



**New York City Council Committee on Parks and Recreation**

**Hearing on the FY15 Preliminary Budget**

**March 27, 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. Last Friday really was an inspiring day for park advocates in New York City. Mayor de Blasio and Commissioner Silver offered thoughtful, even-handed commentary centered around a clear goal: a fairer park system for all New Yorkers. We left the announcement with genuine optimism. And we're also pleased to see that the mayor's preliminary budget for Parks not only baselines many of the important restorations made over the past few years, but funds items up front that are usually subject to the annual budget dance.

This good news gives us the opportunity to turn our attention to the larger issue of addressing inequities across the park system. The solution is complex and nuanced. While many of the large park conservancies are ready to work with the commissioner on bringing more private resources – financial and otherwise – to parks in need, it's clear, as this committee's chairman noted in the *Huffington Post* last week, that addressing inequities must begin with the public budget. There are several specific budget and policy reforms that the administration and Parks Department can undertake in the name of equity and fairness.

On the expense side, this will require addressing the top concern of many local park advocates across the city: there simply isn't enough full-time staff assigned to the parks that need them most. Rather, 75 percent of the Department's maintenance staff is made up of Job Training Participants who work at the Department up to six months but are almost never given an opportunity for permanent employment once their training is complete. "Almost as soon as they're really up to speed on the park, they cycle out," a local advocate told us recently. Her comment rings true across the city. At the same time, many advocates tell us that having full-time staff – a familiar face in the park – goes a long way toward improving the overall park experience for users. These issues offer Mayor de Blasio and Commissioner Silver an opportunity to both address park equity issues and create good jobs.

What would those jobs be, where would they make the most immediate impact, and how much money is needed to create them? Here are some great ways to get started in the highest-use, highest-need neighborhood parks:

- \$2 million for 10 full-time workers per borough to staff playgrounds with comfort stations.

- \$1.5 million for five skilled full-time gardeners per borough to help maintain larger neighborhood parks. Our organization learned first-hand how important these positions are when we helped lead the Neighborhood Parks Initiative almost 10 years ago.

Not only would these new positions start making a difference for parks most in need right away, but they'd offer an opportunity for the Department's part-time workers to gain full-time employment through a new, robust training program to help transition JTP staff into full-time maintenance workers and gardeners.

- Additionally, though the Parks Department has shortened its street-tree pruning cycle thanks to recent budget restorations, DPR still prunes very few trees park trees. \$2 million would allow the Department to at least prune about 25,000 trees in parks: a good start toward a pruning cycle.

These are possible suggestions for a better operating budget. If the Council could establish a neighborhood parks fund of \$5-6 million, Commissioner Silver could work with the Council on a plan that really addresses needs in underserved parks.

There is also an opportunity to address inequities through the capital budget – and without increasing it by a single dollar. Unlike many agencies that oversee a large portfolio of capital projects, the Parks Department does not have a meaningful discretionary budget enabling it to plan for and fund capital projects over time across parks citywide. Rather, the Department has been reliant for funding for the majority of its projects on piecemeal discretionary allocations from City Council Members and Borough Presidents. Cobbling together allocations over multiple fiscal years from different elected officials is inefficient, leads to inequitable results, and often means the nuts-and-bolts needs of parks across the city fall through the cracks. The Bloomberg Administration provided consistent capital funding for parks, but those funds were targeted to a limited number of large-scale projects. It's time to let the Parks Department direct those funds to the neighborhood parks and playgrounds that need them most as part of a timelier, more cost-effective capital process.

Last Friday ushered in a new era for New York City's parks. We're eager to work with Commissioner Silver and the leading conservancies on ways to bring more private money into high-need parks throughout the city, but we're also hopeful that the Parks Department will now turn its primary focus to large-scale budget and policy reforms aimed at addressing inequity – and, in turn, lifting the park system as a whole.

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