



New Yorkers for Parks is the citywide independent organization championing quality parks and open spaces for all New Yorkers in all neighborhoods.

# PARKS PLATFORM 2013

## INTRODUCTION: THE BLOOMBERG LEGACY

From an open space perspective, the Bloomberg Administration will perhaps be most remembered for its “legacy parks” – pristine new jewels such as Brooklyn Bridge Park, the High Line, and Governors Island that have been hailed for their dramatic designs and hybrid public-private funding strategies. In addition, thanks to the vision and capital dollars underpinning PlaNYC, the Parks Department has undertaken transformative capital projects in eight existing destination parks citywide – from Soundview Park in the Bronx to Rockaway Park on the edge of Queens. On a smaller scale, programs such as the Schoolyards-to-Playgrounds Program, a partnership between the School Construction Authority and the nonprofit Trust for Public Land, and the Department of Transportation’s Public Plaza Program have created innovative new community spaces on previously underutilized public land.

It has been an era marked by rampant open space expansion and capital investment – impressive accomplishments to be sure. But new and improved parks come with a significant maintenance price tag, and the operations budget for the Parks Department has not kept pace with the capital budget. After years of staff cuts and hiring freezes, the Parks Department is hard pressed to maintain its existing 29,000 acres of parkland, and cutting corners has become an unfortunate necessity evident in many parks around the city. What’s more, scores of neighborhood parks have not benefitted from the huge influx of capital dollars that has flowed into the handful of large parks targeted by the Administration for upgrades, and too often even the smaller improvements promised for these local parks are delayed for years due to a backlog in the Parks Department’s capital division.

Of course, budget cuts were not unexpected – nor unique to the Parks Department – in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis. In the face of mandated belt-tightening, the Department sought private funding to augment its shrinking budget through various mechanisms, ranging from entering new concession agreements (which generate revenues for the City’s general fund, not directly for the Parks Department), to increasing the number of public-private partnerships, to leveraging large-scale development projects. It is too early to say if all of these financing experiments will prove successful over the long term, but there’s no question that private funding has enabled many parks to achieve a standard of care or provide programming that would otherwise be impossible in this budget climate. This begs the question, what about those parks that do not attract private dollars? Are we creating an inherently inequitable parks system? And how do we ensure that private funding doesn’t lead to privatization or commercialization of our public spaces? These are the questions with which parks advocates are wrestling as the Bloomberg Administration winds down, and we are tasked with thinking about what comes next. How do we build upon the successes of this era, continue to expand and improve New York City’s park system, and prevent the pitfalls that private funding could cause without careful vigilance and planning?

We hope that our Parks Platform 2013 provides some answers to these questions. We look to all the candidates for public office and ultimately to the next Mayoral Administration, Parks Commissioner and City Council to embrace these ideas on behalf of all New Yorkers whose health and quality of life are enhanced every day by parks and open spaces. Together, we can ensure a world class parks system for all New Yorkers, in all neighborhoods, for generations to come.



We call upon the next Mayor and Administration to:

### OVERHAUL HOW THE PARKS DEPARTMENT IS FUNDED.

- 1) The Parks Department should have its own **discretionary capital budget**.

Unlike many capially driven agencies, the Parks Department does not have a meaningful discretionary budget to enable it to plan and budget for capital projects over time in parks citywide. Rather, the Department is reliant on discretionary allocations from City Council Members and Borough Presidents whose priorities may not align with those of the Department. This creates an inefficient, inequitable, and potentially politicized process for funding capital projects, and makes it impossible for the Department to plan for the long-term capital maintenance and improvement of parks system wide.

- 2) The Parks Department's **maintenance budget should be increased**, and funding for **core functions should be baselined** – meaning automatically renewed – in its **annual expense budget**.

The Parks Department's maintenance budget has been slashed for many budget cycles, leaving the Department woefully understaffed to care for its 29,000 acres of parkland. In addition, multiple core functions of the Department – such as tree care and seasonal staffing for pools and playgrounds – are subject to annual budget negotiations rather than being included in its baseline budget that gets renewed every year. These activities are central to the Department's mission and should not be subject to political wrangling. It is time for the Parks Department's maintenance budget to reflect the true cost of maintaining, operating and programming all parks properties at a consistently high standard of care.

- 3) The Parks Department provides an **essential city service** and should be staffed **accordingly**.

Mandated staff cuts for City agencies that perform essential services are half that of other agencies. The Parks Department is responsible for maintaining the city's street trees in addition to its parks and Greenstreets, and when major weather events hit, Parks Department staff are among the first responders. It has never been more clear just how critical New York City's parks are to the sustainability of our city, or what an essential role the Department's staff plays in protecting our shorelines and vulnerable areas. DPR is responsible for maintaining public safety on our streets, sidewalks, beaches and in our parks, yet they are not treated as providing an essential service at budget time.

**INCREASE THE TRANSPARENCY AND EFFICIENCY OF THE PARKS DEPARTMENT TO ENSURE EQUITABLE DISTRIBUTION OF RESOURCES.**

- 4) The Parks Department should know the **cost to maintain every City park**, as well as the **amount of public and private funding** that supports each.

