



**New York City Council Committee on Parks and Recreation  
Oversight Hearing: Equity in Parks  
April 23, 2014**

**Testimony of Tupper Thomas, New Yorkers for Parks**

Good afternoon Chairman Levine, and members of the Parks Committee. I'm Tupper Thomas, Executive Director of New Yorkers for Parks.

As we eagerly await the arrival of Commissioner Mitchell Silver, the parks community is focused on issues of equity. The time is ripe for it. After all, we have a new administration that talks often, and passionately, about improving the quality of life for all New Yorkers, and especially at a neighborhood level. And as we wrote last week in the *Gotham Gazette*, park issues are, at their core, neighborhood issues. We here all know the positive impact an ambitious park policy could have on the everyday lives of New Yorkers – and now is the time to aim high and think big.

But with all this talk of equity, it's an important moment to consider: what, really, is park equity, and what does an equitable park system look like in New York City? There are two essential factors:

- 1. Accessibility: do all New Yorkers live within walking distance of a park?**
- 2. Quality: are all public park properties well-maintained, safe and welcoming?**

Addressing the first question, accessibility, requires a long-term, ambitious planning and implementation strategy based upon a deep mayoral commitment that builds on some of the previous administration's PlaNYC goals. On this front, we are heartened that an urban planner who has demonstrated a commitment to transforming areas most in need is poised to take the helm at the Arsenal. The Parks Department, the Council and the mayor should think about step one – ensuring access to parks – as a key component of the park equity charge.

Question number two – maintaining and improving parks at a standard New Yorkers deserve as a public service – requires more immediate thinking about the budget. There must be a plan in place, from both a maintenance and capital perspective. The two must go hand in hand.

On the expense side, everyone here knows that far more funding is needed. So as a start – and it really should only be viewed as a start – we have proposed a \$10 million fund that would focus first and foremost on a jobs program that would start to move the Parks Department away from its reliance on roving work crews and really begin to restore some accountability on the ground. As a start, we proposed creating, for \$7 million, 150 new full-time maintenance and skilled gardener positions. Our proposed \$10 million pot of expense funding is a tiny fraction of the \$380 million proposed in the preliminary expense budget, but it's a reasonable starting point. And it would provide Commissioner Silver, and the administration, with a workable tool to start strategically

directing resources toward high-need areas in a way that would yield quick, tangible results for park users.

Through all its expense spending, it may also be time for the Parks Department to take a fresh look at its resource allocation formulas, which don't necessarily take into account factors that are key to addressing equity, such like income levels and public health – essentially, a look at parks in the context of broader neighborhood planning and development.

It's also essential, as New Yorkers for Parks has repeatedly noted over the past year, that Commissioner Silver be granted a similar level of discretion on capital spending. Relying on piecemeal discretionary allocations from Council members and borough presidents for the majority of projects, which has been the case for the better part of two decades, inevitability leads to results that don't address the areas of highest priority.

Fortunately, the FY15 budget appears to include a large infusion of capital money to be spent at the discretion of Commissioner Silver, including roughly \$80 million earmarked for “neighborhood parks.” This is a critical step in the right direction. Now, to get that money flowing effectively, the Council and administration should ensure that DPR has adequate capital division staffing, both to clear its backlog caused by Sandy recovery projects and take on the new projects.

The private sector also has a part to play in helping the City meet both equity benchmarks, though that role must be secondary and only in place to augment a more robust, focused public sector effort. Still, the city's larger conservancies, and a growing crop of potential donors, understand their role in helping lift the system as a whole and are eager to work with both the Council and Commissioner Silver on creating a sustainable, effective plan to do just that.

This is, of course, just the start of this conversation – really, the wheels won't start churning until Commissioner Silver starts work. But you are to be commended for getting all of us here today to think ambitiously, and acutely, about how the park system can work better for all New Yorkers.

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*For over 100 years, New Yorkers for Parks 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. More information: [www.ny4p.org](http://www.ny4p.org)*