



**New York City Council Committee on Parks and Recreation
Preliminary Budget Hearing – Parks and Recreation
March 3, 2016
Tupper Thomas, Executive Director**

Good morning. I am Tupper Thomas, 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 2017 preliminary budget. The Parks Department has made strides toward becoming more resourceful, efficient, and innovative, which we find encouraging and inspiring. But the wonderful new motto of the commissioner emphasizes CARE, and yet the department isn't fully funded. The Parks Department can only bring care to our parks through improved expense and capital funding. This means targeted funding that creates full-time, permanent staff to maintain our parks, that empowers communities to become effective stewards of their open space, and that makes necessary capital improvements.

How can the city accomplish this? First and foremost, we strongly support the creation of 100 full-time, permanent City Park Workers and 50 Assistant Gardener positions. Dedicated employees are not only essential to the quality of open space across the city, but these are good, dependable jobs with room for advancement. Creating new positions will go a long way toward addressing equity both in our parks and the city's workforce.

That is not the only opportunity for the city to increase the quality of parks and open space while also creating jobs. Expanding the Urban Park Rangers program, with Rangers specially trained in wildlife management, will help residents co-exist with the increasing presence of urban wildlife, especially in neighborhoods in the Bronx and Staten Island.

While full-time, permanent jobs are most crucial, expanding the Parks Department's seasonal workforce is necessary if we want to have vibrant open space for New Yorkers to enjoy in the spring, summer and fall months.

Additionally, the city should provide employee training programs, a cost-effective way to enable staff to better maintain their parks.

To empower local-level stewardship of open space, City Parks Foundation, Partnerships for Parks and GreenThumb need adequate funding. These programs will allow communities to access the training and resources needed to be effective.

GreenThumb is the largest community garden program in the nation, and yet they are severely understaffed. Their current employees can only service half of the gardens in the system. The staff needs to be increased as this program is essential to cultivating the next generation of gardeners.

With expense budget money the Parks Department should increase its fleet of small vehicles, allowing workers to move quickly and adeptly with limited cost to the city. The Tree Census must be completed, with capital funding added to finish the final two years of their five year tree planting programs.

Other capital budget priorities should include anchor parks in CPI zones; creating new spaces for community playgrounds by increasing funding for the Schoolyards to Playgrounds program; restoration of heavily-used artificial turf fields across the city which provide sporting opportunities to many residents; and providing GreenThumb with funding for desperately needed improvements such as fencing and sidewalks. This should all be done with an eye toward neighborhoods undergoing rezoning as the increase in population will increase the necessity for quality open space.

With funding for LIDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) mapping, the Parks Department can increase its understanding of the existing parks landscape. Additionally, the Parks Department needs funding to digitize its map files, a project that is long overdue.

The city can truly CARE for its parks with funding that creates full-time, permanent staff, that gives communities the resources they need to be effective stewards, and that makes much-needed capital improvements.

Thank you

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