Because few parks have dedicated full-time maintenance crews, it is not easy to track staffing and maintenance costs for individual parks. In 2011, the Parks Department began piloting technology that would allow for better tracking of time spent and tasks performed by Parks staff on a park-by-park basis. The end goal of this new tracking system should be to calculate cost estimates for maintaining every park. These estimates, plus data on how public and private funding goes into each park, would enable the Parks Department to more effectively allocate resources throughout the parks system and advocate for more maintenance dollars based on measurable need.

- 5) The Parks Department should adopt the **best practices of other capital projects agencies** to improve its own process.

Like the Parks Department, multiple City agencies and authorities – including the Department of Design and Construction, the Economic Development Corporation, and the School Construction Authority – have large pipelines of capital projects, though their practices and procedures vary. The Parks Department should study and incorporate these other agencies’ best practices, or alternatively, off-load its projects to the agency or agencies that can complete them in the most timely, cost-effective manner.

- 6) Organizations in **public-private partnerships** with the Parks Department should **report annual revenues, expenses and other critical financial information** in a simple, consistent manner to be shared on the Department’s website.

The Parks Department has contractual agreements with more than 20 nonprofit partners that, depending on the terms of the agreement, may do anything from fundraising and programming to maintenance and capital improvements in affiliated parks. These public-private partnerships have enhanced services in multiple parks citywide. There has been some criticism of these partnerships, however, due to a perception that they benefit select parks to the detriment of the system as a whole, replacing rather than augmenting public funding – an assertion the Parks Department denies. If the public is to truly understand the important role that these organizations play, it is critical that their financial information be transparent and publicly available, not just through required tax disclosures, but through a simple and consistent reporting document issued and posted by the Parks Department.

## RESTRICT AND STRONGLY REGULATE THE PRIVATIZATION OF PARKLAND.

- 7) Parkland alienation should not occur unless **no other land is available to serve an essential public need.**

In a city as dense as New York, parkland is scarce and sacred. Parks should be the last place where private uses are sited, and the City's presumption should be against any alienation of parkland. Whether proposing a municipal non-park use or a private use that is arguably "compatible" with a park, the City should not view our parks as potential development sites, even for necessary or worthy projects.

- 8) State and local laws regulating parkland alienation should be strengthened to require **earlier and broader notification** of alienation actions, and to mandate **acre-for-acre replacement** of lost parkland.

The New York State Legislature can alienate the City's parkland with only a last-minute notice to the City Council and without any notice to the Parks Department or the Parks Committee of the Council. What's more, neither State nor City law require replacement of alienated parkland. The laws regulating alienation need to be strengthened to ensure that those entities charged with protecting our parks have at least 30-days' notice of any potential alienation action, and that New Yorkers receive an equal amount of proximate new parkland of the same quality and character to replace any alienated parkland.

## INTEGRATE PARKS PLANNING INTO NEIGHBORHOOD, CITYWIDE AND RESILIENCY PLANNING.

- 9) Parks are part of a **broad network of public spaces**, and **City agencies should collaborate** to maximize neighborhood open space and citywide environmental **benefits.**

Parks are not islands – they are part of a neighborhood's network of public spaces that also includes streets, sidewalks, greenways and plazas. Thinking about parks in this larger context is essential to ensuring that all residents of a community feel connected to and comfortable in all open spaces. Signage and other way-finding tools, pedestrian safety measures, and crime prevention strategies are integral to park-users' experience not just within parks, but also in traveling to and between parks. And this means that parks need to be considered as part of the larger infrastructure of neighborhoods and the city as a whole, and City agencies must coordinate to create a safe, cohesive public realm.

Too often City agencies operate in silos, but interagency cooperation is essential if New York is to be a truly sustainable urban environment. The Parks Department isn't the only agency with open space in its jurisdiction. Under PlaNYC, multiple agencies developed innovative programs to create new neighborhood open spaces, including the Schoolyards-to-Playgrounds Program and DOT's Plaza Program. These models should be continued, refined and replicated by more agencies, such as the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA), which has hundreds of acres of underutilized open space. In addition, sensitive wetlands and other natural areas currently fall under the jurisdiction of multiple City agencies; all of these vital ecosystems should be transferred to the Parks Department's Natural Areas Conservancy for preservation.

10) The City should be more proactive in **involving neighborhood residents in their parks**, both as volunteer stewards and in planning for the future.

New Yorkers for Parks' research shows that the best maintained parks in the city are those with active volunteers and "friends of" groups. Involving community residents in the planning and stewardship of local parks makes a noticeable difference in the quality of those public spaces. Outreach through established local organizations such as religious institutions, civic associations, schools and community centers will help encourage more New Yorkers to invest time and energy in their neighborhood parks. The Parks Department should collaborate with community residents to develop long-term plans for local parks, as well as to foster volunteer stewardship and cultivate "friends of" groups for every park in the city.