there are  
11 additional opportunities for green spaces and urban  
12 food production in the city will provide useful data  
13 for decision-makers and communities citywide. We  
14 also believe the data gathered in this report would  
15 help the city better allocate resources to gardens in  
16 need of additional material support. The City  
17 Council previously released a report called Growing  
18 Food Equity in New York City, which proposed multiple  
19 policy initiatives that would help garden groups  
20 respond more effectively to issues in their  
21 communities. We recommend that the council implement  
22 those policies as well to better protect community  
23 gardens and enhance their ability to thrive. Thank  
24 you for allowing me to speak today. I'm happy to  
25 answer any questions the council might have.

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25

CHAIRPERSON KOO: Thank you, Rebecca.

No, thank you, Jessica, sorry, yeah. So is there anything else, ah, the city can do to support community gardens and urban agriculture?

JESSICA SAAB: Um, well, as I stated...

CHAIRPERSON KOO: Yeah.

JESSICA SAAB: I think, we think that, um, that report, Growing Food Equity in New York City, outlined some policy initiatives that make a lot of sense for helping communities, community gardens continue to grow and, um, distribute things well. I think, as all have mentioned, it is based on volunteers, so it's tricky to codify this work and, um, but I do one of the policy initiatives that was mentioned in that report was finding a way to provide payment to volunteers for their work. So I think there are different ways that, um, gardeners can be helped in this.

CHAIRPERSON KOO: Thank you. So I, I wanted to ask Lynn Kelly the same question again. Can the city do more to help community gardens and agricultural groups?

LYNN KELLY: Ah, yes, I would concur with, certainly what Jessica has said, but I would

1  
2 add this. A lot of the times the challenge between  
3 partner organizations and the city, um, often have to  
4 do with the, the red tape or the process that has to  
5 occur. And there's a reason why there is a process.  
6 I mean, the city has its, its process for a reason,  
7 I'm not discounting that. But I'll give you an  
8 example. In the case of NYCHA, ah, my organization,  
9 organization over time was able to create a license  
10 agreement with NYCHA as an agency so that as garden  
11 groups that are parts of tenant organizations applied  
12 to us to be able to do small-plot gardening and  
13 otherwise under-utilized spaces we have a very  
14 succinct, quick process for approval now that we  
15 didn't have a year ago. So if there are ways of  
16 creating streamlined approval processes so that we  
17 can get things up and running, it's, I always say  
18 it's, a garden is a lot different, setting up a  
19 garden is a lot different than some of the large-  
20 scale city capital projects and in my point of view  
21 they don't need the same time of procurement or the  
22 same type of level of, ah, scrutiny, perhaps. Um,  
23 there should some process in place, don't get me  
24 wrong. But I think if the council could encourage  
25 agencies that have land, not just the Parks

1  
2 Department, but remember DOT has land, DCAS has land,  
3 ah, DEP has land, NYCHA has land. They're, you know,  
4 think about if there could be one sort of czar over  
5 this, so to speak. I hate that word, but I can't  
6 think of a better one at the moment, to really kind  
7 of consolidate, ah, some of this work and the  
8 processes with the city agencies. I think that would  
9 go a long way. I mean...

10 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Thank you.

11 LYNN KELLY: [inaudible] Council Member,  
12 I'll say this, like if ever there was a time to move  
13 quickly and think creatively about how to get fresh  
14 produce in New Yorker's hands, look at any corner in  
15 any neighborhood where there's a food pantry and  
16 there's your answer. So now is the time to, to  
17 mobilize and, ah, I, I will hope that the elected  
18 officials on this call and the administration can  
19 figure out a way to work with us as partner  
20 organizations to make that happen quickly. Thank  
21 you.

22 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Thank you, yeah.

23 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. We'll now  
24 hear from Aziz Dehkan from the New York City  
25

1  
2 Community Garden Coalition, and he'll be followed by  
3 Raymond Figueroa.

4 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time starts now.

