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Securing Adequate Funding/Maintenance for Parks

a. Will you work towards securing long term funding for Parks?

Yes. We rank last per capita of any major American city in the amount spent on park maintenance; this statistic reveals worlds about our priorities and must be changed.

- i. *If so, would you consider exploring creative financial models such as Parks Improvement Districts (based on the BID model), tax increment financing (TIF), zoning benefits and public private partnerships to supplement maintenance and operating costs?*

Allowing other financial models to grow is a slippery slope. If significant expense, control and power shift to public/private partnerships, potentially the city's role is usurped in certain situations. I am concerned about the BID model as not only lacking feasibility, but also fostering an unequal system where wealthy neighborhoods can tax for services in a way that poor areas cannot. Our city's charter mandates that the city maintain its parks. That's the law, and clearly the city should abide by that, fully funding parks without relying on outside sources.

b. Would you support dedicating revenue earned through park concessions to parks maintenance and operations?

No. I do not believe this is a tenable long-term solution to the parks' funding problems. Using concessions to pay for the parks will encourage the parks commissioner to focus on revenue generation, instead of focusing on the beautification, maintenance and safety of the parks. This dependence on concessions will in turn result in the further privatization of our public space, and will make the continued well-being of our parks almost completely dependent on private enterprise. We want funds going to parks, but commercializing them would only serve to depreciate their beauty. Instead of focusing on concession funding, I would lobby the city to dedicate 1% of city funds over the next decade for all of New York City's parks, thereby allowing currently neglected parks to have funds that they can depend on and use for park planning and upkeep.

c. Will you support establishing the tracking of spending and staffing on a park by park basis?

Yes. In fact, the Public Advocate's office is an ideal vehicle for developing such an oversight role.

d. When a capital project is not fully funded will you support diversifying funding sources to ensure their completion?

Yes, but I would have to examine these sources on a case by case basis, depending on the situation. We need to make sure there aren't any strings attached that might introduce players with competing interests.

e. What specific actions would you take to ensure that every park in every neighborhood has properly working facilities such as ball-fields, educational facilities, restrooms, etc?

Our current programs for building and maintaining our parks are efficient, but are simply not funded at a level that would allow them to maintain these facilities in every park. My approach to this problem would be to call on the parks commissioner to allocate more funding specifically aimed at maintenance projects in parks that don't currently have these facilities and enlist the support of elected officials and community leaders in those localities, with the understanding that in neighborhoods where parks aren't as well maintained and more lacking of such facilities, they can often provide the most benefit.

New York has more than 28,000 acres of parkland; clearly its maintenance should be a much higher priority, a priority of the Public Advocate. The Public Advocate is one of only three citywide offices, granting it a crucial oversight role when it comes to all the city's parks – one that should have qualitative aspects to compliment the Comptroller's fiscal oversight. As such I would create an open-spaces task force to fulfill the Public Advocate's watchdog role by releasing independent reports on individual parks and the Department of Parks & Recreation as a whole, with an eye towards achieving greater accountability.

The backbone of my campaign and my desire to serve as New York City's Public Advocate is my vision for how this unique elected position – the only position in America that represents the people *against* the government – can operate as an example of democracy in action. No New Yorker would have to ask “what does the Public Advocate do?” if I were in charge of the office. The City Charter specifies in section 24g, “The public advocate shall establish procedures for receiving and processing complaints, responding to complaints, conducting investigations, and reporting findings, and shall inform the public about such procedures.” So I would like to outline fourteen approaches I would use to demonstrate how a Siegel Public Advocate office would serve as a dynamic interface for advocates, lovers and users of parks:

1. I will not only contact the appropriate city agencies when it is appropriate, but I will also connect concerned residents and community groups to the appropriate agencies, so they do not get the run-around when trying to deal with city bureaucracies.
2. The Public Advocate has access to the media, and he or she should use it. The Public Advocate's office will put pressing issues into New York's papers by writing letters to the editor and opinion editorials on a constant basis.
3. Similarly, our office will hold press conferences to keep New York's journalists apprised of the problems people are facing, and the work our office and our partners are doing to fix them.

