



**New York City Council Committee on Parks and Recreation
Preliminary Budget Hearing – Parks and Recreation**

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Lynn Kelly, Executive Director

Hello. I am Lynn Kelly, Executive Director of New Yorkers for Parks. I want to thank the City Council Committee on Parks and Recreation for inviting us to speak on the fiscal year 2018 Preliminary Budget. The Parks Department has continued to make meaningful investments in park improvements over the past few years, but New Yorkers for Parks remains concerned that there is not a commensurate amount being allocated to the agency to ensure that these capital improvements will remain in a state of good repair for years to come.

We understand the Administration's conservative budget approach this year, considering the extensive cuts facing New York City from Washington, but we urge the City to not lose sight of the importance of our communal open and green spaces during these times. We learned last week that there are potentially devastating cuts facing the GreenThumb Community Garden division of NYC Parks. As proposed in the federal budget, the Community Development Block Grant program would be cut entirely. This would mean GreenThumb would lose up to one third of their entire staff, and a significant portion of their expense funding, totaling approximately \$1M. We urge the City Council and the Administration to consider allocating this funding to GreenThumb in light of the proposed cuts. This 40-year-old program has provided so much to NYC at a relatively low cost, and we firmly believe that they cannot lose the funding that is currently on the chopping block in Washington.

One of the most critical additions we believe needs to be baselined in the budget is the restoration of \$9.6M to retain 100 City Park Workers and 50 Gardeners throughout the city. NY4P has advocated for these staff lines for the past two budget cycles, and we find ourselves again fighting to keep these 150 vital maintenance and operations lines. We cannot keep relying on the Council to add this funding, and it leaves 150 New Yorkers unsure of their employment status yet again. These park workers help keep our neighborhood parks well-maintained, and are dedicated to Community Parks Initiative sites in all five boroughs. As the Administration has allocated tens of millions of capital dollars to rebuild parks in CPI zones, we see a lack of commitment to the staff members who help keep these CPI sites in good repair for New Yorkers who rely on these parks. We commend the Council for its ongoing commitment to keep these staff lines in place, but we urge the Administration to baseline these positions. This modest investment in the 'infrastructure of people,' will go a long way in caring properly for our parks and playgrounds.

In line with investing in the people that care for our parks, we encourage the Council and Administration to add funding to increase the staff for Partnerships for Parks. It is well known that the current staff is stretched thin. A budget allocation of just under \$1M would allow for 10 new Outreach Coordinators, and 5 new Volunteer Program Assistants. The good news is that over 500 park volunteer groups exist in NYC, and another 250 potential community groups have been identified. The bad news is that each current Outreach Coordinator is responsible for supporting approximately 40 to 50 groups, and this is an untenable lift. We hear time and again from community groups that Partnerships for Parks' support is simply put - their life line - crucial to their long-term maintenance and advocacy efforts for their local parks, and we believe everyone should benefit from the

expert guidance and program opportunities that Partnerships staff can provide. In order for Partnerships to reach its full potential of supporting community groups, we ask that this funding be added and baselined to the budget.

We would like to see an allocation in this year's budget of \$3M to allow for 50 new Urban Park Rangers. The Rangers program provides our city parks with ambassadors to the natural world, a pressing need as the realities of climate change become more and more clear. As New York City grapples with how to adapt to a changing climate, the Ranger program can provide educational opportunities to the children of New York, helping to promote awareness of the environmental issues facing our parks and green spaces, and providing valuable programming opportunities to schools and community organizations citywide. An additional benefit is that Rangers are empowered to help enforce park rules and regulations, and can provide these services in parks where PEP officers may not be able to reach. Did you know that many of the long-time staff members at NYC Parks started their careers as Rangers? This creates an important pipeline for the next generation of parks staff.

On the capital budget, we are pleased to note the Administration's commitments in the Preliminary Budget, many of which would provide funding for the kinds of infrastructure improvements that aren't as easy to fund through discretionary allocations such as retaining walls, comfort stations, park bridges, HVAC and boiler systems. We are pleased to see the allocation of \$82M committed toward new street tree plantings citywide. We know that increasing the size of our urban canopy pays dividends in long-term public health benefits, from cleaning our air, helping to capture our storm-water, and providing New Yorkers with small moments of mental respite from our dense, urban environment. In light of the recently completed Tree Census, we believe NYC Parks has the data they need to effectively bolster our urban canopy, and we commend the Administration's support of these efforts through funding for new plantings. We also know that our existing canopy needs ongoing care to remain healthy – we support an expense commitment of \$2.7M to bring the agency back to its ideal seven-year pruning and inspection cycle for our street trees, as well as the removal of tree stumps, many of which have languished for years.

Before I end my comments today, I want to take this moment to encourage both the Council and Administration to still think creatively and boldly about the future of NYC Parks. While it may be likely that funding will be restricted out of Washington, we also know that our city's population is continuing to grow, as is its density. There are still communities that fall short of open space access, but there are also forward thinking park proposals to balance density and have positive impacts on public health such as BQ Green, Queensway and Daylighting Tibbets Brook. We support these visionary efforts to create new green space while also mitigating critical environmental factors that need to be addressed in a rapidly changing climate and city. As such, we would welcome another round of capital and expense funding commitments to build upon the Community Parks Initiative, Parks Without Borders, and the Anchor Parks program.

I want to thank the Council for inviting me to speak today. We look forward to working with the City to create a better budget for parks to benefit all New Yorkers. I am happy to answer any questions the committee might have. Thank you.

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