5 AZIZ DEHKAN: Hi, everybody, and thank  
6 you for, um, letting me speak today. Chair Koo,  
7 thank you very much for your pointed questions. Um,  
8 your, your committee has come with some really good  
9 questions to the commissioners and, and Bill LoSasso  
10 on this call. Um, some of the things that have been  
11 said, um, I have some issues with. Ah, I think the  
12 word transparency has been bounced around a lot here  
13 and, um, during the license negotiation I think there  
14 was an extreme lack of, of transparency in how we  
15 were working with each other. The license issue  
16 could have been resolved months earlier had Parks  
17 Department, um, held more fruitful discussions with  
18 us, but that's water under the bridge, so to speak,  
19 and now we need to talk about how we increase the  
20 work of community gardens. How during this pandemic  
21 we, um, find ways to increase food security in the  
22 city and as people have spoken about it, um, you  
23 know, community gardens are a definite outlet for  
24 that. Um, I think part of what we need to do is in  
25 this study, which I want to shout out to Rafael

1  
2 Espinal who started this process years ago, um, my  
3 question comes around to transparency again. And I'm  
4 concerned, ah, following up with, ah, Councilman's,  
5 ah, Council Member Levine's question, how is the DPR  
6 going to conduct this study? Um, how will it be  
7 shared? Who are they going to talk with, ah, about  
8 this during the study? Um, how's it gonna be  
9 presented back to your committee, Chair Koo? And,  
10 um, how, how, how receptive are they going to be to  
11 our questions and to the things that we see as  
12 community gardeners, as we know the importance of our  
13 own gardens. Um, so I'm, those are my real concerns  
14 about this study. You know, we're in, the Community  
15 Garden Coalition is, is in support of Intro 1059. I  
16 think it's important to recognize what, ah, Jessica  
17 Saab said about there are previous studies out there  
18 that could be utilized. Ah, as a part of the New  
19 York, ah, COVID-19 Coalition we've talking quite a  
20 bit about food security and the community gardens'  
21 roles in that food security issue, um, and food  
22 insecurity. Um, as, ah, Lynn said, ah, all you need  
23 to do is go to a food bank and see what that's about.  
24 So anything that the, ah, GreenThumb and Commissioner  
25 Silver can do to increase, you know, the ability and,

1  
2 and Chair Koo you talked about, you asked about are  
3 there rules that limit community garden activity.  
4 And in a 17-page license there are a lot of rules  
5 that do limit us in what we can do. So we would like  
6 to see some of those relaxed and, you know, a  
7 partnership with GreenThumb that, that goes back for  
8 many years restored and that a communication  
9 transparency would be a, a top of the list on this,  
10 how this study is proposed. Thank you.

11 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Thank you for your  
12 input, yeah.

13 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. Next  
14 we'll hear from, ah, Raymond Figueroa of New York  
15 City Community Garden Coalition and Pratt Institute,  
16 and he'll be followed by Shahela Begum from Uprose.

17 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time starts now.

18 RAYMOND FIGUEROA: Ah, thank you very  
19 much. I first want to acknowledge the leadership of  
20 Chair Koo, ah, and Councilwoman Ayala, very much so,  
21 and I want to recognize also Council Member Levine  
22 for his, ah, long-standing leadership, ah, as it  
23 regards community gardens. Ah, thank you again for  
24 convening this hearing. I'm, ah, very, very  
25 grateful. Um, I just wanted to respond, I believe,

1 in terms of my remarks in, in a couple of ways. Ah,  
2 first, I think what needs to, you know, with, ah, ah,  
3 and I want to direct this directly to Chair Koo, one  
4 of the things that the city really needs to think  
5 about is incorporating what I would call, ah, an  
6 anti-racism equity lens, ah, ah, in terms of  
7 assessing how to move forward with, um, ah, the  
8 consideration of community gardens in the siting.  
9 Why do I say that? Um, the community gardens  
10 historically, um, have, have arisen in communities  
11 that have been historically marginalized as a result  
12 of structurally racist policies implemented via the  
13 city. Redlining, urban renewal, planned shrinkage  
14 were all aimed at relegating communities of color and  
15 disenfranchising communities of color economically  
16 and socially. What happened in response is that  
17 community residents rose up, not accepting poverty,  
18 not accepting racism, but accepting their sense of  
19 human dignity and reclaiming the spaces that have  
20 been abandoned, their communities that have been  
21 abandoned, ah, you know, as community gardens. And  
22 so that dynamic is still at play when we're, ah,  
23 considering community gardens. Why? Because as we  
24 can see from the pandemic the way it's played out,  
25

1  
2 um, it's played out in such a way where there is  
3 disproportionate morbidity and mortality in  
4 communities of color. Where these community gardens,  
5 in the same places where these community gardens are  
6 located. Ah, what I'd like to say is that for  
7 example in the Bronx, community gardens organized  
8 themselves, I want to say a dozen, ah, approximately  
9 a dozen of us community gardens organized ourselves  
10 to aggregate our harvest. We grew, ah, anywhere from  
11 5 to 10,000 pounds, I don't have the exact number, I  
12 know that's a big window, um, depending on how we  
13 measure, but it was, ah, it was over 5000 pounds of  
14 food that we moved. And, ah, um, market valuation in  
15 excess of, ah, \$36,000. The point being, um, is that  
16 community gardens have risen, um, to the occasion to  
17 respond, ah, to this, ah, situation of the pandemic.  
18 The city needs to really think that if it is not  
19 healthy, um, from a community health perspective,  
20 from a citywide perspective, the economy is not going  
21 to be, ah, healthy as, as well. People are not going  
22 to be [inaudible]...

