



NYC Parks

**Hearing before the New York City Council
Committee on Finance / Committee on Parks & Recreation
Oversight: Fiscal Year 2022 Executive Budget
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Testimony By: Mitchell J. Silver, FAICP, Commissioner

Good afternoon, Chairs Dromm and Koo, members of the Finance and Parks committees, and other members of the Council. I am Mitchell Silver, Commissioner of the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, and I am joined “virtually” here today by a number of our senior staff, including First Deputy Commissioner Liam Kavanagh and several of our Deputy Commissioners, as well as Matt Drury, our Director of Government Relations.

As you are aware, NYC Parks’ primary responsibility is the stewardship of more than 30,000 acres of green and open space, encompassing 5,000 individual properties, from playgrounds and beaches to community gardens and natural areas. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to discuss the agency’s Fiscal Year 2022 Executive Budget, and to provide an overview of our agency’s recent efforts to build and care for our park spaces, as we recover from an incredibly challenging time for all.

This year’s Executive Budget reflects the growing confidence that our city’s economic recovery is underway, as many of the budgetary cuts implemented during the height of the COVID pandemic are being restored. COVID demonstrated that New Yorkers rely on our City’s green and open spaces for the physical, emotional, and mental benefits that they provide—this Administration is investing in the care and maintenance that our parks need and deserve. The agency’s Executive Expense budget represents an all-time high for the agency’s operating budget, including \$587 million dollars in Mayoral funding this year for our operational needs—a \$55 million increase over the proposed FY22 Preliminary Budget and \$84 million more than last year’s Adopted Budget. The Executive 10-Year Capital Plan, including the current Fiscal Year, provides for a total Parks Capital budget of \$6.4 billion dollars. This reflects the importance of keeping our open space infrastructure in a state of good repair.

We are pleased to announce a number of expense and capital additions to this year’s budget that will assist in bridging some of the gaps in last year’s budget and put the agency on strong footing going



forward. Our seasonal staff hiring program and our workforce development program have been fully restored for Fiscal Year 2022. This restoration will supplement the hiring of 2,500 park workers that will serve as part of the City's Clean-Up Corps, thanks to \$42 million dollars in funding to support our maintenance and operations efforts. The City is also investing over \$1 billion capital dollars in key park infrastructure. We are partnering with the Department of Transportation to repair and renovate 15 park pedestrian bridges around the city, and assisting the Economic Development Corporation in the completion of the Manhattan Greenway loop.

These investments represent a continued commitment to our park system, a commitment that this Administration has supported and strengthened throughout my seven-year tenure as Parks Commissioner. I am saddened to be leaving this phase of my life as a public servant, but am immensely gratified and proud of the work we've accomplished.

In the months since announcing my resignation, I have not been able to stop thinking about the many men and women who have come before me to serve as Commissioner for NYC Parks, and in whose footsteps I've followed. When I came back home to New York City in 2014 to take on this position, I knew that I would eventually have to reckon with the legacies they've left, and the people they've impacted. I hope that in years following my tenure, people will be able to look back and truly see the transformative nature of what we were able to accomplish over the past seven years.

My goal as Commissioner was not to become a power broker; it was to remind this city, and the world at large, that parks are for people. Every single person, no matter your age, color, income, or ability, deserves an opportunity to access open green space. Every day we have worked closer to this goal by; promoting diversity, equity, inclusion, and access in all of our park operations, moving the agency forward through innovation, new technology, and thoughtful planning and placemaking, and in the process, leading a global conversation about equity in the public realm.

