



New York City Council Committee on Parks & Recreation
Oversight – Examining the Parks Department’s Parks Enforcement Patrol (PEP) Program
February 26, 2020
Emily Walker, Director of Outreach & Programs

Good afternoon. My name is Emily Walker, and I am the Director of Outreach & Programs at New Yorkers for Parks (NY4P). I want to thank the Committee on Parks and Recreation for inviting us to testify at today’s hearing.

NY4P believes that the safety of our public parks and open spaces is critical for their accessibility to the widest number of New Yorkers and its visitors possible. Perceptions of park safety are key to a number of constituencies feeling safe to visit and use their parks, in particular women, families with children, and the elderly. The presence of uniformed staff, such as Parks Enforcement Patrol (PEP) Officers and Urban Park Rangers, in our parks is one critical way to ensure that visitors can feel safe entering their local open spaces.

Last year, our organization spearheaded the creation of the Play Fair Coalition, which advocated for a \$100 million addition to the City’s expense budget for NYC Parks. One of our Coalition’s successes was the addition of \$6 million to the FY20 budget to fund 80 new Parks Enforcement Patrol officers, and \$3 million to fund 50 new Urban Park Rangers. While these positions are different in many ways, they both share the ability to enforce park rules and regulations, and we believe help convey a sense of safety to park-goers when they are present.

While our Coalition was thrilled to have successfully advocated for these new staff lines, we want to convey our concern that the funding for these positions was made possible by the City Council on a one-shot basis, which is set to expire on June 30th of this year. There are advanced education requirements for both positions, as well as a lengthy mandatory background check and months-long training process for PEP. These are good things: we want our uniformed Parks safety professionals to be the right ones for the positions, and we want them to be trained sufficiently. But that all takes time, and as we know, that time costs money. Although we won the funding for these positions last summer, many of them have just recently deployed into our parks at the beginning of this year. We are concerned that without a commitment from the Administration to baseline these positions, the City will lose these critical 80 PEP and 50 Urban Park Ranger staff lines come July 1st, when the FY21 budget goes into effect. We wouldn’t just lose those dedicated professionals: we would lose the significant investment the City has made in recruiting and training these hard-to-fill, critical positions. The Play Fair Coalition will be asking the Mayor to baseline these positions for the FY21 budget, to preserve these hard-fought jobs, and ensure that NYC Parks’ investment in training these new PEP officers and Urban Park Rangers is preserved.

Finally, NY4P strongly believes that the safety of our parks and open spaces depend on a number of factors beyond the work done by our PEP officers, or even our Urban Park Rangers. Parks that lack sufficient maintenance and programming are parks that are less likely to feel welcoming to the communities they are located within. Depending on the features of a park, there are even specific horticultural maintenance issues that can lead visitors to feel unsafe in their parks. To that end, we firmly believe that creating a more welcoming and safe park system for all New Yorkers depends on robust, dedicated funding for more permanent, baselined staff, from PEP officers and Urban Park Rangers, to City Park Workers and Gardeners. This idea is at the heart of our work convening the Play Fair Coalition, and informs our advocacy to seek more resources for NYC Parks maintenance and operations staff. All of our NYC Parks staff play an integral role in keeping our parks clean, safe, and beautiful, and we urge the Council to remember this as we enter budget season.

Thank you for inviting me to speak today. I'm happy to answer any questions the Council might have.

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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.
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