23 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time expired.

24 RAYMOND FIGUEROA: ...any healthy. Um, I  
25 just want to just finally say that, um, at Pratt, out

1  
2 of Pratt Institute we've conducted a number of  
3 studies. Not only are community gardens growing food  
4 in a very robust type of way, ah, we are also, ah,  
5 benefitting the city fiscally in terms of our  
6 ecological system services, meaning that, um, in the  
7 year that we, last year when we measured, ah,  
8 ecological system services, just out of a sampling of  
9 20 gardens, ah, the city is realizing 1.3 million  
10 dollars in savings, ah, to its sewage infrastructure,  
11 to its energy infrastructure, ah, and, and so forth  
12 as a result of ecosystem services. So the  
13 combination of benefits to local communities in, in  
14 terms of lowering pollution and benefitting the city  
15 fiscally, as well as producing health-promoting food,  
16 and there's nothing more health-promoting than  
17 locally, ah, ah, grown nutrient-dense food. So I  
18 just wanted to, ah, offer that for your  
19 consideration. Thank you very much.

20 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Thank you. Thank you  
21 for your suggestion and your input. Thank you.

22 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. Ah, we'll  
23 now hear from Shahela Begum of Uprose, followed by  
24 Alexis Mena of Universe City NYC.

25 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time starts now.

1  
2           SHAHELA BEGUM: Good afternoon. My name  
3 is Shahela Begum and I'm the resilience coordinator  
4 at Uprose. I'm here today on behalf of Uprose to  
5 express our support for Intro 1059. Founded in 1966,  
6 Uprose is Brooklyn's oldest Latino community-based  
7 organization. Uprose is an intergenerational,  
8 multiracial, and nationally recognized [inaudible]  
9 grassroots organization that works at the  
10 intersection of racial justice and climate change.  
11 Thank you for addressing the need for community  
12 gardens and urban agriculture as a way to address  
13 resiliency efforts throughout the city. New Yorkers  
14 are extremely resilient in engaging with resources to  
15 provide supplemental food benefits for their  
16 community. However, this type of engagement should  
17 not fall on the community alone. The City Council  
18 Parks and Recreation Committee must commit to do more  
19 in support of community gardens in low-income  
20 communities and communities of color. Providing  
21 funding support and valuable resources to front-line  
22 communities secure the future of urban agriculture.  
23 COVID-19 has made a huge impact on communities of  
24 color, especially in urban areas, such as New York  
25 City, forcing to reallocate resources and cut

1 programs such as compost collection. Due to these  
2 types of cuts in environmental sustainability many  
3 New Yorkers turn to their local community gardens for  
4 their composting needs. Community gardens took much  
5 of the burden off the Department of Sanitation by  
6 reducing excess food waste and scraps in our  
7 landfill. Composting sites in local gardens  
8 throughout the city also play a vital role in  
9 building healthy organic soil to use for gardening  
10 and distribution. Low-income communities look to  
11 these gardens as a source of supplemental food where  
12 there's a growing food crisis during the pandemic.  
13 The variability of food growing depending on local  
14 neighborhoods represents the many diverse ethnicities  
15 and cultures that represent New York City. For all  
16 of these reasons, community gardens function not only  
17 as ecologically resilient hubs for the city, but also  
18 uphold social cohesion and resiliency of our people.  
19 There are a myriad of benefits that [inaudible]  
20 functions of urban agriculture, one of which is  
21 climate resiliency. New York City receives an  
22 average of 45 inches of annual rainfall, which makes  
23 it difficult for our existing infrastructure to  
24 process, leading to combined sewage overflows and  
25

1 CSO. We see ongoing flooding every time it rains  
2 continuing to be a major problem in front of, in  
3 front-line communities that also have to deal with  
4 pollution and flood damage. Urban agriculture is one  
5 way to relieve an excess amount of rainfall from  
6 overflowing our infrastructure since much of the rain  
7 is absorbed into the soil and spread slowly  
8 throughout. Furthermore, community gardens are also  
9 well known for rainwater harvesting in large tanks,  
10 which also plays a vital role in alleviating CSOs.  
11 Urban agriculture designs offer solutions for a  
12 healthier New York, reducing flooding pooling in  
13 front-line neighborhoods along with simultaneously  
14 producing the need for healthy food. Air quality and  
15 temperature is dramatically improved with the  
16 increase of community gardens where cities suffer  
17 from overheating...

