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Holly Leicht

Good afternoon, Councilmember Mark-Viverito and members of the Parks Committee. My name is Holly Leicht, and I am Executive Director of New Yorkers for Parks (NY4P), a 100-year-old organization that champions greener, cleaner and safer parks for all New Yorkers. Thank you for this opportunity to comment on the Administration's Preliminary FY12 Budget for the Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR).

It comes as no surprise that DPR's capital and expense budgets, like those of all City agencies, face significant cuts. While cuts to the capital budget are always painful and result in the elimination or delay of anticipated parks projects, NY4P commends DPR for its effort to spread these cuts so that the most under-served boroughs are the least affected. We recognize that budget cuts are unavoidable in this economic climate, and our primary concern is that the resources that remain at DPR's disposal are allocated equitably so that all New Yorkers have access to quality parks and open spaces.

To this end, my testimony will focus on two proposed Programs to Eliminate the Gap, or PEG's, that we are concerned would have a disparate impact on those New Yorkers least able to afford alternative recreational opportunities.

First, the proposal to double adult recreation center fees, more than double senior rates, and increase permit fees, including doubling the price of tennis permits from \$100 to \$200. DPR projects this will provide \$4 million per year in revenue to the City's general fund, after an estimated 5% loss in membership. We believe this is a

highly optimistic loss projection. When fees were first imposed in 2003, recreation center membership dropped 13%, and when they were doubled in 2007, membership dropped 38% initially, though it later rebounded somewhat. Doubling tennis permit fees in 2003 resulted in a 40% drop in permit sales.

While fees remain less than the cost of most comparable private venues, they will nonetheless price some lower income New Yorkers out of these opportunities – the very New Yorkers that have the most limited alternate recreational options. We have started a dialogue with DPR about whether a tiered fee structure is viable, and we encourage the Council to also engage in thinking about ways to ensure that this PEG does not have a disparate impact on low income New Yorkers.

Secondly, we are concerned about the proposed 15% seasonal reduction. While the specifics of this cut have not been laid out, based on past proposals, this could mean the closure of pools as well as limited pool and playground hours. We respectfully ask DPR and the Council to reconsider this reduction, as it would disproportionately affect those New Yorkers with the fewest other places they can swim and play during the summer months.

Finally, I'd like to say a word about the pending federal cut in CDBG funds. The entire \$800,000 budget of GreenThumb, the community gardening program of DPR, is supported by CDBG funding. In a time of limited resources, GreenThumb is about the best deal going – on a miniscule budget, they enable communities to create open spaces that require no City-funded design, build-out or maintenance. It is imperative that GreenThumb, already operating on a bare-bones budget, be held harmless from any CDBG cuts.

Thank you again for this opportunity to speak on behalf of New Yorkers for Parks, and I look forward to working with DPR and the Council to address these concerns.