

CITY COUNCIL
CITY OF NEW YORK

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

of the

COMMITTEE ON PARKS AND
RECREATION

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January 27, 2021
Start: 1:02 p.m.
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HELD AT: Remote Hearing, Virtual Room 2

B E F O R E: Peter A. Koo
Chairperson

COUNCIL MEMBERS: Peter A. Koo
Diana Ayala
Joseph C. Borelli
Justin L. Brannan
Darma V. Diaz
Mark Gjonaj
Robert F. Holden
Mark Levine
Francis P. Moya
Kevin Riley
Carlina Rivera
Eric A. Ulrich
Jimmy Van Bramer

A P P E A R A N C E S (CONTINUED)

Mitchell Silver
Commissioner
Department of Parks and Recreation

Sam Biederman
Assistant Commissioner
Department of Parks and Recreation

Bill LoSasso
Director
GreenThumb
Department of Parks and Recreation

Lynn Kelly

Jessica Saab

Aziz Dehkan

Raymond Figueroa

Shahela Begum

Alexis Mena

Maureen O'Brien

Joseph Reiver

Sarah Williams

Kara Goad

Brenda Thompson Duchene

Barbara Adamson

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SERGEANT AT ARMS: PC recording done.

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Cloud recording is started.

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Backup is rolling.

SERGEANT AT ARMS LUGO: All right, thank you. Sergeant Hope, you may take it away with the opening.

SERGEANT AT ARMS HOPE: Thank you, Sergeant Lugo. Good afternoon and welcome to the New York City Council remote hearing on Parks and Recreation. At this time would all panelists please turn on your videos. I repeat, all panelists please turn on your video.

UNIDENTIFIED: Can we just, ah, hold, please. Just a technical issue. OK, all good. You can, ah, begin.

SERGEANT AT ARMS HOPE: Thank you. Once again, welcome to the New York City Council remote hearing on Parks and Recreation. At this time will all panelists please turn on your videos. Thank you. To minimize disruption, please place all electronic devices to vibrate or silent mode. If you wish to submit testimony you may do so at testimony@council.nyc.gov. I repeat,

1 testimony@council.nyc.gov. Chair Koo, we are ready
2 to begin.
3

4 CHAIRPERSON KOO: [gavel] Thank you for
5 joining our virtual hearing today before the
6 council's Committee on Parks and Recreation. I would
7 like to acknowledge my council, ah, my fellow council
8 members. Darma Diaz, Gjonaj, Moya, Riley, Borelli,
9 Ayala, and Diana Diaz. OK. So if more people, more
10 member comes we will acknowledge them later. Good
11 afternoon. I'm Peter Koo, chair of the City Council
12 Committee on Parks and Recreation. I would like to
13 welcome you to our virtual hearing that will examine
14 the state of community gardens and urban agriculture
15 and consider a related piece of legislation.

16 Community gardens play a critical role in the life of
17 our city. They help provided needed green space in
18 areas that were once lacking, foster a greater sense
19 of community among local residents, provide
20 educational opportunities for our children,
21 contribute to decreasing the effects of climate
22 change and produce and [inaudible] numerous kinds of
23 food products through urban agricultural practices.
24 I have been a supporter of gardens for a long time
25 and I'm proud that I have one of the largest gardens,

1 if not the largest, garden in the city. Evergreen
2 Community Garden in Kissena Park, which is about five
3 acres large and beloved by my community. Urban
4 agriculture is typically defined as the process of
5 growing food in cities, in addition to other
6 activities, such as food processing and distribution,
7 food waste and collection. The benefits of urban
8 farming are numerous, as in addition to providing
9 food for the community. They are also centers of
10 learning, where children can learn about nature and
11 how food is produced, while being safe spaces that
12 deliver environmental benefits, such as reduced city
13 heat, decreased storm water runoff, and save the
14 soil. The city's [inaudible] rules permit
15 agricultural activities in almost all of the city
16 zones, which presents us with a promising home that
17 there are no outright rules that should impede the
18 growth of this activity. The council in its growing
19 food equity plan along with so many parks and open
20 space advocates have recognized the need for urban
21 agriculture support and call for various policy
22 proposals to support their growth, including having a
23 central office or entity that focuses on facilitating
24 the growth and maintenance of urban agriculture. The
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2 increasing support for educational programming, for
3 farming and gardens, determining what vacant lots or
4 land are suitable for agriculture and gardening.

5 Supporting economic empowerment for gardeners and
6 farmers, and improving the availability and

7 accessibility of data regarding urban farms and their
8 use. I'm also curious to examine with more detail

9 what the administration's plans are to increase

10 support for urban farming in community gardens and

11 how they can make it less burdensome on gardeners to

12 make the best use of gardens and farms they operate.

13 My view is that the city should make it more

14 welcoming and less restrictive for those who seek to

15 open a garden or farm in a safe and a reasonable way.

16 We will consider Intro number 1059, sponsored by my

17 colleague, Council Member Diana Ayala. This bill

18 will require the Parks Department to conduct a study

19 on the prevalence of community gardens engaged in

20 urban farming and agriculture and to provide

21 recommendation to the mayor and the council on how to

22 better support and increase such farming and

23 agriculture. I look forward to exploring it in

24 greater detail today and hearing what the

25 administration and advocates think about the

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2 legislation. Thank you, and welcome all of you. At
3 this time I would like to invite Council Member Ayala
4 to offer a statement on the bill she has sponsored.

5 COUNCIL MEMBER AYALA: Thank you, Chair
6 Koo, um, and before I give my remarks I also wanted
7 to recognize former Council Member Espinal, who was
8 the original, ah, sponsor of the bill and thank him
9 for his efforts in helping us craft it. Ah, good
10 afternoon, and thank you for being here today. I am
11 Council Member Diana Ayala and I am looking forward
12 to having my bill, Intro 1059, heard today. This
13 bill would require the New York City Department of
14 Parks and Recreation to conduct a study on the
15 prevalence of urban farming and agriculture and to
16 submit a report on its findings. Such a report shall
17 include, but should not be limited to, ah, an
18 understanding of the number of community gardens
19 under the jurisdiction of the Parks Department
20 presently engaged in farming and/or food processing,
21 ah, the amount and types of food produced at such
22 gardens, information on the types of equipment used
23 by such gardens for agricultural purposes, including,
24 but not limited to, greenhouses, hydroponic systems,
25 food processing systems, and composting systems, a

1 list of resources provided by the Department of Parks
2 and Recreation and other government agencies to aid
3 in farming and food processing, information on the
4 availability of potential sites throughout the city
5 that could be developed for urban agricultural
6 purposes, information on the feasibility of costs
7 associated with expanding, and the number of farmers'
8 markets operating in the Department of Parks and
9 Recreation, um, property, and the number of community
10 gardens that engage in urban agriculture, and it also
11 asks for recommendations on how the city can provide
12 more technical assistance and financial resources to
13 expand the number of community gardens that engage
14 in, ah, urban agriculture. This bill is obviously
15 really important to me and I'm sure to my colleagues,
16 um, as many of us have many community gardens that
17 are engaged in urban farming and agriculture. Ah,
18 East Harlem and the South Bronx suffer from many
19 health disparities and community gardens in my
20 district especially have played an important role in
21 offering access to healthier food options and to
22 offering much-needed access to green space respites
23 during this very difficult time. I'm hopeful that
24 the study will help us, ah, gain much-needed
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2 information to support the growth and the
3 sustainability of urban farming and agriculture in
4 the city, and I am now happy to turn this hearing
5 back to Chair Koo. Thank you.

6 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Thank you, Council
7 Member Ayala. We are also joined by Council Member
8 Holden, Council Member Brannan, and Council Member
9 Van Bramer. I will now turn it over to our
10 moderator, committee counsel Chris Sartori, to go
11 over some procedural items.