18  
19 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time expired.

20 SHAHELA BEGUM: ...due to urban island  
21 effect. Thank you for allowing me to testify.

22 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. We'll now  
23 hear from Alexis Mena of University New York NYC,  
24 followed by Maureen O'Brien from the Brooklyn Botanic  
25 Garden.

1                   SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time starts now.

2                   ALEXIS MENA: Sorry, I was on mute. Good  
3  
4                   afternoon, everyone. Thank you for this opportunity  
5                   to speak today. Ah, my name is Alexis Mena. I'm a  
6                   lifelong resident of Brooklyn, New York, ah,  
7                   specifically East New York. Um, I'm an organizer,  
8                   I'm a farmer, and a [inaudible] community chef. Um,  
9                   I have been part of [inaudible] NYC with five  
10                  community gardens, two school gardens, and two  
11                  [inaudible] New York City, and I think that we need  
12                  to see more support, ah, direct financial support to  
13                  people who are taking on, ah, urban farming projects  
14                  and landscaping and beautifying the, the parks. Um,  
15                  two fundraisers a year, ah, if you think about most  
16                  of these community gardens are working on small, ah,  
17                  series of, of funders and followers, ah, [inaudible]  
18                  locally. So the most that they are fundraising in  
19                  these, between these two, ah, proposed fundraising  
20                  events is somewhere between \$1000 to \$5000 on  
21                  average, from what I've heard back from a lot of the  
22                  other, um, partners. This is insufficient. We need  
23                  more direct support [inaudible].

24                  COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Sir, we're losing  
25                  your, ah, your signal a bit. Is there a way we can,

1  
2 is there a way you can move to a location, ah, where  
3 you can get more clarity? If not, we can return to  
4 you at a later point.

5 ALEXIS MENA: [inaudible] which is the  
6 public land of the city. Thank you for my time.

7 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: OK, thank you. We'll  
8 now hear from, ah, Maureen O'Brien from the Brooklyn  
9 Botanic Garden, ah, who will be followed by Joseph  
10 Raver or Reger from the Elizabeth Street Garden.

11 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time starts now.

12 MAUREEN O'BRIEN: Thank you. Good  
13 afternoon, everyone. Ah, thank you, ah, Chair Koo,  
14 ah, council members, everyone here attending from  
15 GreenThumb and other organizations. I also want to  
16 shout out Brenda Duchene, Barbara Adamson, and Alexis  
17 Mena, out there, people who are community gardeners  
18 out there doing the work. So glad to see you. Ah,  
19 my name is Maureen O'Brien. I'm the community field  
20 manager at Brooklyn Botanic Garden, and I work with  
21 community gardens and urban farm volunteers in  
22 Brooklyn. Um, ah, BBG supports community gardens and  
23 public open green spaces and we do support a study on  
24 the prevalence of urban garden food production and  
25 agriculture in New York City. Um, ah, we suggest

1 that this study focus, ah, very specifically on the  
2 volunteer gardeners, ah, what community gardens and  
3 farms have and are doing, and what specific support  
4 would be helpful. Ask and listen to the gardens and  
5 farm leaders first. And learn and gather advice  
6 about what they're doing and what they need, and if  
7 they would like to do more. Our gardeners, who are  
8 volunteers, are literally the people on the ground.  
9 They're working with the soil and growing and they  
10 know what they need to continue doing that. Not  
11 every garden is interested in food growing and there  
12 are some limitations with soil and, um, other, you  
13 know, contaminations that not every single, ah,  
14 situation is appropriate for food growing. Ah,  
15 ornamental horticulture and herbs and pollinator  
16 gardens are also super important, ah, to support the  
17 food growing, ah, efforts. Ah, we advise that the  
18 study also prioritize communities affected by food  
19 apartheid, gardens and farms led by black and brown  
20 people, neighborhoods that are low income and have no  
21 or low food access. Ah, healthy food and seeing food  
22 being grown is really important, ah, so that people  
23 can develop healthy eating habits, even if the food  
24 coming from the garden is not actually eaten. It's  
25

1  
2 important that people know where food comes from and  
3 we really, ah, just, um, praise the council for, ah,  
4 taking a deep dive into more food access for people  
5 in New York. Ah, thank you so much. I want to leave  
6 with, ah, one thing that Leah Peneman stated  
7 yesterday at a conference at BBC, at BBG, sorry,  
8 we're in a triple, we're now in a triple pandemic,  
9 the COVID crisis, climate change, and racism. All of  
10 these three things can be affected in a positive way  
11 through community garden support.

