



**New York City Council Committee on Parks & Recreation
Oversight - Examining the Parks Department's Maintenance Practices
September 26, 2019
Lynn Kelly, Executive Director**

Good afternoon. My name is Lynn Kelly, and I am the Executive Director of New Yorkers for Parks (NY4P). I want to take a moment to welcome our new Committee Chair, Council Member Peter Koo, and our two new committee members, Council Members Adrienne Adams and Carlina Rivera.

NY4P is a founding member of the Play Fair Coalition, which includes over 150 organizations citywide, and has the support of a super majority of the City Council. Our Coalition worked tirelessly last spring to ensure that NYC Parks received a more significant amount of expense funding for critical maintenance, operations, and programming work. We were thrilled at the news of the City Council and Administration committing over \$43 million in additional expense funding, but we also know it is just a start.

While the physical infrastructure of our parks is of vital importance, it is often the day-to-day maintenance needs of our parks that make the biggest impact on park use and perceptions of safety. We also know that without routine, quality maintenance work done in our parks and green spaces, the physical infrastructure of our parks will more quickly degrade. Since the fiscal crisis of the 1970s, NYC Parks has lost over 4,000 full-time equivalent staff lines, and has for decades had to rely on a more seasonal and temporary workforce. This means that for over 40 years, the City agency tasked with caring for 14% of New York City's land has had to do more with less. It is incredible that our parks are in the overall condition they are given this tremendous mandate.

The \$43 million Expense Budget addition the FY20 City budget included some important wins for NYC Parks, namely the baselining of 100 City Park Workers and 50 Gardeners that work throughout the five boroughs. At a cost of a little less than \$10 million, the administration finally made these positions permanent for the hard-working New Yorkers who do some of the most necessary ongoing maintenance and clean-up of our parks. We want to note that in an overall City budget that exceeds \$92 billion in total, the investment of nearly \$10 million represents a literal rounding error. It's about time these positions were made permanent.

We are grateful that the City Council recognized the importance of park maintenance and operations, and made such meaningful additions to the FY20 Expense Budget for NYC Parks. The 100 additional City Park Workers, 50 additional Gardeners, 50 new Urban Park Rangers, and 80 new Parks Enforcement Patrol officers will help ensure that between now and June 30th, our parks, gardens, and natural areas will see a higher standard of care, beautification, and safety. We are also pleased to know that new specialized staff will also be hired to help implement the funding for our natural forests and GreenThumb community gardens. We remain concerned, however, that these vitally needed staff lines, and the hard-working New Yorkers who

will be filling them, will lack the stability and permanence needed to make a long-term impact in our parks. If we want to move the needle on better conditions in parks, we must make this funding permanently baselined. Additionally, we expect NYC Parks to allocate any new staff lines in an equitable way among the boroughs, and we expect the placement of these positions to be made transparent to the public through some reporting mechanism. We suggest that perhaps reporting to the City Council would be an effective means of relaying this information.

This past spring, the Play Fair Coalition asked the City to make an investment of \$65 million to allow parks of all sizes to have fixed-post, permanent staff. Over \$47 million of this funding would have allowed NYC Parks to implement the zone management strategy of maintenance across its 48 largest parks. The zone management strategy, developed by the Central Park Conservancy, has been piloted by the agency in a select number of parks to great success. Expanding this management strategy, and making permanent the staffing it would require, would have an incredible impact on the conditions in some of the City's most loved and heavily-used destination parks. The remaining \$18 million we asked for would allow NYC Parks to expand fixed-post, permanent staff at all City parks that would be eligible to do so. This would mean small neighborhood parks and playgrounds with comfort stations could have a dedicated parkie whose one job is to help keep these parks clean, well-supplied, and safe year-round. The community advocates and stewards you will hear from today can speak to the importance of having parks staff that they can get to know on a one-on-one basis. While we didn't receive this funding in the FY20 budget, we still believe this should be a funding priority for the City, as it would have an incredible impact on park conditions citywide.

I want to conclude by stating that 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 believe that the funding NYC Parks received in the FY20 budget was an incredible win, but one that will require expansion and baselining in order to be most effective in the long-term. We look forward to continuing to work with the Council to fight for the funding and structural changes that will be needed to ensure that all parks can be safe, clean, and beautiful for the millions of New Yorkers who consider their parks to be their backyards. 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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