12 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you, Chair Koo.
13 I'm Chris Sartori, senior counsel to the Committee on
14 Parks and Recreation, and I'll be moderating this
15 hearing. Before we begin, I would like to remind
16 everyone that you'll be on mute until you are called
17 on to testify, at which point you will be unmuted by
18 the host. During the hearing I'll be calling on
19 panelists to testify, so please listen for your name
20 to be called as I'll periodically be announcing who
21 the next panelists will be. We will first be hearing
22 testimony from the administration, followed by
23 testimony from members of the public. During the
24 hearing, if council members would like to ask a
25 question of the administration or of a specific

1 panelist, please use the Zoom raise hand function and
2 I'll call on you in order. We'll be limiting council
3 member questions to five minutes, which includes the
4 time it takes to answer those questions. For members
5 of the public, we'll be limiting speaking time to
6 three minutes in order to accommodate all who wish to
7 speak today. Once you are called on to testify,
8 please state your name and the organization you
9 represent, if any, when it is your time to speak. We
10 will now call on representatives of the
11 administration to testify. We will be hearing
12 testimony from Mitchell Silver, commissioner of the
13 Department of Parks and Recreation, Sam Biederman,
14 assistant commissioner of the Department of Parks and
15 Recreation, and Bill LoSasso, director of GreenThumb.
16 And at this time I will administer the affirmation to
17 each representative of the administration. I will
18 call on you each individually for a response, so
19 please at this time raise your right hands. Do you
20 affirm to tell the truth, the whole truth, and
21 nothing but the truth before this committee and to
22 respond honestly to council member questions?
23 Commissioner Silver?

24
25 COMMISSIONER SILVER: Yes.

2 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you.

3 Commissioner Biederman?

4 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER BIEDERMAN: Yup.

5 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Ah, Director LoSasso?

6 DIRECTOR LOSASSO: Yeah.

7 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. And at
8 this time I will invite Commissioner Silver to
9 present his testimony.

10 COMMISSIONER SILVER: Thank you, Chris.

11 Ah, good afternoon Chair Koo and members of the Parks
12 Committee. My name is Mitchell Silver. I'm the
13 commissioner of New York City Parks. It's good to
14 see all of you once again and to offer greetings to
15 the new faces on the committee as this new year
16 begins. Joining me on today's panel are our
17 assistant commissioner of community outreach and
18 partnership developments, Sam Biederman, and Bill
19 LoSasso, our director of GreenThumb. Additionally,
20 we have staff from our agency watching this panel, as
21 well as the public testimony that will follow on the
22 council's hearing live stream. GreenThumb is an
23 amazing division of New York City Parks, initiated in
24 1978 as New York City was in the midst of a financial
25 crisis and significant social upheaval. When

1 GreenThumb was created it was able to assist
2 neighborhoods in revitalizing local spaces and
3 creating new and important community resources.
4 GreenThumb continues that mission today by providing
5 programming and material to support over 550
6 community gardens in this city, including workshops
7 that cover garden basics, as well as organizing
8 topics. These are all volunteer initiatives that
9 demonstrate the strength of community bonds and what
10 can be achieved when local government works in close
11 partnership with New Yorkers. To help provide more
12 detailed background about our GreenThumb division and
13 the various efforts we undertake alongside our
14 community garden partner groups and to help maximize
15 potential of these special gardens throughout the
16 city, I would now introduce the director of our
17 GreenThumb division, Bill LoSasso.

19 DIRECTOR LOSASSO: Good afternoon, Chair
20 Koo and members of the Parks Committee. Thank you,
21 Commissioner Silver, for your remarks. I am Bill
22 LoSasso and I serve as director of GreenThumb at NYC
23 Parks. Accompanying me today are Assistant
24 Commissioner Sam Biederman and director of government
25 relations, Matt Drury. We are very pleased to be

1 here today to discuss GreenThumb community gardens,
2 the tireless work of New York City's volunteer
3 gardeners, the efforts that we have made at
4 GreenThumb to support community gardening and urban
5 agriculture in New York City. As there has not been
6 a recent hearing on GreenThumb specifically, and
7 since there are new members joining both the council
8 and the Parks Committee, please allow me to quickly
9 explain GreenThumb, our model, and our support of
10 community gardening and urban agriculture. As you
11 know, GreenThumb is the community gardening program
12 of NYC Parks with a mission of helping to create a
13 more sustainable, resilient, healthy, and equitable
14 New York City. Founded in 1978 to support the
15 resident-led community gardening movement that had
16 arisen during a time of disinvestment and abandonment
17 of public and private property, we support a growing
18 network of over 550 community gardens and tens of
19 thousands of volunteer community gardeners with the
20 provision of free access to public land, materials,
21 technical assistance, operational support, public
22 programming, and community engagement. We also serve
23 thousands of New Yorkers who are interested in
24 community-led environmental stewardship through
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1 public programming, as well as hundreds of thousands
2 of annual visitors to [inaudible] gardens who enjoy
3 this cherished public open spaces. GreenThumb
4 community gardens are unique public spaces that are
5 stewarded by volunteer New Yorkers and which help
6 catalyze sustainable, healthy, and equitable
7 communities. Gardens thrive through a partnership
8 between New York City government, community
9 gardeners, and countless partners who are
10 collectively, who collectively care for these spaces
11 in a shared spirit of service. GreenThumb gardens
12 reflect the history and the diversity of New York
13 City's neighborhoods and they serve as platforms for
14 neighborhood beautification, social cohesion,
15 teaching and learning, cultural expression, food
16 production, health, environmental justice,
17 resilience, and more. Reflecting the unique
18 personalities and needs of our city's neighborhoods,
19 GreenThumb gardens range widely in size and nature,
20 and host a variety of activities, from botanical
21 horticulture and food gardening to passive
22 recreation, special performances, and programming,
23 providing opportunities for New Yorkers to
24 participate and collectively engage with their
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1 neighbors. It is important to note that it is not
2 GreenThumb who determines how each garden will be
3 used, but rather each individual garden group. Our
4 core philosophy is that the local community
5 volunteers that make up the garden groups best
6 understand the needs and wants of their community.
7 Within this context, we invest that value by helping
8 these groups realize their unique vision for each
9 garden. That means that whether gardeners plant
10 ornamental gardens, food gardens, or both, we support
11 them in that undertaking. Thanks to increased
12 support from city government in recent years,
13 including the City Council's discretionary
14 allocations, the Parks Equity Initiative, A Greener
15 NYC, and most recently the Play Fair Advocacy
16 Campaign, GreenThumb has experienced tremendous
17 growth and an expanded ability to support gardens.
18 Specifically, this has allowed us to provide new and
19 higher-quality materials to increase the number of
20 annual workshops, to develop new specialized
21 trainings for gardeners, and to work with emerging
22 garden groups to initiate approximately 20 new
23 community gardens since 2016, with an additional 50
24 new gardens planned in the next three years through
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1 an innovative partnership with NYCHA. With the
2 additional funding provided by Play Fair in fiscal
3 year 2020 we were able to make unprecedented levels
4 of investment in gardens. This includes addressing
5 long-needed infrastructure improvements, including
6 the installation of new fencing, signage, and
7 sidewalks, new workshops and trainings for gardeners,
8 an expanded provision of materials, including lumber
9 for raised beds, compost tumblers, and expanded
10 operational support to the addition of new GreenThumb
11 staff. GreenThumb has supported urban agriculture
12 since its founding, providing tools, equipment,
13 training, and materials that support food production
14 in GreenThumb gardens. Food production has occurred
15 in gardens since the beginning and this has been a
16 growing trend in recent years. Greet has adjusted
17 its programming and support accordingly to remain
18 responsive to the needs of our network. We have
19 developed new workshops and trainings on growing
20 food. We've permitted garden groups to sell their
21 own produce to support on-site efforts and formed new
22 partnerships to provide additional supplementary
23 support for food-producing gardens. Today 83% of
24 gardens on New York City Parks property grow food in
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2 some way and we estimate that a significant amount of
3 food is grown in gardens each year, though the scale
4 of production tends to be somewhat limited given the
5 relatively limited size and capacity of these
6 gardens. In addition, some gardens are able to
7 distribute food to their community to support healthy
8 food access through farm stands and local donations.
9 Navigating the COVID-19 pandemic has of course proven
10 challenging for all New Yorkers in so many ways, but
11 we are proud to have been able to continue supporting
12 gardens, including those growing and distributing
13 food during this difficult time. We adapted our
14 annual distribution of free plants to gardeners and
15 hand delivered 110,000 plants to hundreds of garden
16 groups throughout the city in May, including 45,000
17 food-producing plants and thousands of seed packets.
18 This represents the largest plant distribution in the
19 history of GreenThumb. Working with the Department
20 of Health and Mental Hygiene we developed protocols
21 to ensure that gardens could safely remain open to
22 garden groups throughout the pandemic and that
23 allowed garden-managed farm stands to continue
24 operating to support the safe distribution of healthy
25 food during a time of need. In addition, while