12 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Thank you.

13 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. Next,  
14 next up is Joseph Reiver from Elizabeth Street  
15 Garden, who will be followed by Sarah Williams of  
16 Green Guerrillas.

17 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time starts now.

18 JOSEPH REIVER: Hi there. Um, I just  
19 want to thank the City Council for, for hosting this  
20 meeting. Um, you know, I think a good question  
21 that's come up, ah, from Council Member Koo is that  
22 if there is anything the city can do to continue  
23 helping community gardens and green infrastructure,  
24 ah, to let you know. Um, you know, along with  
25 everything that's, that's been discussed here, I

1 think an important starting point is protecting and  
2 preserving community green space that's at risk and,  
3 ah, already exists. Ah, as many of you may know,  
4 Elizabeth Street Garden is at risk of being developed  
5 and has been pitted against the need for affordable  
6 housing. Um, the garden itself is over 20,000 square  
7 feet of green space, actual green space in Little  
8 Italy, which is very underserviced. Um, it's  
9 recreational areas, but it's also community garden  
10 beds. Ah, it's an outdoor museum as well. But  
11 within these community garden beds we have volunteers  
12 and neighbors growing food, ah, growing vegetables,  
13 fruits, along with plants, ah, and we have actually  
14 over 100,000 visitors each year. We have hundreds of  
15 free public programs based in educational workshops  
16 with local public schools, ah, based in gardening,  
17 ah, wellness, and arts and culture. Ah, all of this  
18 is being done by volunteer-based organizations at  
19 zero cost to the city. I know a big discussion has  
20 been, you know, the funding with these community  
21 gardens, ah, and the funding with GreenThumb.  
22 Everything we're doing in Elizabeth Street Garden is,  
23 ah, at no cost to the city whatsoever. And because  
24 of the size that we are, we're able to accommodate  
25

1  
2 all of these different functions. Ah, in 2019 the  
3 City Council voted in favor of destroying Elizabeth  
4 Street Garden. Ah, many council members are on this  
5 board. Um, and it doesn't have to be this. It  
6 doesn't have to be this affordable housing or green  
7 space. It can be both and we can achieve both, and  
8 we've actually identified an alternative site that  
9 can provide more housing. Um, so I think, you know,  
10 this pandemic has really highlighted the need for  
11 open green space. Um, and it's highlighted the need  
12 for community gardens and it's actually, ah, given us  
13 an opportunity to achieve, ah, more affordable  
14 housing with existing vacancies, ah, and more  
15 creative thinking that way. And so we really need to  
16 prioritize the green spaces and preserve that which  
17 exists. And so, you know, I, I urge the City Council  
18 to start, to start, ah, ah, looking at new  
19 approaches, ah, and, and shifting their perspectives,  
20 um, and, and saving spaces like Elizabeth Street  
21 Garden because community gardens in general should be  
22 at the forefront of our plans for urban agriculture  
23 and our plans for pandemic recovery strategy. Ah,  
24 these things are intertwined. Um, they're interwoven  
25 and they both are vitalities to the city, ah, and

1 community healthy. So, you know, I just, I want to  
2 highlight Elizabeth Street Garden because it's a  
3 perfect example, ah, and we really can set, ah, a new  
4 precedent in the way we're ah, we're unfortunately  
5 being met with this housing versus green space, or  
6 green spaces at risk, East River Park as well. You  
7 know, these discussions, the community should be much  
8 more involved, I feel, ah, personally, ah, and then  
9 speaking on behalf of the garden, ah, the City  
10 Council, I urge you to, to really sit down and listen  
11 with the community because we're putting forth, ah,  
12 creative plans and we really want to work with, ah,  
13 with you to achieve the, ah, preservation...

14  
15 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time.

16 JOSEPH REIVER: ...of these green spaces,  
17 like Elizabeth Street Garden. Thank you.

18 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Thank you.

19 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. Next up  
20 is Sarah Williams from Green Guerrillas, who will be  
21 followed by Kara Goad from Earth Justice.

22 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time starts now.