Equity has been a cornerstone of my work throughout my career. The Community Parks Initiative was the first major initiative in my tenure as Parks Commissioner, and it was one of our most important as well. We had to right an historic wrong. For decades, scores of parks in our community were neglected. These



neighborhoods, many of them underprivileged, were isolated. It was unacceptable, so we made it right. We reached out and empowered members of many underserved communities around the city to join the agency in rethinking what their parks could be. We made efforts to expand public input; we tried to meet people where they were by offering more convenient times and locations for meetings, and improving our scoping process. 58 of the 67 projects that constitute this internationally-recognized \$318 million dollar initiative are complete, and the remaining projects are slated to be completed soon. However, we weren't done trying to create a more inclusive parks system. Both the Parks Without Borders program and the Cool Pools initiative sought to reimagine how our parks are designed and operated, and for whom. A public amenity in a neighborhood must be inviting or attractive. For Parks Without Borders, we created a public process to determine which sites could be enhanced with a simple redesign to ensure a seamless interaction between park and neighborhood, introducing a new design philosophy for all capital projects going forward. The \$50 million dollar project includes eight showcase sites, and now most of our capital projects incorporate these design principles. The Cool Pools project revamped and revitalized drab and unappealing pool sites into vibrant places that some residents now call "resorts." 11 outdoor public pools gained colorful new wall murals, planters, and lounge chairs in order to provide an inviting and welcoming space for the public, and it was a great success. Pool attendance skyrocketed, and we increased the enrollment in our Learn to Swim classes by roughly 15%. We continued our focus on redesigning and developing inviting spaces, and making sure that underserved communities have world-class spaces to call their own, with our Anchor Park Initiative. The \$150 million dollar project invested in five large parks, one in each borough, and ensured that neighborhoods that had previously suffered from disinvestment would have access to thriving flagship parks. We've celebrated several ribbon cuttings for these projects, and look forward to celebrating a few more over the next few years.

NYC Parks' commitment to community is more than revitalizing amenities—it's also providing vital infrastructure to neighborhoods around the City, so they can survive and thrive. I am very proud of the resiliency measures we have undertaken, including the East Side Coastal Resiliency project in Manhattan, along with the Army Corps projects in Staten Island and the Rockaways. This City, with help from the federal government, has invested hundreds of millions of dollars into shoreline protection plans. These plans, when completed, will help to stem the damage from the increasingly frequent and strong



weather events caused by climate change. We will never shy away from our commitment to protecting New Yorkers, and we are doing what we can to combat climate change, with both large-scale projects and design implementations in parks and neighborhoods around the city. Along with the resiliency work, we have also endeavored to increase and maintain some of our most important infrastructure: our street and park trees. We were able to complete the Million Trees initiative, an ambitious planting program that started before my tenure, two years ahead of schedule. The Cool Neighborhoods program started in 2017 and has provided over \$100 million dollars to improve the city's tree canopy and plant trees in heat-vulnerable neighborhoods—an act that will hopefully save lives and make our neighborhoods more pleasant and comfortable. Under the stewardship of First Deputy Commissioner Liam Kavanaugh and Assistant Commissioner Jennifer Greenfeld, we reconfigured our Tree Management program, and in 2017, we became the first large city to transition its urban forestry program to focus more squarely on risk assessment prioritization. This approach allows us to better use staff time and resources and address unsafe conditions as quickly as possible.

One of accomplishments I am most proud of is streamlining the capital process. Over my tenure, we have completed over 850 capital projects, including 130 projects that were stalled during the previous administration, that we eventually completed or have in active construction. This was achieved through a major effort from our Capital team, led by Deputy Commissioner Therese Braddick. It helped streamline the design, procurement, and construction processes so that we could have more on-time and on-budget projects, and led to the creation of our monthly Red Zone meetings, which closely examine projects facing complications and identify creative ways to get them over the finish line. Rebuilding parks is only one facet of our responsibility, and we need to make sure that our parks and open spaces are maintained properly. In order to do that, we closely examined our Maintenance and Operations portfolio, and brought on a Chief Operating Officer, to oversee all the borough operations and standardize best practices. The head of our Innovation and Performance Management team was elevated to a Commissioner-level title, and we designed more data-driven approaches to manage our finite resources. We found more ways to do work in-house—for example, by creating a Synthetic Turf Team to improve the longevity of our artificial fields, saving money and avoiding unnecessary wear on our natural fields.