1 observing all applicable safety measures, we were
2 able to work with garden groups and partners to
3 renovate 15 gardens, about 375, with new raised
4 planting beds to increase, to support increased food
5 production and deliver over 2000 cubic yards of
6 topsoil and compost to garden groups across the city.
7 Specific to the legislation being heard today, Intro
8 1059, NYC Parks shares the council's interest in
9 transparency and providing any information about the
10 wonderful work being carried out by our partners and
11 volunteers. We appreciate the intent of the
12 legislation and look forward to discussing this bill
13 further with the council. In closing, we thank the
14 City Council for convening this hearing. We
15 appreciate every opportunity to shine a spotlight on
16 the tireless work of our dedicated volunteers that
17 steward community gardens across New York City and
18 showcase the work that we have been doing at
19 GreenThumb to support them. We look forward to
20 answering council members' questions and afterwards
21 our agency staff will be viewing the public's
22 testimony via the council's hearing live stream.
23 Thank you.

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2 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. And at
3 this time I will now turn it over to questions from
4 Chair Koo. Panelists, please stay unmuted, if
5 possible, during this question and answer period.
6 Thank you.

7 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Ah, thank you, Counsel.
8 We are also joined by Council Member Rivera and
9 Council Member Levine. Commissioner Silver and
10 Assistant Commissioner Sam Biederman and director of
11 GreenThumb Bill LoSasso, thank you, thank you for
12 coming to today's testimony. So I have a few
13 questions. Ah, Commissioner, how many community
14 gardens are there in the city, broken down by agency?
15 How many GreenThumb gardens are there in the city and
16 how many other agencies [inaudible]?

17 COMMISSIONER SILVER: Um, thank you for
18 that question, Chair Koo. Ah, as it was stated, we
19 have over 550 community gardens. Ah, that's part of
20 our GreenThumb program. Ah, there are other gardens,
21 ah, through NYCHA and we have worked with NYCHA to
22 help them to manage about 50, ah, of those gardens.
23 I know they had some informal spaces and could number
24 in the hundreds. But in terms of the ones I'm
25 familiar with for Parks is over 550 and for NYCHA

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2 there's about 50 that we'll be working to help
3 manage, ah, those NYCHA residents for those gardens
4 on NYCHA property.

5 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Can we have a breakdown
6 of like, of gardens by borough, like Queens how many,
7 Bronx how many?

8 COMMISSIONER SILVER: We, we can supply
9 you. Ah, Bill LoSasso certainly has those numbers
10 and we can supply those with you, ah, after this
11 hearing, but we certainly have the breakdown of how
12 many gardens per borough.

13 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Thank you.

14 COMMISSIONER SILVER: Commissioner
15 Biederman, can you...

16 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Yeah, sure.

17 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER BIEDERMAN: And I
18 would just add that, you know, for, um, you and your
19 staff, Council Member, and for anyone following
20 along, the GreenThumb website is a great resource for
21 this information as well. Um, there's a great map
22 where you can see all of the gardens laid out, ah,
23 across the city.

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2 CHAIRPERSON KOO: OK, yeah. So how many
3 gardens currently engage in urban agriculture and
4 where are they located?

5 COMMISSIONER SILVER: Well, let me answer
6 first and then I'll turn it over to Bill LoSasso.
7 Um, as it was stated, about 83%, um, do some level of
8 food production. Because of the scale of the garden
9 it may vary. Ah, so if it's 83% of 550, we can
10 certainly do the math. Ah, but I'll turn it over to
11 Director LoSasso to see if wants to, ah, provide more
12 clarity to your question.

13 DIRECTOR LOSASSO: Thank you,
14 Commissioner. Thank you for the question, Chair Koo.
15 Ah, of the 377 gardens that are located on Parks
16 Department property, ah, 314 last we were able to
17 count, ah, currently grow food in some way, as Mr.,
18 as Commissioner Silver mentions, is 83%. Um, these
19 food-producing gardens are located throughout the
20 city in all five boroughs and I don't have it, ah,
21 available right now, but I would be able to provide
22 a, a map showing food-producing gardens, um,
23 throughout the city.

2 CHAIRPERSON KOO: OK. So what is the
3 average cost to maintain a community garden,
4 Commissioner?

5 COMMISSIONER SILVER: Again, that varies.
6 Each garden is different. Ah, these are not just
7 gardens but community spaces. And they're volunteer-
8 led. Ah, so they do some of their own fundraising or
9 volunteer contributions, but the GreenThumb also
10 supports them in various ways. So that's very
11 difficult, because some do food production, some do,
12 before COVID would do some community events, ah, and
13 the [inaudible] different about what they could
14 accommodate, so that's very, very difficult. I'll
15 see if Director LoSasso has some additional
16 information, but it's very difficult to say on
17 average how many of each of the gardens, ah, spend
18 money, ah, to manage those volunteer spaces.

19 CHAIRPERSON KOO: OK, so who...

20 DIRECTOR LOSASSO: Thank you,
21 Commissioner.

22 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Yeah, go ahead.

23 DIRECTOR LOSASSO: And it is very
24 difficult to estimate. Um, some garden groups, ah,
25 have small budgets. Some have larger. Ah, what

1 we've done in recent years, of course, as I
2 mentioned, is, is realized, ah, significant new
3 resources thanks in large part to the council's
4 provision of supports. We've been able to really
5 exponentially increase the support that we're giving
6 at GreenThumb and there's another, ah, a number of
7 other support mechanisms that they available
8 themselves of, including grants from nonprofits
9 across the city.
10

11 CHAIRPERSON KOO: So, Director LoSasso,
12 you, ah, just mentioned, um, 15 new gardens in the
13 next three years. So where will those gardens go?

14 COMMISSIONER SILVER: Um, those are
15 currently located on NYCHA property. Ah, several
16 years ago when the former, um, chair of NYCHA, ah,
17 was concerned about the gardens on NYCHA property. I
18 believe there were in excess of 700. We worked with
19 NYCHA to do an evaluation. Some could just could
20 have been a small plot or flowerbed. Others were
21 advanced gardens. We we've worked with NYCHA. They
22 felt that GreenThumb would be better suited, ah, to
23 support those gardeners on NYCHA campuses and so for
24 the past couple years, um, Director LoSasso evaluated
25 those gardens that made the most sense, that kind of

1
2 fit the standard of what we believe would be a
3 community garden and so we'll be working with NYCHA
4 to bring those into our portfolio. Not GreenThumb
5 per se, but we'll provide some of the technical
6 support for those gardeners on NYCHA campuses. What
7 Director LoSasso did say as well is that we've added
8 20 new gardens since 2016. But these 50 are existing
9 gardens, but they're on NYCHA property.

10 CHAIRPERSON KOO: I see. So who is
11 responsible for maintaining the gardens? The farmers
12 or the Parks Department?

13 COMMISSIONER SILVER: Primarily the
14 volunteer effort with support from the GreenThumb
15 team. We'll supply soils, equipment, so it's a joint
16 effort. All these gardens are volunteer gardens.
17 They have the new signage, will explain, ah, the
18 hours that they should be open. Ah, but again,
19 during COVID we adjusted those rules. But as a
20 partners between our volunteers and the Parks
21 Department with resources from both the city and
22 again thank the City Council, from the City Council
23 as well, and other grantees.

