



**New York City Council Committee on Parks & Recreation,  
Committee on Contracts, and Subcommittee on Capital/Finance  
Oversight - Improving the Efficiency of Parks Department Capital Projects  
November 12, 2019  
Lynn Kelly, Executive Director**

Good morning. My name is Lynn Kelly, and I am the Executive Director of New Yorkers for Parks (NY4P). I want to thank the Committee on Parks and Recreation, the Committee on Contracts, and the Subcommittee on Capital and Finance for holding today's important hearing. NY4P has long advocated for improvements to the City's capital process for parks, and we welcome the chance to testify to today.

I want to start by stating that while we understand the frustrations relating to the high cost and the lengthy timeline for most capital projects, we also think it is time that the Council took a hard look at the various steps that are overseen by various agencies or entities that *aren't* NYC Parks.

According to NYC Parks' capital division, over 70% of the many steps in the procurement process alone are required by State and City laws, and are outside of the agency's control. The Mayor's Office of Contracts, the City's Law Department, and the Office of Management and Budget all play roles in the procurement process: it's important to hear from representatives of those agencies too. Additionally, other City agencies can complete capital projects more quickly and cheaply than NYC Parks – there are valuable lessons to be learned from them.

For years, NY4P has highlighted the need for NYC Parks to have a significant, robust discretionary capital budget. For a capital-intensive agency responsible for the maintenance and upkeep of 14% of the entire City's land, it is incredibly troubling that most capital funding for the agency remains contingent on allocations from elected officials. While there is a tremendous value to the ability of our City's elected officials to fund renovations in their districts' parks and open spaces, those allocations should not be the primary source of capital funding for our city's open spaces. Without a well-funded and flexible capital budget to be used at the discretion of the agency itself, the Parks capital process will not see the long-term improvements it needs. The Center for an Urban Future estimates that between now and 2028, our parks system requires \$5.8 billion in funding to bring our parks system to a state of good repair. Without a meaningful discretionary capital budget, NYC Parks cannot meet this need.

We are thrilled that NYC Parks has recently begun its first-ever needs assessment of its entire portfolio. However, the rate of funding to complete this vitally-needed process is not sufficient: the needs assessment will not be complete for another 20 years. We believe this is an unacceptable timeframe for NYC Parks to work with. Having a complete set of system-wide needs available will help NYC Parks better plan for and execute capital projects that will have a transformative impact on communities citywide. It will also expedite

the process for individual capital projects, as having this data available at the outset would streamline the design phase of the NYC Parks capital process. We urge the Mayor's Office and the City Council to consider fully-funding the needs assessment in FY21 as a priority.

We think it's worth highlighting positive changes Parks has made to the capital process, making it more effective and efficient under Commissioner Silver's leadership. We applaud these changes. As of now, NYC Parks is one of the only agencies to share information on individual capital projects publicly, which they do via the Parks Capital Tracker. This online tool has helped illuminate the process for the public, and created a mechanism for agency accountability to the elected officials and communities whose parks and playgrounds are set to receive improvements. Additionally, NYC Parks has taken steps to reduce internal agency reviews, and has moved toward using more standard templates for common design projects. We are heartened by these changes, but know that there are still structural parts of the overall process that could be streamlined that, again, may not be under the control of NYC Parks directly.

As park advocates, we have pushed for changes and improvements to the capital process for parks for many years, but today we find ourselves asking why we are yet again having a hearing on this topic. Since 2013, there have been at least three hearings to examine various components of the NYC Parks capital process. Have other agencies been subject to oversight hearings to this degree? While we understand the frustration that is shared on all sides of this issue, after so many years of having conversations about why the capital process for NYC Parks is broken, we think it's time to also admit that the capital process is broken across the board. Parks is far from the only agency to experience cost overruns and project delays, so why is it that they are most consistently singled out in the public conversation? And what changes will the Council make to address and fix the issues that make our capital process so onerous?

As we have stated many times on the record, in a city that champions equity we must start treating our parks, gardens and open spaces as critical city infrastructure. This means not only fixing a broken capital process, but also investing in the important long-term maintenance our parks require and deserve. Our park capital investments are more often than not the results of hard-won advocacy by everyday New Yorkers who want to see their parks, playgrounds, and gardens improved. We owe it to ourselves as a City to ensure that these capital improvements are protected by being properly maintained, and that requires not just an investment in physical infrastructure, but a permanent investment in the infrastructure of the people who do the critical work to keep our parks clean, safe, and beautiful.

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.  
[www.ny4p.org](http://www.ny4p.org)*