



**New York City Council Committees on Parks & Recreation
Oversight Hearing on Parks Department Properties Currently Inaccessible to the Public
December 1, 2016
Emily Walker, Director of Outreach & Programs**

Good afternoon, my name is Emily Walker, and I am the Director of Outreach and Programs at New Yorkers for Parks. I want to thank the City Council Committee on Parks and Recreation for inviting us to speak on this issue. As the city's independent advocate for parks citywide, I will be restricting my comments today to encompass only those sites that are currently managed by NYC Parks.

We share the belief that increasing access to some of these locations would be a great way to generate excitement about our city's parks and rich history, however we do have concerns about the feasibility of increasing access to some of these spaces. In September, I had the privilege of attending a tour of North Brother Island hosted by the Natural Areas Conservancy. The opportunity to visit the Island was an experience I will never forget, however I also saw and learned firsthand about the challenges that opening up access to this particular location would present. Part of our tour focused on helping the Natural Resources Group to complete a massive reforestation effort on the island that has been underway for years. The City has invested in invasive species removal and the replanting of native trees and shrubs, in large part to encourage the safe nesting of wading birds, including herons, egrets, gulls, and cormorants. Additionally, safety hazards were present at every turn – the collapsing historic buildings present a major challenge to visitors. We believe the enormous cost burden of rehabbing the Island to a point where it could be safely visited, as well as its importance as a safe breeding site for our city's wading bird populations, mean that access should remain tightly restricted.

The monuments and arches included on the list present a different set of challenges from North Brother Island. It is our understanding that some of these locations were developed to allow internal access and visitation, however many of these locations have suffered from long-deferred maintenance, and have experienced damage from the elements over the years that would require a significant financial investment to make them safe to visit with regularity. We also have concerns that achievable 'access' to these spaces would preclude many New Yorkers who have physical limitations. We would support a cost-effective process of rehabilitating these spaces to a degree that they would be safe to visit, but would encourage programming and other activities that would make these locations somehow accessible to all, including those who are differently abled.

It must be stated that we do not believe these projects should take precedence over other, badly needed areas of investment for our city parks and playgrounds. As it stands, the Parks Department has not had the budget needed to adequately maintain its existing citywide network of almost 2,000 parks, and the current conditions at all of the locations discussed today would require significant and costly remediation before increased public access could become a reality. We would encourage thoughtful study about how to open up these spaces for occasional access, while balancing concerns of equity in funding for repairs, ecological impacts, and true accessibility for all. Today's topic is also a great reminder of the many historic assets throughout our city parks that are already open and available for public use, including the properties maintained by the Historic House Trust of New York City – these assets deserve our attention, and reflect existing opportunities for New Yorkers to better connect to our rich history without significant investment.

Additionally, we hope today's discussion opens up the dialogue for exploring increased access to other park structures that are currently underutilized or unavailable for public use. There are many buildings throughout the park system that have been identified by community groups for potential use. These buildings might not have the allure or mystique of a historic monument, arch, or island, but nonetheless represent tangible opportunities for New Yorkers to better connect with their communities and open spaces. Thank you for the opportunity to speak, and I welcome any questions you might have.

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