24 CHAIRPERSON KOO: So the gardeners are
25 responsible for, for what? Ah, for maintaining the

1 gardens and your department is responsible for
2 administration?

3
4 COMMISSIONER SILVER: That's fair to say.
5 But it's also support. We offer a lot of technical
6 support by way of training, by way of resources. Ah,
7 some of these gardens are small or large. Ah, but,
8 again, they could be for food production, they could
9 be for [inaudible]. Some have planting beds where a
10 community person would just be responsible for their
11 planting bed, but then would collectively make sure
12 that is well maintained. But the volunteer groups,
13 ah, each garden has a volunteer group. They are
14 responsible primarily for maintaining, ah, the, the
15 community garden.

16 CHAIRPERSON KOO: So, ah, how many
17 fundraisings, ah, gatherings your department allowed
18 to maintain the community gardens, how many
19 fundraisings they can do?

20 COMMISSIONER SILVER: Commissioner
21 Biederman or Director LoSasso, I, I don't, I'll let
22 them respond to that question.

23 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER BIEDERMAN: I'll
24 defer to Bill on that.

25 COMMISSIONER SILVER: OK.

1
2 DIRECTOR LOSASSO: Um, garden groups are
3 now permitted to host fundraisers at, ah, community
4 gardens. It, ah, was a change that we happy to make
5 recently in response to feedback we got from garden
6 groups, um, that hosting a limited amount of
7 fundraisers on site would support them and garden
8 groups are now allowed to host two fundraisers every
9 year to support their efforts in the operation of the
10 garden.

11 CHAIRPERSON KOO: So if a community
12 garden can no longer be sustained by the, ah, by the
13 gardening group maintaining it, what happens to the
14 garden?

15 DIRECTOR LOSASSO: Yes, thank you, Chair,
16 for the question. Um, it is rare, but on occasion
17 garden groups will disband. But what we have found
18 in GreenThumb in, in recent years that there's a lot
19 of interest in community gardening throughout New
20 York City. So we have a community engagement team,
21 ah, of nine outreach coordinators who work with, ah,
22 council members and community boards and members of
23 the public, um, to find interested parties that
24 continue stewarding the space, ah, and we've had
25 really good success, ah, on the limited amount of

1 occasions where, ah, a space has become available.
2
3 So we've been able to keep them active with the
4 neighborhoods.

5 CHAIRPERSON KOO: OK. So how often are
6 the GreenThumb licensing agreements renewed?

7 COMMISSIONER SILVER: It's every four
8 years. They're renewed every four years, and as
9 Director LoSasso just stated, ah, we do listen and
10 make some adjustments and, ah, so this year we did
11 allow for the fundraising, but every four years we
12 have to renew all the agreements.

13 CHAIRPERSON KOO: So, Commissioner, can
14 you take us through the process of how the new rules
15 are established in these license agreements?

16 COMMISSIONER SILVER: I'm going to defer
17 that question to Commissioner Biederman.

18 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER BIEDERMAN: So,
19 um, thank you for the question and thank you,
20 Commissioner. Ah, this most recent round of, ah,
21 license renewables was preceded by a more robust
22 engagement with, ah, garden groups and garden
23 advocates than, ah, GreenThumb had really ever done
24 before and it did result in some significant changes
25 to the license. Um, but so we reached out, I

1 believe, with a draft license, I believe, um, many
2 months in advance of the signing date, ah, to get
3 feedback from garden groups, get feedback from
4 advocates. Then, you know, we take that back to the
5 agency, discuss it with, um, our general counsel and
6 the city law department just to make sure everything
7 is kosher, and then we finalize the license. So
8 that, that would be the process.

10 CHAIRPERSON KOO: So what are the new
11 rules?

12 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER BIEDERMAN: Well,
13 the license, the licenses, um, as licenses go it's
14 not the longest license, but there are many details
15 in it. Um, so there are some just and significant
16 changes. Um, as Bill mentioned, one of them is, ah,
17 explicitly stating that gardens have the ability to
18 have two fundraisers a year. That's, that is a
19 change. Ah, another significant change would be the
20 lifting of a, an explicit liability of a requirement.
21 So in previous licenses, ah, the gardens were made,
22 um, the garden groups were explicitly made liable for
23 what happened in the garden. That language was
24 lifted. This was, um, thanks to feedback from the
25 gardens. That language was lifted from the license,

1
2 ah, so there is no strong liability requirement in
3 the license now.

4 CHAIRPERSON KOO: So how much time are
5 the gardeners given to look over any new rules in the
6 license agreement before they have to sign on?

7 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER BIEDERMAN: Ah,
8 Bill, I, I, um, I think that process actually started
9 before I returned to the Parks Department. How many
10 months was that?

11 DIRECTOR LOSASSO: Ah, I don't know
12 offhand. I, I want to say there was a couple months
13 provided and then when there were some questions and
14 some need for clarification we were happy to extend
15 the deadline to make ourselves available to speak
16 with garden groups that needed additional time to
17 review, ah, the documents, either themselves or, or
18 with their garden groups. Um, so we were committed
19 to making sure that we made ourselves available to
20 answer any questions or to provide any necessary
21 clarifications.

22 CHAIRPERSON KOO: So what happen if the,
23 what happen to the gardens if certain groups do not
24 sign the new license agreement?

1
2 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER BIEDERMAN: So,
3 um, the groups that, um, ah, there were some groups
4 that still had questions about the license
5 agreements, um, and as, ah, Director LoSasso said,
6 um, continued to have questions and they didn't sign
7 on the initial signing date. So, ah, we worked with
8 them and, ah, made ourselves as available as we could
9 to answer as many questions as we could of these
10 licenses. The good news is that at this date I,
11 almost every garden group has signed the license.

12 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Yeah.

13 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER BIEDERMAN: It's
14 about, ah, really only a handful of groups left, I
15 think about five left, um, who haven't signed. Now I
16 think this goes to show this is a demonstration of
17 what happens to the groups that don't sign the
18 license. We make every effort to reach out to them.
19 Um, you know, we want these relationships to work.
20 We want these garden groups to, ah, to continue to
21 volunteer on the gardens that they've built. So, um,
22 we make every effort to get them [inaudible].

23 CHAIRPERSON KOO: So, so, are there any
24 current garden groups that have not signed the new
25 lease? You mentioned you have five, about?

2 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER BIEDERMAN: Yes,
3 there's about five who haven't signed the new
4 license.

5 COMMISSIONER SILVER: Correct.

6 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Ah, are there any
7 public hearing meetings that gardeners can attend to
8 express their ideas or concerns?

9 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER BIEDERMAN: So,
10 sorry, sorry.

11 COMMISSIONER SILVER: So the [inaudible]
12 the GreenThumb, ah, keep in contact. We have
13 outreach coordinators, so any [inaudible] public
14 meeting clearly a lot of stuff we do now, everything
15 we do is [inaudible] by Zoom, but there's regular
16 contact throughout the years. It was stated in both
17 my testimony and Director LoSasso. So in terms of
18 public meeting, ah, we used to have these larger
19 annual events. Ah, because of COVID we weren't able
20 to do that. But certainly there are a lot of
21 opportunities and then, um, almost certainly the
22 gardeners, um, meet among themselves. But I will
23 now, I'm sorry, defer to Commissioner Biederman and
24 LoSasso. But I, I just want to make sure I
25 understand what you mean by public meeting.

1
2 Everything we do in the Parks Department is public
3 whether it's online or in person. Ah, but our effort
4 is to reach out, give the support in any manner, and
5 to listen to the community gardens and see how we can
6 help them out in any way.

7 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Commissioner, I want to
8 go back to the five, ah, groups that have not signed
9 the agreement. Ah, why haven't they signed it and
10 does that mean they are closed if they don't sign the
11 new agreement?