23 SARAH WILLIAMS: Thank you. I'm Sarah  
24 McCullough Williams, executive director of Green  
25 Guerrillas, a nonprofit that supports community

1 gardens and activates youth engaged in food justice  
2 across the city. Communities that were already  
3 experiencing food insecurity before COVID-19 are now  
4 depending on community gardens to survive. This year  
5 many gardeners ramped up their food production for  
6 distribution to families, neighborhoods, and local  
7 organizations in need, sometimes uniting with other  
8 gardens to distribute across large networks, as Ray  
9 mentions, has happened in the Bronx, as also  
10 happened, ah, elsewhere across the city. Even before  
11 this time of extreme need, however, community  
12 gardeners have been vital members of a larger  
13 movement towards food sovereignty and have been  
14 working vigorously for the right to healthy, fresh,  
15 culturally relevant food, the right to green space,  
16 and community land ownership and the right to  
17 healthy. For these reasons and many more we support  
18 this initiative proposing a detailed study into food  
19 production in community gardens, ways to increase  
20 their food production, and channels for making  
21 neighborhood-grown food available to the community,  
22 and we thank Council Member Ayala for bringing this  
23 legislation. However, we express concerns about the  
24 ability of the Parks Department to adequately  
25

1 undertake this study. On key issues, including  
2 composting in the city, Parks leadership has not  
3 upheld the interests of those who are working for  
4 food justice. We urge the city to think and work in  
5 expansive ways to support and recognize the value of  
6 community gardens across the city. Simultaneous to  
7 this, we ask that the unpaid volunteer labor being  
8 done by community gardeners be recognized within the  
9 proposed Parks Department study and recommendations.  
10 Community gardeners do essential life-nurturing work  
11 to heal the soil, to foster a connection with nature,  
12 to act for food justice, to preserve and protect the  
13 health of their families and neighbors. The most  
14 prolific and powerful community gardeners are often  
15 people of color, often from low-income communities,  
16 often women, often immigrants. Their work has  
17 tremendous community value, but it lacks vital  
18 economic support. We ask the city to increase their  
19 support for community gardens as essential  
20 infrastructure for neighborhood food production and  
21 to offer creative, adequate, and community-affirming  
22 funding to ensure that they can provide increased  
23 health and environmental benefits, um, to communities  
24 across the city. Thank you for your time.  
25

2 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Thank you.

3 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. Ah, next  
4 is, ah, Kara Goad from Earth Justice.

5 KARA GOAD: Hello, thank you. Yes, my  
6 name is Kara Goad. I'm a legal fellow at the  
7 Sustainable Food and Farming Program at Earth  
8 Justice, and I'm [inaudible] in support of Council  
9 Member Ayala's bill. We support this bill because it  
10 will bring more attention to the many benefits that  
11 community gardens provide to New Yorkers, which I'd  
12 like to highlight today. Community gardens offer  
13 numerous benefits to gardeners, neighbors, and garden  
14 visitors, including the opportunity to participate in  
15 urban agriculture. Through urban agriculture our  
16 community gardens, community members gain access to  
17 fresh and nutritious foods, including traditional  
18 foods that they might be otherwise unable to find.  
19 For example, at the Rockaway Youth Task Force Urban  
20 Farm in Queens gardeners grow callaloo, a popular  
21 Caribbean ingredient, ah, that's not commonly  
22 available at supermarkets. In addition, community  
23 gardens offer neighbors the opportunity to learn  
24 about agricultural techniques. And one of these  
25 techniques is composting, a traditional method of

1 enriching the soil and recycling the food and plant  
2 waste. In 2018 the BK Rot Program at No Wastelands  
3 Community Garden in Bushwick took in 70 tons of food  
4 waste for composting. And if the success were  
5 replicated at more community gardens it would  
6 contribute significantly to the city's waste  
7 reduction goals. The city's community gardens also  
8 offer space for innovation in urban agriculture. For  
9 example, the Impact Farm at Harlem Grown, ah, has a  
10 solar-powered greenhouse and a vertical farming  
11 hydroponic system and it's one of the first of its  
12 kind in the United States. Urban agriculture at  
13 community gardens is especially important for people  
14 living in neighborhoods without easy access to fresh  
15 foods. It's been a key resource during the COVID-19  
16 pandemic, which has heightened food insecurity. Ah,  
17 in response to the pandemic community gardeners  
18 across the city increased production and distributed  
19 fresh and healthful foods to neighbors and food banks  
20 in need. Ah, yet the pandemic also made clear that  
21 much more is needed, which is another reason we  
22 support this bill that will help establish the  
23 foundation for expanding community garden and food  
24 production. By requiring the Parks Department to  
25

