



**New York City Council Committees on Finance  
Hearing on the FY16 Preliminary Budget  
March 9, 2015  
Submitted testimony of New Yorkers for Parks**

Good morning. I'm Tupper Thomas, Executive Director of New Yorkers for Parks, and it's my pleasure to testify on the Preliminary Budget as it relates to parks. We see many bright signs in this budget, but we also see some holes.

Use of our city's parks has gone way up in the past several years, and so has our city's population. Last year's announcement of the Community Parks Initiative raised our hopes that baseline funding for park staff would keep pace. This budget season, we see that we have to fight for that baseline funding again. To really express the administration's stated commitment to equity, and to create security and stability in park funding, the Administration needs to restore funding for some essential services that have fallen out of the budget.

We're excited that Parks will receive funding to study its usership and capital needs, but we have to address what's lacking now in order to make proper investments down the road. Mainly, \$8.75 million that went to fund essential maintenance and operations staff lines last year needs to be restored to the budget. Roughly half of that amount made it possible to hire operating staff for Community Parks Initiative locations. We strongly supported CPI explicitly for its provision of maintenance and operations money, and its community outreach. CPI can only succeed with this funding assured. Without that money in the baseline, we will lose playground associates, city park workers, PEP lines and gardeners, both citywide and in targeted CPI zones. CPI, and parks more broadly, need appropriate baseline funding for staffing. When the Council funds these positions on a one-shot basis, the city cannot attract quality applicants who are looking to build careers. Parks Enforcement Patrol officers, gardeners and playground associates, when properly supported, can send the message that the city cares about a community. This sense of community encourages neighbors to become more active in supporting their own parks.

For similar reasons, we need to restore money for City Parks Foundation, which supports community development work through the Partnerships for Parks program. Last year's Council addition of \$434,500 provided key staff and resources to provide technical assistance and capacity-building tools for community groups. For CPI to serve as an entry point for long-term care by local residents, we need these staff in place. We also see huge benefit in providing \$3.5 million to the Natural Resources Group, which would provide for field crews in each borough. The city has committed millions in capital to sensitive ecosystems, and good management requires maintenance to match.

Funding for these crews could go with funding enhancements park rangers, which can help the department expand Rangers' science and nature programming to more parks in low-income communities. Bringing nature into communities is crucial to solving the equity puzzle, so we urge the council to provide \$3.5 million for GreenThumb. This would fund 15 new staff positions, including increased staffing for the school garden program Grow to Learn, the Land Restoration Program, and GreenThumb Outreach Coordinators. Having an increased outreach presence would allow GreenThumb to provide more oversight and enforcement of garden rules, which would ensure that existing gardens are meeting their obligations to the communities they serve. It would also allow for more support to be provided for gardens that are currently struggling with membership or maintenance issues. Both of these

considerations would help existing community gardens serve their mission as neighborhood resources and open spaces. This would also pay for lumber, compost, and soil for gardens citywide.

And we should show that the city is also a good steward, so we need adequate funding for street and park tree care. We're asking for \$3 million for pruning, and for clearing tree stumps, many of which still remain in our parks post-Sandy. This amount would exceed the Council's \$1.75 million addition to last year's budget, and would allow for a more robust pruning and stump removal schedule citywide.

Thinking bigger, we urge the Council to provide \$500,000 for basic masterplanning of four to five mid-sized parks. The city needs to develop more inclusive, community-led practices for designing and maintaining them to meet changing needs. A masterplan creates a roadmap for the Council, borough presidents and communities to set priorities. It can also set a precedent for ongoing funding over several years of operation.

We believe a \$100 million addition to the budget for discretionary capital funding would provide a tremendous benefit for capital projects that have stalled due to funding shortages. Letting the Parks Department decide which projects need extra funding to push them to the finish line would pay off visibly citywide. We also echo the Parks Department's request to provide capital improvements in mid-sized parks.

More capital staff and more capital discretion add up to more resources in more places. With more realistic funding for staff and maintenance, and an eye toward long-term upgrades in parks of all sizes, the Council can make park equity much more than a discussion topic. Thank you.

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*For over 100 years, New Yorkers for Parks 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. More information: [www.ny4p.org](http://www.ny4p.org)*