12 COMMISSIONER SILVER: They're not closed.
13 Ah, the, Commissioner Biederman is actively working
14 with each of them. It's down to five or six. Ah, in
15 some cases we're having difficulty reaching them.
16 Ah, it's a variety of reasons. It's not the same for
17 each. But my staff has been very diligent. As we
18 sit down and people would express concern, the
19 gardeners, we go over, ah, the language, ah, to see
20 exactly how we could address their concerns. So
21 there is just really, ah, a few left. So at this
22 point we have 99% of all the gardens that signed. We
23 will continue working with them. Ah, so I'll see if
24 Commissioner Biederman wants to add to that. But
25 they are, like I said, about five or six left.

1 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER BIEDERMAN: Yeah,
2
3 I haven't got anything to add to that, Commissioner.
4 Thank you.

5 CHAIRPERSON KOO: So what are their
6 concerns? Why are they, why aren't they signing the
7 new lease. Can you name a few concerns that they
8 have?

9 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER BIEDERMAN: Some,
10 um, some of the, um, concerns are about that
11 liability. [inaudible] that I, um, that I detailed
12 earlier, there are, I think we found in some gardens,
13 ah, previous gardens that, ah, declined to sign at
14 first and then signed later, it seems to be a
15 question, mostly questions that required
16 clarification, ah, rather than adjustment, um, for a
17 lot of these gardens, so we continue to work to
18 clarify those issues and liability, you know, is a
19 complicated thing and, ah, so we do our best to
20 answer those liability questions, ah, as, um, as we
21 can, you know, as they come in. Um, you know, a
22 couple of gardens, ah, it's different from garden to
23 garden. So liability is, tends to be the most common
24 issue. Some gardens, you know, they're hard to
25 reach, ah, depending on the, ah, organization of the

2 garden. So it does vary from garden to garden with
3 these five gardens left.

4 CHAIRPERSON KOO: So you mentioned that
5 they are hard, some gardeners they are hard to reach.
6 Ah, how do you reach them, by email, by telephone, or
7 by mail?

8 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER BIEDERMAN: All of
9 the above, ah, Councilman.

10 CHAIRPERSON KOO: All the above?

11 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER BIEDERMAN: Yeah.

12 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Hmm. So if they
13 haven't returned your mail or haven't returned your
14 answer, so how do you contact them?

15 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER BIEDERMAN: Um,
16 the GreenThumb team continues to, ah, attempt to
17 reach out, by phone, by mail, and by email. I, I
18 have a thousand percent confidence in, um,
19 GreenThumb's dedicated outreach team. They are
20 dogged when they [inaudible] time to reach out. So,
21 ah, they, they are on the case.

22 CHAIRPERSON KOO: So I will hope as a
23 last resort you will go there, you know, go to the
24 garden and find them there, because I guess
25 sometimes, like senior citizens, they have a hard

2 time to, ah, listen to the phone or, or they don't
3 read the email, or things like that, no?

4 COMMISSIONER SILVER: Right, but they're,
5 Commissioner, ah, Chair Koo, they're not there every
6 day.

7 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Oh.

8 COMMISSIONER SILVER: So, ah, not like a
9 park where you have staff. Some are there once a
10 week, twice a week, three times a week, so it's not
11 like, you'd have to probably sit there for a couple
12 of weeks and I'm not sure we're committed to doing
13 that.

14 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Really?

15 COMMISSIONER SILVER: But [inaudible]
16 staff will reach out, ah, to find, ah, the gardeners
17 and get in contact with them so they sign this
18 agreement.

19 CHAIRPERSON KOO: So, Commissioner, are
20 any of the meetings you mentioned before are made
21 aware to the public? How are you communicating the
22 meetings?

23 COMMISSIONER SILVER: I'll defer to
24 [inaudible]. I'll defer to, ah, Director LoSasso for
25 that question.

1
2 DIRECTOR LOSASSO: Thanks for the
3 question, ah, Chair Koo. We've worked directly with
4 the garden groups since they are a party to the
5 agreement, um, so we've worked directly with the
6 garden groups rather than engaging, ah, the public.
7 We, ah, as Commissioner Biederman mentioned, we, ah,
8 keep in touch with them through our outreach
9 coordinators, through events that we have through,
10 through various events that we do in the gardens, um,
11 and we did a pretty robust survey this year, ah, this
12 most recent licensing round as well, to get as much,
13 ah, feedback as we could, as we prepared for the
14 four-year relicensing, and that's where a lot of the
15 good suggestions that we got came from and we were
16 able to make some updates to the license that were
17 beneficial for the garden groups.

18 COMMISSIONER SILVER: And at this point
19 I'm [inaudible] very early [inaudible] in my
20 administration, because I see Raymond Figueroa and I
21 see Aziz, and there are others, very early on and
22 there were some concerns about GreenThumb. I think
23 it was my first year as commissioner that we sat down
24 to express, ah, just concerns, um, about GreenThumb
25 and so, ah, I've clearly stated, I don't know if they

1
2 knew, I wrote an article way back when I was in my
3 thirties about the GreenThumb gardens. That was
4 right before, ah, Bette Midler was going to war with
5 Guiliani and [inaudible] Kelly here, so I've had a
6 long history with GreenThumb. It was a pleasure to
7 meet with the GreenThumb advocates and so I told my
8 staff we're committed to see what we can do. So in
9 terms of public meetings, as Director LoSasso said,
10 I've gone to a lot of these harvest events. There
11 was an annual program at [inaudible], ah, sorry, at,
12 um, Coastals College, which I was going to, and so
13 there were a lot of opportunities to broaden, ah, our
14 reach, ah, to let both the gardeners but also other
15 advocates that believe in these important public
16 spaces come together and, and speak out. And I enjoy
17 those annual events. I've learned a lot. Some of
18 the most powerful speakers I've met, ah, have been
19 there. And then took my own GreenThumb tour to
20 [inaudible] and others just to see our incredible
21 public spaces we have here.

22 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Thank you. So how does
23 the gardening handbook relate to the actual license
24 agreement? And is there any conflict between the two
25 that can sometimes lead to confusion among gardeners?

1
2 DIRECTOR LOSASSO: I, I can speak to
3 that. Ah, so the gardener handbook is a document
4 that really we prepared to be a one-stop of as much
5 applicable information, ah, to help garden groups
6 succeed as possible. Some of it, the information in
7 the handbook, includes gardening 101 tips. Some of
8 it is direction to gardeners on what do I do if, ah,
9 a contractor shows up at the garden and wants to work
10 on the building immediately adjacent to a space, who
11 do I contact, you know, what rights do I have to make
12 sure that a permit is issued. Um, who do I contact
13 if I want to get, ah, a permit to use a hydrant to,
14 to water the garden, and are there any other
15 applicable regulations or rules that govern activity
16 in the space. So we've outlined some rules, for
17 example, from the Department of Buildings that
18 outlines, um, how big a shed could be or how big a
19 structure could be in the garden before it needs a
20 permit. And we've really created it to be a
21 resources for the garden groups, ah, to bring as much
22 information into one place as possible. To our
23 knowledge there is no conflict, um, between the, the
24 handbook and the license. We've, we've gone through
25 it, ah, pretty closely, ah, to make sure that that is

1
2 the case and any time that there has been a needed
3 clarification we've sat down with garden groups and
4 gone over it line by line, and we've really found
5 that to be helpful to, to explain the contents, um,
6 where it comes from, and how it can be used
7 [inaudible] garden.

8 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Thank you.

9 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER BIEDERMAN: And,
10 um, if I could add one thing. When there is an
11 update to the handbook, this is some, um, something
12 we committed to in conversation with, um, Aziz
13 Raymond that, ah, when, um, when [inaudible] would
14 make an update to the handbook that all the gardeners
15 would be notified both via email and via, um, US mail
16 so that, um, that those updates were, everybody was
17 on the same page, everybody knew about them, there
18 was transparency about them.