1 collect information on urban agriculture our  
2 community gardens and make recommendations for  
3 expanding the number of gardens, ah, the bill further  
4 the benefits that community gardens offer. That  
5 information collected will highlight the important  
6 role that community gardens play in increasing access  
7 to fresh fruits and vegetables and it will support  
8 calls for the city to provide more resources and  
9 support to community gardeners. Um, so for all these  
10 reasons we support the bill. We also urge the City  
11 Council to take additional steps to protect the  
12 city's community gardens, which have few legal  
13 protections. Um, in November of 2020 Earth Justice,  
14 the New York City Community Garden Coalition, and 52  
15 other organizations partnered to submit a petition to  
16 New York City agencies requesting that they designate  
17 all New York City community gardens as critical  
18 environmental areas pursuant to the state  
19 environmental quality review act. Ah, this petition  
20 is available on Earth Justice's website and I urge  
21 you to visit it, as it contains a tremendous amount  
22 of information about community gardens. A critical  
23 environmental area designation would increase  
24 protections for community gardens by requiring the  
25

1 agencies fully evaluate the impact of certain  
2 actions, like nearby construction, on the gardens,  
3 yet at the same time it would not unduly tie the  
4 city's hands from moving forward with necessary  
5 projects. Um, our petition also asks the city to do  
6 a study of the gardens not specifically described in  
7 the petition to confirm the critical environmental  
8 area designation is appropriate for them. To assist  
9 with that study we created a form on our website that  
10 community gardeners can share information about their  
11 gardens, including whether the garden is used for  
12 food production. Ah, we've received information  
13 about 20 gardens and over 300 people have signed on  
14 for our petition, which shows the wide [inaudible],  
15 ah, interest in this issue and support for this bill.  
16 So in sum because community gardens enhance public  
17 health, provide natural settings, celebrate the  
18 cultures of the gardeners and their neighborhoods,  
19 and contribute to the city's sustainability efforts,  
20 we urge the committee to pass this bill and to also  
21 consider additional bill to grant critical  
22 environmental status to all of New York City's  
23 community gardens. Thank you for the time.

25 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Thank you.

1 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. Ah, next  
2 up we have two individuals who registered under the  
3 name Brenda Thompson Duchene. Ah, I'm going to call  
4 up, ah, the first person, if you could state your  
5 name for the record and also let us know who, if you  
6 are aware who the other person might be.

8 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time starts now.

9 BRENDA THOMPSON DUCHENE: Good afternoon.  
10 I'm Brenda Thompson Duchene. The person is  
11 [inaudible] also in my [inaudible] the garden, she's  
12 one of my gardeners. One of the thing I heard today  
13 from, um, GreenThumb saying they're helpful. I feel  
14 they're not helpful in a sense that I want to thank,  
15 um, [inaudible] Inez Barron because the garden that  
16 she spoke about is my garden. The garden have a, a  
17 greenhouse, 25 x 40 feet, that have been there seven  
18 years. It incur increment weather. Um, when, when  
19 we was told that we cannot install the electricity,  
20 um, we had Brooklyn Range came in to do assessment  
21 and they said, OK, this is what we can do. All I'm  
22 hearing from GreenThumb is take down, take down.  
23 When they take down this greenhouse, which is growing  
24 food in it, are they gonna replace it with the same  
25 size? One of the things is as I hear everyone say

1 in, in Brownsville, it's in Brownsville, we started  
2 11 years ago growing fresh vegetables 'cause no one  
3 will come into the neighborhood. We did a study on  
4 food that was in the neighborhood which was lousy.  
5 It was poor quality. For two years we did the study  
6 with the supermarkets. These gardens is essential  
7 with the growth that we need to be able to give out.  
8 With this pandemic we gave out over 1500 free bags of  
9 food. The greenhouse, what we trying to do, is grow  
10 all year round. With that building it took away all  
11 our sunlight. We even can't start, like now we start  
12 the seedlings, we can't do that. If GreenThumb  
13 really want to help us they have agencies that could  
14 come in and help us, see what we can do to get this  
15 lighting. Instead of tearing down and spending what  
16 you don't have, let's work with what we have and see  
17 what we can do. If it's really [inaudible] that is  
18 that terrible and they can't do anything, well  
19 Brooklyn Range gave us a assessment something could  
20 be done. It don't have to be taken down. What are  
21 we gonna do to help the community? We need  
22 transparency as Aziz and everyone else said. I don't  
23 feel there's enough transparency. I don't feel is  
24 enough support. Yes, they give support, but not  
25

1  
2 enough. And if they really want to help a community  
3 that is lacking in, in fresh vegetables, no one  
4 didn't want to come into Brownsville. That's why we  
5 started [inaudible] of Elegance Foundation, it's a  
6 nonprofit, that we could take care of the community  
7 and give with other people did not want to come in to  
8 help. We are helping ourself and we need the  
9 support. Thank you for your time. And if you have  
10 any questions I would love to answer.