The most important privilege I had as Commissioner was the responsibility to keep an eye towards the future, making sure that New Yorkers will continue to have new and unique open spaces to call their own, even in a city with finite space. We have expanded our ability to sustain beautiful, vital greenspaces for communities in many ways. Our GreenThumb division worked with partners at HPD and NYCHA to bring new properties into our community garden portfolio, using its know-how and enthusiasm for local garden groups. We have also worked with the Department of Education on the Schoolyards to Playgrounds program—a very important initiative that provides community residents with open playground space, by leveraging existing infrastructure.

The COVID pandemic has been a challenging and complicated time for NYC Parks. The death toll in this city was staggering, and while at times conditions looked grim, Parkies were on the frontlines, handling mask and food distribution, and helping to coordinate various relief efforts with federal, state, and local partners. I have made this position quite known, but I'd would like to once again thank our Parkies, everywhere, especially Commissioner Margaret Nelson and the Public Programs and Urban Park Service team, who did an immense amount of tireless work to support this city during some of its darkest moments. Even as sirens blared through our streets, and our offices, schools, arenas, theaters and places of worship lay empty, our parks were full of life. Our flowers bloomed, colorful birds became stars on social media, and our greenspaces were packed with people seeking fresh air and natural beauty. Our visitors, who may have felt alone in their apartments or on endless Zoom calls, could still find spaces to be with friends and loved ones in our parks, even if socially distanced. It was endearing and galvanizing to visit different parts of a city that some quickly declared dead, become very much alive. The resilience of our citizenry has never been more impressive.

But the trauma of this time period will not be forgotten. Care and respect are some of the most basic and fundamental tenets of our society—they are acknowledgement that, as a human being, your life matters and is as precious as anyone else's. It's the reason why we decided to take a meaningful step to address systemic racism in our city, by creating Juneteenth Grove at Cadman Plaza in Brooklyn, launching the effort to name several NYC Parks properties after prominent Black Americans, and beginning the consideration of other park re-namings to better reflect the contributions of other under-represented



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minority groups. It's also why I elevated the Equal Employment and Opportunity Coordinator role to a Commissioner-level title, because it's important to me that every one of our Parks staff knows how much I deeply care for them, and want to provide the resources for them to thrive. As a Black man and Commissioner of the Parks Department, the events of this past year have weighed heavily on me, but I knew that I was in a unique position to uplift members of the Black community. Representation matters, but what you do once given the opportunity to wield your influence matters much, much more. When history looks back at my time at NYC Parks, I hope they will note not only my ability to continue on the impressive path laid out ahead of me by my predecessors, but also to respond to the complex issues of the past, and lay groundwork for my successors. To them, I would like to say, "Can you be a Parks Commissioner for everyone - for every borough, every age, every color, every income level, every ability? Did you leave people unheard, or unprotected, or untouched by the actions you have taken?" It is my humble belief that our parks system should reflect the people it serves, encourage reflection and expression without interference, and be a refuge for the community at its highest heights, and at its lowest lows. How we treat the public and treat our public spaces demonstrates who we are as a community, and where we're headed in the future.

I also believe the city should be aggressive in reclaiming open space where it can. That is why I have been so pleased by the efforts made to revert park space out of the grips of car traffic, and back into the hands of children, pedestrians and cyclists. During my time we've made miles of interior roads of Prospect Park and Central Park car-free, and where feasible, we must increase that number. Public space should be maximized for people and that shouldn't be forgotten.

I want to thank the Council for its support of parks and open spaces for all New Yorkers during my tenure. I also want to thank Mayor de Blasio for granting me the privilege to help transform this agency, and for his commitment to our parks system and making them more equitable, inclusive and resilient. Most of all, I want to thank our incredible team of dedicated Parks staff who keep our parks safe, clean and accessible, because serving alongside them as Commissioner has been the highest honor of my career. Though my time with the agency is drawing to a close, NYC Parks looks forward to continuing to work



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alongside the City Council to create a bright, green future with a more equitable and inclusive parks system. We would now be happy to answer any questions that you may have.