19 CHAIRPERSON KOO: OK. So I have one more
20 question, and then I'll turn it over to my other, my
21 colleagues in the committee. So regarding the
22 licenses are there any future changes being
23 contemplated to further support urban agricultural
24 practices when it comes up for renewal again in a few
25 years?

1
2 COMMISSIONER SILVER: Ah, well, it is
3 three years away from now since this one had just,
4 ah, been resigned. Ah, as Director LoSasso said,
5 urban agriculture is, is voluntary. Ah, we do not
6 prevent them from doing it. If they do we can
7 certainly offer them the guidance. Ah, but that
8 clearly is up to the volunteer efforts, ah, because
9 it does change what you do in your garden, so it is
10 not prohibited, but it is not mandated. It's up to
11 each garden. So we can certainly have a conversation
12 about urban agriculture. As you know, it's seasonal
13 and it's, ah, a very small supplement to overall city
14 food production, but is something we can certainly
15 have conversations with community gardeners to
16 express, ah, the interest in increasing food
17 production. Again, because the footprint is so small
18 it would be a very small supplement, but I'm sure it
19 would be still important, ah, to a local community.
20 So we certainly can have the conversation, but it is
21 something we would not want to mandate. We could
22 encourage but we could not mandate garden, gardeners
23 shift from horticulture to food production.

24 CHAIRPERSON KOO: So are there any rules
25 that, ah, each garden, how much is charged individual

1 farmers, individual farmers? Ah, I'll give you a
2 plot, how much they have to pay, the garden, for
3 administration?
4

5 COMMISSIONER SILVER: I think, ah, Chair
6 Koo, I want to make sure we make the distinction
7 between urban farm and urban agriculture. Ah, a lot
8 of the food production that is happening on gardens
9 are just given away. In some cases they're being
10 sold to help support the garden itself. But it's
11 not, since these are very small lots, 25 x 100, some
12 could be larger, so urban ag really isn't something
13 we're going to be looking at a full-scale urban farm.
14 Um, community gardens are somewhat different. I'll,
15 I'll defer that to Director LoSasso, see if wants to
16 add the that. Ah, but I believe people just come in,
17 they agree to take care of a plot or do a certain
18 function, and they're part of that community gardens
19 network, ah, but I don't believe there's a fee
20 charged to someone, ah, to actually be able to grow
21 either horticulture or food in their garden.
22 Director LoSasso?

23 DIRECTOR LOSASSO: Thank you,
24 Commissioner. Um, we do not permit a mandatory fee.
25 Some groups, ah, are permitted to charge what is

1 usually a nominal fee to support the basic operation
2 of the garden, \$10 or \$15 to help support them buy
3 seeds or, or buy shovels, or put on events for the
4 community. But we do have a requirement that there
5 also be an alternative to any kind of membership
6 fees. So we want to make sure that gardens are
7 accessible to everyone, that financial means is not a
8 barrier being a member to a GreenThumb garden. So if
9 somebody is not able to, to pay a plot fee or a basic
10 membership fee, they are able to do some additional
11 work around the garden or perhaps host, host open
12 hours or, or share a special skill that they have
13 with the garden group. So we've done everything we
14 can to work with garden groups to make sure that
15 gardens, ah, don't have any barriers to membership,
16 and, and gardens are supportive of that. Our
17 GreenThumb community gardeners are very much
18 community-centered and community-minded and they're
19 always interested in bringing more people into the
20 garden and not creating barriers.

22 CHAIRPERSON KOO: So, ah, Director, I
23 have one more question for you. Ah, so suppose a
24 senior citizen, they want to do something on the
25 garden, right, they have some free time, you know,

1
2 they retire, is there a waiting list for them to sign
3 on the, the community garden, or it depends in which
4 area you live in?

5 DIRECTOR LOSASSO: Ah, thank you, Chair
6 Koo. There may be a waiting list to get access to a
7 plot. Some gardens, many gardens are relatively
8 small in scale, as Commissioner Silver mentioned, and
9 there's only so many plots that can be fit. But what
10 we have found is that all garden groups find
11 innovative and creative ways to broaden membership
12 and to allow people to join the group. So even if
13 they don't have access to an individual plot in the
14 first year or two, they do have a way to be a part of
15 stewarding the garden or perhaps participating in a
16 communal plot. And each, each group makes its own
17 determination on how plots are allocated, but
18 membership is very broadly defined and we find that
19 groups are very welcoming, although sometimes there
20 may be a small wait to get access to a growing plot.

21 CHAIRPERSON KOO: OK. So if they're
22 interested to join they just, how do they join? I
23 mean, they just look up the GreenThumb, ah, directory
24 or what?

1
2 DIRECTOR LOSASSO: There's a lot of
3 different ways. The best way is to, to go to a
4 garden and introduce yourself and you will find some
5 of the most welcoming and inviting people in the
6 world stewarding GreenThumb gardens and gardeners
7 will be happy to give a tour of the space and tell
8 you the history of it. A lot of the history of these
9 gardens is amazing, um, and if they're not able to,
10 to reach the group or, or they want to just reach out
11 directly to GreenThumb, we have a whole team that can
12 facilitate introductions to, to provide pathways to
13 membership.

14 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Thank you. I finished
15 my questions. Ah, I want to turn it over to Counsel,
16 our moderator.

17 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. Ah, thank
18 you Chair Koo. Ah, we'll now move on to questions
19 from other council members. Ah, I will call on
20 members to ask their questions in the order that they
21 have used the Zoom raise hand function. If you would
22 like to ask a question and you have not yet used the
23 Zoom raise hand function please raise it now. Ah,
24 council members, again, please keep your questions to
25 five minutes. The Sergeant at Arms will keep a timer

1 and will let me know when your time is up. Ah, you
2 should be once I have called on you and the
3 sergeant has announced that you may begin, ah,
4 asking, ah, your questions. Ah, first we will hear
5 from Council Member Barron and she will be followed
6 by Council Member Riley.

8 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time starts now.

9 COUNCIL MEMBER BARRON: Thank you, thank
10 you so much. Thank you to the chair and to the panel
11 for participating and sharing the information. I did
12 not hear most of the, ah, testimony, but I do have a
13 specific question that I would like to pose. Ah,
14 first of all, oh, I'm so sorry. Commissioner Silver,
15 thank you for the work that you continue to do.
16 We've had a great partnership in developing the major
17 parks in my community and having them refurbished and
18 restored, so I want to thank you for that. And
19 commendations to Marty Mahr for the great work that
20 he has continually done in our community and the
21 staff that works with him. My question particularly
22 goes to a garden that's in my community. Ah, it's a
23 garden that has been operated for perhaps maybe as
24 much as 15 years or more. And it's the Green Valley
25 Garden on [inaudible] Avenue. We had to battle,

1 first of all, to keep it as a garden. There were
2 plans from the city to take it over and include in
3 some development that was being conducted, ah, and we
4 had to fight and battle and get a lawyer to prove
5 that it was in fact a protected garden and we were
6 successful with that battle. Subsequently there was
7 development that was planned across the street and
8 the height of that building would have had a negative
9 impact on the sunlight that would have been able to
10 reach the garden. So we negotiated, ah, I'm very
11 much concerned about housing but gardens are
12 important as well, and we had the developer lower the
13 building substantially so as to not be as much of a
14 hindrance to the sunlight. The, ah, developer agreed
15 that they would in fact, again, after negotiations,
16 that they would in fact participate in installing a
17 grow light so that there would be some compensation
18 for the sunlight that was diminished during that
19 growing season. But now it appears that we have a
20 bit of a problem. I've been told that there needs to
21 be a more substantial building constructed or
22 structure erected to accommodate what would be the
23 electrical outlets and poles and all of that thing.
24 So I don't know if you or someone on your staff can
25

1
2 speak to that topic and give us some input as to what
3 is the process in proceeding so that we will be able
4 to get that grow light installed and have that
5 service provided, which the developer said that they
6 would do.

