



**New York City Council Committee on Parks & Recreation**  
**Hearing: Preliminary Budget Hearing**  
**March 8, 2019**  
**Lynn Kelly, Executive Director**

Good afternoon. My name is Lynn Kelly, and I am the Executive Director for New Yorkers for Parks (NY4P). Our organization is a founding member of the Play Fair Coalition. Many of our Coalition partners are with us today to testify about the importance of adequately funding our parks, and we thank the City Council Committee on Parks and Recreation for inviting us to speak about the fiscal year 2020 Preliminary Budget.

City-owned parkland comprises 14% of all City land, but last fiscal year, NYC Parks received only 0.59% of the City expense budget. The last time NYC Parks received more than 1% of the City's expense budget was in the 1970s. This was a decade that is associated with the City's hardest economic times - when agencies were funded at an all-time low – and yet even then our Parks Department's expense budget was still funded at a higher rate than it is today. We believe this is unacceptable, especially in light of our growing population, and the tremendous number of visitors our City parks receive each year. Enough is enough – now is the time to Play Fair for parks, and commit to an increased budget for maintenance, operations, and programming.

We are asking the City to commit an additional \$100M to the preliminary budget for parks. While this might seem like a large ask, the reality is that this amount would increase the total proportion of the expense budget for Parks from 0.59% to 0.69%. While we would ideally like to see NYC Parks receive 1% of the total City budget again, we believe starting with \$100M would be a meaningful and transformative addition to the agency's budget. What would a \$100M addition to the expense budget for NYC Parks provide?

Since 2015, our organization has advocated for the baselining of 100 City Park Worker and 50 Gardener positions, which would cost the City a mere \$10M. These roles are essential to the maintenance, upkeep, and beautification of parks located within the City's Community Parks Initiative zones. These are parts of the City that have long been under-resourced, but have recently been the recipients of newly reconstructed parks and playground. We believe it is irresponsible of the City to fail to baseline these positions, which provide the critical maintenance needed to protect the transformative capital investments made by this Administration. Additionally, these are 150 hard-working New Yorkers who, year after year, are unable to know definitively if they will have a job come July 1<sup>st</sup>. These roles have the potential to be stable green jobs, and we believe it is an issue of equity and economic justice to finally protect these jobs for the 150 New Yorkers who are doing this work.

An expense investment of approximately \$4M, alongside a capital investment of \$3.74M, would allow the City's Natural Resources Group to begin the first year of a 25-year plan to proactively maintain and conserve

our precious natural forests. The City's own "Forest Management Framework" report lays out the funding needs to begin this important work, and we believe now is the time to commit to this funding plan and begin to invest in the work needed to keep our natural forests healthy, free of invasive species, and protected for generations to come. With our rapidly changing climate, this visionary work is more important than ever.

An addition of \$65M to the expense budget would allow for parks of all sizes, in all neighborhoods, to receive fixed-post, permanent staff. Park advocates and stewards know just how important it is to have a consistent presence in the park, and a reliable staff contact who understands the needs of each park. For too long, NYC Parks has had to rely on roving crews to do basic maintenance and operations in our parks. This investment would make a tremendous difference for communities. \$47M would allow the agency to roll-out an innovative Zone Management strategy for park maintenance in our 48 largest parks – this is the same model used by the Central Park Conservancy, arguably one of the most cherished and beautiful public open spaces in the world. It is pennywise and pound foolish to not take the opportunity to implement this kind of management of our parks when we have the opportunity to. It would create not only cleaner and more beautiful large parks, but it would create a new green workforce within the agency. Similarly, an investment of about \$18M would allow for smaller neighborhood parks to have a fixed-post, permanent staff person.

\$8M would allow the City to provide funding to every single GreenThumb community garden to receive physical improvement. Our City's community gardens provide untold benefits to our neighborhoods – they allow for New Yorkers who live in food deserts to cultivate and grow fresh, organic produce for their families, they provide children with spaces to foster a connection with nature, and they provide community cohesion. Our community gardens are often overlooked in the funding conversation, but this modest ask would make a tremendous difference in allowing our City's dedicated community gardeners to help implement transformative changes to their cherished community spaces.

A \$4M investment would allow the City to expand its Kids-in-Motion program to every single playground that could host one. As of now, only 100 playgrounds citywide have this programming. A small addition to the expense budget would expand this program to reach the 395 additional playgrounds that don't currently have this program. This would mean that tens of thousands additional New York City children and their families would have structured programs in the warmer months, offering opportunities for safe, educational, and proactive play.

And finally, a \$9M addition to the budget would allow NYC Parks to increase the ranks of both Urban Park Rangers and Parks Enforcement Patrol officers. \$3M would mean the City could hire an additional 50 Urban Park Rangers, expanding their ranks from the current 30 that work across the entire City. \$6M would mean an additional 80 PEP officers could be hired. Both of these positions provide a level of safety and protection for our parks. We know that when parks are perceived to be unsafe, they become a liability for a neighborhood, rather than the asset they should always be.

In a city that champions equity, we have to start treating our parks, gardens and open space as critical city infrastructure, which also means investing in the infrastructure of the thousands of people who care for them day-in and day-out. We are here today as a member of the Play Fair Coalition, which is nearly 100 organizations strong. Simply put, it is time for the City to Play Fair for our parks. We ask that the Council join us in advocating for this \$100M investment to the expense budget for NYC Parks. Thank you for inviting me to speak today. We look forward to working with the City to create the best budget achievable for parks to benefit all New Yorkers. I'm happy to answer any questions the Council might have.