4. A Public Advocate cannot understand the concerns of the City without going directly to the people. That is why we will hold public conferences/town hall meetings throughout the five boroughs to allow residents to give feedback about the difficulties they are facing.
5. Not only will I hold meetings in all five boroughs, but I will also decentralize the office. I would establish satellite Public Advocate offices in each borough, not just the municipal building in downtown Manhattan. No advocate waits for people to come with their problems; advocacy is about taking the first step by reaching out to people in their own neighborhoods.
6. Once a problem has been identified, the Public Advocate's office will designate a task force to speedily gather information, make recommendations, and if necessary, take action.
7. If a task force is insufficient, I will not hesitate to create Public Advocate Commissions that can hold hearings, issue reports, and bring additional media attention to an issue.
8. If our office identifies an issue that warrants substantial study, we will commission Special Reports and have experts look into those issues.
9. There will be times when new legislation will be required to solve the issues we face. Under my direction, the Public Advocate's office will be aggressive in recommending and supporting new legislation.
10. As Public Advocate, I will encourage and participate in all protected First Amendment action events, including marches, rallies and protests.
11. One of the most important features of the Public Advocate's office is its authority to hold public hearings. When dealing with City agencies accused of wrongdoing, one can be assured that holding hearings is a tool I will use liberally. Additionally, New York law allows the Public Advocate to petition for judicial public hearings when there has been any showing of government impropriety, which allows the public to hear the acts in a court of law. As a civil rights attorney representing taxpayers I used this process to bring public attention to the "slush fund" that had been funneling city money to fictitious organizations. That case is currently on appeal in the New York Appellate Division. The incumbent has never asked for judicial hearings, but I will show no such reluctance in exposing government improprieties, such as fraud and corruption.
12. I would create an Institute of Advocacy where the Public Advocate staff would quarterly hold weekend training sessions on the "art of advocacy." The goal would be to create a citywide network of skilled advocates.
13. To this end, I would recruit, train and supervise hundreds of volunteers (assistant Public Advocates) to participate in weekly intakes at housing developments, public libraries, and senior centers, identifying the systemic issues and recurring grievances that are plaguing city government.
14. As a last resort, the Public Advocate's office will engage in litigation. We will sue for declaratory judgments, injunctive relief, or, in state court, for a judicial public hearing.

- i. Will you support a "fix it first" policy for funding capital projects, so that resources are allocated to existing projects in need of repair?

Yes.

- f. Will you support adequate staffing and funding to ensure that new and existing parks stay in a "state of good repair"?

Yes.

- i. What funding/programs would you use to increase the full-time parks maintenance staff?

I would advocate for a higher expense budget for Department of Parks & Recreation.

- ii. What can be done to improve baseline services, or maintenance of effort, in our parks to ensure that partnerships don't need to replace poor, existing services or neglected services such as bench and fountain repairs?

I believe that the city must make parks and open spaces a much greater priority.

- iii. How would you fund the unique maintenance costs of waterfront parks (e.g. access, bulkheads and piers)?

Recognizing that much of this is infrastructure, I would advocate for increased city, state and federal funding. The Public Advocate should be a strong ambassador for the city to secure funding from other levels of government.

- g. Will you support park ratings by borough and community board in addition to the citywide level in the Mayor's Management Report?

Yes. I also feel we need a truly independent, collaborative way to report on parks at the citywide level, which would require establishing independent data sets. This could potentially be performed by the Public Advocate's open-spaces task force I referred to in question (e.)

- h. Will you support making the official Parks Department "property list" – that specifically delineates all 1,700 properties – available online?

Yes.

Protecting Parkland

- a. Will you support more laws that require a public notification and input when a park will be used for non-park purposes, to afford parks the protection they need from development or use by other agencies?

Yes – provided, of course, that the laws are well-written and created with community input

- i. How would you require that professional sports organizations assist in maintaining and operating public parks near their facilities?

Right now I am considering filing a lawsuit on behalf of the community surrounding Yankee Stadium, which has seen many acres of park and recreational space destroyed to make way for the new stadium, and many promises so far unkept for building an equitable amount of replacement park space. The new Yankee Stadium deal has been an example of poor bargaining by the City; we're giving too much and getting too little. As Public Advocate I would make sure that when future deals are made with sports organizations, especially when they are granted space for a stadium, that we seek contributions to the surrounding community in the form of funding improvements to existing park space or creating additional park space.

b. Will you work to strengthen parkland alienation regulation by requiring Environmental Impact Statements before parkland alienation bill is filed by municipality?

Yes

i. How will you do so?

As Public Advocate I will demand notification, recommend that all alienation go through ULURP, and advocate that all EIS/EAs be made public by law.

d. How would you prevent "pay to play" situations from arising at public and amateur sports facilities?

We should not engage in any form of pay-to-play, and I actually have the experience of successfully representing members of the East Harlem and South Bronx community who opposed the city's giving private schools priority in use of athletic fields in Randall's Island, in exchange for \$45 million. Not only is pay-to-play policy-wise questionable, it also limits public use of parks. Parks should be available and accessible to all New Yorkers; they should be protected and maintained, and we shouldn't need to cut undesirable deals to do so.

e. Will you support legislation that requires regular NYPD reports to the City Council on crime in parks (i.e. Intro 470)?

Yes – but I feel Intro 470 is weaker than we need and they have not complied with expanding the adopted law. There must be greater safeguards and we must hold the NYPD and DPR accountable.

f. Will you work towards making parkland part of the city's CompStat system?

Yes.

Expanding Park Use

a. Will you work toward creating, with significant community involvement, a comprehensive citywide master plan for parks and open spaces that will guide the overall acquisition, restoration, improvement, and maintenance of parks, natural areas, playgrounds and athletic facilities in the five boroughs?

Yes

i. What is your vision for some of the new parks?