11 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Thank you.

12 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. Ah, thank  
13 you very much, and I will now ask your fellow  
14 gardener to come up and testify, and, again, can you  
15 please, ah, just state your name for the record since  
16 we don't have it on your, listed as your Zoom  
17 profile.

18 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time starts now.

19 BARBARA ADAMSON: My name is Barbara  
20 Adamson and I'm currently a member of [inaudible] of  
21 Elegance and as Brenda Duchene said we've been  
22 growing produce through, ah, Sustain Brownsville and,  
23 ah, other areas because no one wanted to come into  
24 this area. Um, as she said, we gave out over 1500  
25 bags of food and if we keep this greenhouse we can

1 definitely start, like we always do, in late  
2 February, early March, so that our seedlings are  
3 ready to go in the ground at the end of the first  
4 frost, which allows us to have extra growing time and  
5 giving vegetables to the community that needs them.  
6 Ah, we have horrible soil and GreenThumb just came in  
7 and we have taken up what's there and over the last  
8 11 years, ah, different people, I can speak for  
9 myself, I've been purchasing soil to go in my beds to  
10 compensate for what I feel is the inadequate soil  
11 that we've been getting. Um, there's just no  
12 cooperation. Why can't, um, members of GreenThumb do  
13 the DOB for us? We don't have that kind of money.  
14 They have staff that can do the research, find out  
15 what we need so that we can keep the same size  
16 greenhouse and continue the production of what we've  
17 been doing for the last years. But with all of this  
18 going back and forth, back and forth, I mean, it's  
19 preventing us from doing the most we can do. Ah,  
20 GreenThumb took down a small fence around our garden,  
21 what, what, three feet, and, ah, now the garbage is  
22 spilling from the building next door onto the  
23 sidewalk and they're gonna blame us for the area  
24 being dirty. Where are they going with that three  
25

1 feet? It's just, it's like a dictatorship now. I  
2 mean, gardening used to be fun. Ah, most of us are  
3 senior citizens. I'm 72 years old. And we go to the  
4 garden, we do what we have to do on the days that we  
5 need to do it. But we're older and they're just not  
6 trying to help. It's like they're pushing the senior  
7 citizens out for modern technology, ah, the, the  
8 licenses agreement, ah, it has more pages in it than  
9 a mortgage. I mean, we're not college students. Ah,  
10 we are baby boomers and we don't understand a lot of  
11 the information...  
12

13 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time expired.

14 BARBARA ADAMSON: ...that's been given to  
15 us. But, ah, they just want implement their rules  
16 and regulations and if you don't agree with them  
17 then, ah, you're pushed out. My three minutes is up  
18 so I'll just be quiet.

19 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Thank you.

20 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you very much.

21 Um, that was our last registered panelist. Ah, if we  
22 have inadvertently missed anyone who is registered to  
23 testify and has not yet been called, please use the  
24 Zoom raise hand function and you'll be called on to  
25 speak. Seeing none, I'll now turn it back to Council

1  
2 Member Koo to offer any closing remarks and adjourn  
3 the hearing.

4 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Thank you, Chris.

5 Before we close, I want to thank Parks Department,  
6 Commissioner Silver, Assistant Commissioner  
7 Biederman, and director of GreenThumb, ah, Bill  
8 LoSasso. And also our committee staff, Chris,  
9 Patrick, Chima, Monica. And of course my staff,  
10 Elaine, and also I want to thank all the public  
11 participants, Lynn Kelly, Jessica, ah, and all the  
12 other ones. So thank you for coming. This is very  
13 meaningful and fruitful testimony. Ah, so the  
14 meeting will come to, will be adjourned. [gavel]

15 UNIDENTIFIED: Ending live stream.

16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25

C E R T I F I C A T E

World Wide Dictation certifies that the foregoing transcript is a true and accurate record of the proceedings. We further certify that there is no relation to any of the parties to this action by blood or marriage, and that there is interest in the outcome of this matter.



Date February 27, 2021