7 COMMISSIONER SILVER: Well, first thank
8 you, ah, for your comments, Council Member Barron.
9 I'm not familiar with the details. I will see if,
10 ah, Director LoSasso does, ah, so I'll see whether he
11 has any information about that specific garden.

12 COUNCIL MEMBER BARRON: OK.

13 DIRECTOR LOSASSO: Thank you,
14 Commissioner, and Council Member, ah, thank you very
15 much for your support of gardens. Um, in my entire
16 tenure at GreenThumb you've been a strong supporter
17 and I know that the garden groups are very
18 appreciative of that, so thank you.

19 COUNCIL MEMBER BARRON: Thank you.

20 DIRECTOR LOSASSO: Ah, I am familiar with
21 the space and it's, um, ah, a bit of a technical
22 question, ah, as you alluded to [inaudible]. The,
23 the specific challenge here, and I will be happy to
24 follow up offline with more details, ah, if you're
25 interested, is that installing electricity into a

1 structure, um, cannot occur, ah, unless that
2 structure is registered with the Department of
3 Buildings. And the existing structure is not
4 currently registered with DOB. We, we did have a
5 chance to speak with the garden group and it's, ah, a
6 great garden group, it does a lot of great work in
7 the neighborhood...

9 COUNCIL MEMBER BARRON: Yes.

10 DIRECTOR LOSASSO: ...as, as you know, um,
11 and does a lot of, ah, food-related work, very
12 pertinent to the topic of this hearing, um, and tried
13 to outline, um, where the technical challenges were
14 and what may be some possible paths forward. One of
15 them would be, um, getting, ah, another greenhouse, a
16 prefabricated greenhouse that already met DOB
17 specifications, um, that could be more easily
18 electrified. And, and I don't want to speak too
19 deeply on it because I'm not an electrician, but I, I
20 would be happy to get more information for you and,
21 and follow up if, if you have further questions.

22 COUNCIL MEMBER BARRON: OK, because it's
23 been a, a struggle, as I said, from the beginning.
24 But, ah, I'm used to struggling when the causes are
25 righteous and just cause and, as you alluded, this

1 particular garden has been around for years and the
2 contributions that they made to the community are
3 truly outstanding...

4
5 DIRECTOR LOSASSO: Yeah.

6 COUNCIL MEMBER BARRON: And they have a,
7 the beehive and the bees come and get the honey and
8 all of that. The, ah, local honey and that's so
9 important as well. So I look forward to talking with
10 you afterward as well as my staffer, Ms. Anita
11 Fisher, who is my liaison in this, to find out
12 specifically what needs to be done and what the
13 timeframe that we can establish to accomplish that,
14 because the building is up...

15 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time expired.

16 COUNCIL MEMBER BARRON: ...so now the
17 sunlight is being impeded. So I just want to, ah, be
18 sure to get back to you so that we can progress, and
19 thank you so much to the panel and to the chair, once
20 again, for allowing my question. Thank you.

21 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you, Council
22 Member Barron. Next we'll hear from Council Member
23 Riley. He'll be followed by Council Member Ayala,
24 followed by Council Member Levine.

25 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time starts now.

1 COMMITTEE ON PARKS AND RECREATION 51
2 COUNCIL MEMBER RILEY: Thank you, and
3 thank you, Chair Koo, and to the panel for this
4 presentation today. I'm very supportive of community
5 gardening and, and my question is, ah, has the Parks
6 Department ever, ah, seen a community group abandon
7 their garden and if so, um, what is the process of
8 another group possibly taking over the garden, or is
9 that garden completely just dismantled? Also, um, is
10 there any way that community group, who has a
11 community garden, sell the produce that they're
12 actually making in the garden to the community?

13 COMMISSIONER SILVER: Um, well, first,
14 welcome, Council Member Riley. I will defer that
15 question to Director LoSasso.

16 DIRECTOR LOSASSO: Thank you,
17 Commissioner, and thank you, Commissioner, ah,
18 Council Member Riley. Um, on occasion GreenThumb
19 gardens can become inactive. That's the term that we
20 use at GreenThumb, um, and that just means that the
21 group that was stewarding it for, for whatever
22 reason, um, disbanded. Sometimes people can move
23 from the block or people's interest can change and
24 the space will become an inactive. It's rare, ah,
25 but it does happen. Um, and typically when that's

1
2 happening our, our team at GreenThumb has an idea
3 that the group is beginning to dwindle and we start
4 working proactively to find interest in the
5 neighborhood to keep the space active. So we have a
6 community engagement team whose sole job is to work
7 with communities [inaudible] GreenThumb gardens to
8 engage, ah, elected officials and community boards
9 and members of the public and nonprofits and CBOs to
10 introduce them to community gardening and with
11 community gardeners. So we've had a lot of success
12 reactivating spaces. So, um, I'm confident that if a
13 space were to become inactive in relatively short
14 order we could reactive it, similar to how we've done
15 in the past. And your second question about sales,
16 um, several years ago, predating me, but I think a
17 couple licenses cycles ago the Parks Department did
18 begin allowing GreenThumb gardeners on Parks property
19 to sell the produce that they grow. And this was,
20 again, in response to feedback we got from community
21 gardeners and, ah, as I understand it, what the Parks
22 Department heard was that being able to sell the
23 produce would give them a way to distribute it the
24 community, of course, but to help support the
25 operation of the garden, and sell some tomatoes or

1 cucumbers when the, when the crop comes in at the end
2 of the year. You can then buy soil or more seeds or
3 more plants for the next year. So we do permit that,
4 provided that all of the revenue goes back into
5 supporting the garden.

6
7 COUNCIL MEMBER RILEY: Thank you. That,
8 that answered my questions. Thank you so much.

9 DIRECTOR LOSASSO: Thank you, Councilman.

10 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you, Council
11 Member Riley. We'll now hear from Council Member
12 Ayala, followed by Council Member Levine.

13 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time starts now.

14 COUNCIL MEMBER AYALA: Thank you. Um, so
15 my question is has, has the Department of Parks and
16 Recreation or GreenThumb done any type of analysis on
17 what, ah, neighborhoods are most in need of new urban
18 agricultural sites?

19 COMMISSIONER SILVER: Well, let me, you
20 say urban agricultural sites. We know where the
21 gardens are located and where the gaps exist. Ah,
22 so, ah, but we look at gardens in general, not urban
23 [inaudible] in particular. I'll defer the rest of
24 that question to, ah, Director LoSasso. But we do
25 have maps spatially to show where there are gaps in,

1 I guess, a walking distance to GreenThumb gardens.

2 Ah, so I'll defer to, ah, Director LoSasso.

3
4 DIRECTOR LOSASSO: Thank you,

5 Commissioner, and thank you for the question, Council

6 Member, and, of course, for your continued support

7 of, of GreenThumb gardens. I know you have a lot in

8 your district as well. Um, so as Commissioner Silver

9 alluded to, we do look at neighborhoods throughout

10 the city that don't currently have a garden. We

11 would look specifically for siting a GreenThumb

12 garden and let the group, of course, choose whether

13 or not they want to grow food or they want to grow

14 flowers, or a mixture of both. We have the long-term

15 goal of establishing a GreenThumb garden within a 10-

16 minute of every single New Yorker. It, it is

17 ambitious and long term, but we have all seen that a

18 neighborhood is a better, stronger neighborhood when

19 they have a GreenThumb garden. So gardens are

20 clustered. We have about 550. They're clustered in,

21 in five areas, um, throughout the city largely. Um,

22 so we've developed a set of criteria and, and a

23 pretty robust map, which I would be happy to share

24 after the hearing, showing those areas in the city

25 that don't currently have a garden and we're

1 specifically focusing and prioritizing our efforts on
2 trying to find those, those few remaining empty
3 vacant lots in the city to potentially start a garden
4 there, because I think we all know once a vacant lot
5 is gone, it's probably gone for our lifetime. So we
6 are focusing on those neighborhoods that aren't
7 currently [inaudible].

