



**NYC City Council Committee on Parks and Recreation
Hearing on the FY13 Preliminary Budget
March 22, 2012
Testimony of Holly M. Leicht, New Yorkers for Parks**

Good afternoon. I'm Holly Leicht, Executive Director of New Yorkers for Parks, a citywide research and advocacy organization championing quality parks and open spaces for all New Yorkers in all neighborhoods.

Last year at this time, I sat before you requesting the restoration of approximately \$16 million in proposed cuts to summer seasonal staff, Playground Associates, swimming pools, and Job Training Participants (or JTP's) – and this year we see these same functions back on the chopping block. Should funds for these functions be restored yet again? Absolutely – but next year, these functions should be base-lined in DPR's budget, as they are core services of the Parks Department, and the Council should not have to restore these every year.

But the reality is that even with these restorations, and even if this \$16 million is base-lined in FY14, DPR will still be in a state of crisis. Its expense budget, the majority of which is dedicated to maintenance and operations, has been depleted since 2008 when it was increased, largely thanks to PlaNYC. In recognition of the increased tree care the MillionTreesNYC initiative would generate, the budget for pruning and stump removal was bumped up to \$7.0 million in 2008; that's now been reduced to \$1.4 million, which means trees are pruned on a 20-year cycle rather than the ideal 7-year cycle, and there is no money for stump removal. Stump removal may not be as sexy as swimming pools, but the cumulative impact of these cuts is unsafe conditions in parks and on streets, and a long-term reduction in the tree canopy we're working so hard to increase.

Moreover, DPR's staff has been cut almost 40% since 2008 – and again, these cuts are primarily affecting maintenance and operations. A decade ago, DPR's maintenance crews comprised full-time staff assigned to a set of parks; today, they're mostly made up of temporary Job Training Participants, or JTP's, who typically cycle out of DPR within six months. Given this constant state of flux within DPR's maintenance crews, it's impossible to assign the same people to the same parks consistently, creating inevitable inefficiencies and inconsistencies in maintenance across the parks system.

And this situation is about to get much worse, because FY13 could see the JTP program cut by up to 800 people. That's a 62% decrease since 2008. DPR has managed to keep the dyke plugged these past few years, but such a drastic cut in JTP's will invariably result in a noticeable and unacceptable decline in maintenance and services in city parks. A further loss of DPR staff, especially at this scale, is simply untenable if we expect New York City parks to continue operating at the level we've come to expect from our public spaces, rather than backsliding toward an era of disinvestment and neglect we'd all rather forget. And while JTP's may not be the ideal approach to maintaining the city's 2,100 parks properties, they are a relative bargain, providing almost equivalent man hours as full-time staff for almost a quarter of the cost.

I worked in City government for years, and I well appreciate the mandate for agencies to do more with less in times of fiscal constraints. DPR has been doing just this, but we have reached a critical tipping point. If the City does not seriously reevaluate DPR's maintenance and operations budget and personnel situation, New Yorkers will begin to see firsthand the impacts of an underfunded parks system. To avoid this, in addition to the permanent restoration of \$16 million for services that keep ping-ponging in and out of the budget year to year, \$13.35 million must be added to hold the JTP program harmless, and at least \$4 million should be added to the expense budget for pruning and stump removal. I recognize that \$33.35 million is no small ask, but managing 29,000 acres of park properties is no small task. It's time to recognize DPR's role among the providers of essential City services and to fund it accordingly.