9 COUNCIL MEMBER AYALA: OK, I appreciate
10 that. I wanted to recognize Ray, ah, Figueroa from
11 Friends of Brook Park, it's in my district. Love,
12 love, love what they're doing in that garden. But I
13 have two questions. I only have three minutes left.
14 Um, what portion of the budget for green, um,
15 GreenThumb or otherwise is devoted to promoting and
16 supporting urban agricultural programs in community
17 gardens and, two, um, do we know of any, any gardens
18 that were either unable to or opted to not open
19 during COVID?

20 COMMISSIONER SILVER: Bill, why don't you
21 respond?

22 DIRECTOR LOSASSO: Of course. Um, I
23 don't have an exact breakout, ah, Council Member, on
24 urban agriculture-related portion of the budget, but
25 I, I'm confident saying that it's hundreds of

1 thousands of dollars, ah, which was, of course, um,
2 an exponentially large amount of support last year
3 due to Play Fair. And that's primarily broken into
4 providing, ah, clean topsoil that's chemically tested
5 to, to be safe for growing food, providing really
6 high-quality lumber for raised beds, ah, indirectly
7 supporting urban agriculture through infrastructure,
8 ah, supporting the gardens, and we've spent tens of
9 thousands of dollars on providing free plant starts
10 and seeds to garden groups throughout the city, and
11 developing new workshops and public programming and
12 trainings to support those that are interested in
13 food production, and that ranges from gardening 101
14 to really advanced gardening techniques.

16 COUNCIL MEMBER AYALA: OK, and regarding
17 the question around the gardens that either opted to
18 or were unable to open during COVID, is there a
19 number?

20 DIRECTOR LOSASSO: Ah, I don't have a
21 number, um, off the top of my head. I, I can get you
22 an estimate. We don't know exactly, but what we did
23 do is, was defer to each group. We worked very
24 closely with Parks operations and the Department of
25 Health to develop protocols to make sure that the

1 gardens could remain accessible to garden groups. So
2 they were always open to garden groups during COVID.
3 They were closed to the public during the height of
4 it, in the interest of public safety, of course. And
5 then we developed protocols as the situation evolved,
6 ah, with operations and with the Department of Health
7 to advise groups on maintaining social distancing and
8 signage and what kind of PPE might be necessary to
9 begin to invite the public back in. But we've always
10 approached this through a lens of best practices of
11 public health.

13 COUNCIL MEMBER AYALA: I appreciate it.
14 I appreciate the support. Oh, I'm also on the bill.
15 Um, this summer we had the, the garden at the
16 Randall's Island, um, and they were just
17 phenomenal, um, in terms of it. I know that Ray
18 does this all of the time, too, in the South Bronx.
19 Um, you know, contributing to the local food pantries
20 was really critical, um, especially, you know, in the
21 Eighth Council [inaudible] District, we were hit
22 really hard and food disparities continue to be a
23 real thing for us. So it would be really, it would
24 be nice to, you know, at least do a study to have a
25 better understanding of where food is being grown,

1
2 how we're processing, who, you know, where, where
3 this food is being distributed to, um, because I
4 think that we, you know, we underestimate the
5 importance of community gardens sometimes, um, and,
6 and we've learned, I think specifically during this
7 pandemic, how, how critical they offer in terms of
8 helping us meet the, you know, supplement the needs,
9 ah, in the community, ah, that has been deprived of
10 an opportunity to really have access to fresh, ah,
11 foods, ah, during this pandemic, um, for many
12 reasons. So, you know, I thank you for that and I,
13 you know, I look forward to, to passing this bill and
14 hopefully getting, um, you know, some answers to some
15 of our questions and figuring out how we can be more
16 supportive, um, as a body so that we're, you know,
17 we're able to really look at this more holistically.

18 DIRECTOR LOSASSO: Thank you.

19 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Thank you.

20 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you, Council
21 Member Ayala. Next up is Council Member Levine. Ah,
22 before Council Member Levine starts I will just ask
23 if there are any other council members who have
24 questions, please use the Zoom raise hand function
25

1 now, and we'll go, move on to Council Member Levine.
2 Thank you.

3 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time starts now.

4 COUNCIL MEMBER LEVINE: Thank you, Chris.

5 Ah, thank you to Chair Koo for your great work in
6 this hearing, and it's really a pleasure to see you,
7 Commissioner Silver, really grateful for your
8 leadership for parks in this city. I just want to
9 say how precious I consider the community gardens.

10 Ah, I really feel they are an essential component of
11 the Parks system, not an appendage, and I feel like
12 their value now in the pandemic and, and post
13 pandemic is actually greater than ever, in part
14 because just having any space for people to be
15 outside right now, it's really a lifesaver. I can't
16 imagine what the city would have been like without
17 our Parks system and, and specifically community
18 gardens. But I also think that, as Council Member
19 Ayala was just, ah, saying very forcefully, um, we
20 see more than ever just how critical access to fresh
21 fruit and vegetables is to health. Ah, it really,
22 ah, critical to closing health inequality that has
23 been exposed by this pandemic, and so community
24 gardens really have I think an even more important
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2 role to play going forward. And, ah, and I know you
3 agree with that. I just wanted to ask a couple
4 follow-up questions. So the current license
5 agreement is dated 2019, correct? And I think, I
6 might be confused on this. I think you mentioned a
7 four-year term for that? So does that mean that this
8 agreement expires, I guess, in 2023 and then it would
9 be subsequently reviewed, renewed for another four
10 years?

11 COMMISSIONER SILVER: That is correct.

12 COUNCIL MEMBER LEVINE: OK. And is that
13 the normal cycle? This is an every-four-years
14 process?

15 COMMISSIONER SILVER: Correct.

16 COUNCIL MEMBER LEVINE: Got it, OK.
17 Thank you. Um, in, in terms of the liability
18 obligations, ah, as, as defined in the agreement,
19 which I know has been very contentious, um, just
20 perhaps you can expand or, or clarify if, if garden
21 volunteers, community garden volunteers, are, um,
22 shoveling snow, ah, after, after a storm, ah, and,
23 and they leave a spot undone accidentally are, are
24 they then as volunteers liable to be sued as a result
25 of that, according to the, this agreement?

1
2 COMMISSIONER SILVER: Well, let me, I'm
3 not sure the answer to that question. Let me defer
4 that to Commissioner Biederman, ah, about the, the
5 new liability clause in the agreement.

6 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER BIEDERMAN: So,
7 thank you, Commissioner, and, ah, thank you, Council
8 Member, for the question. Um, the, so if in the
9 unfortunate case there's an accident or a lawsuit,
10 um, regarding anything that happens in the garden it
11 would be left to a judge to decide, um, what the,
12 who's liable or the accident [inaudible]. Ah, just a
13 reminder, prior to this the licenses stated, prior to
14 the current licenses, the licenses stated that, um,
15 it was the garden groups were liable for everything
16 that happened in the garden. That language was
17 lifted and so now it is up for a court to decide in
18 the, um, unfortunate instance that something like
19 this should happen.

20 COUNCIL MEMBER LEVINE: And how, how
21 often does such an instance occur?

22 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER BIEDERMAN: It has
23 not happened in my memory under, ah, my leadership
24 [inaudible], yeah, it's exceedingly rare.

1
2 COUNCIL MEMBER LEVINE: Ah, that, that's
3 good to hear. Um, we just want to make sure that
4 these volunteers who, I mean, I just have to say a
5 word about the volunteers. I mean, the community
6 garden volunteers in this city are absolutely
7 incredible, ah, what they've done, ah, in many cases
8 turning these spaces from abandoned vacant dangerous
9 places to, ah, just thriving community gathering
10 spots and sources of healthy food and environmental
11 education and none of them are getting a, a penny for
12 that effort. So I think at all times we want to
13 uplift them and celebrate them and, ah, certainly,
14 ah, we don't want them to feel that they're facing
15 legal liability, ah, if they're just trying to do the
16 best they can. But, um, I'm, I'm short on time so I
17 just, I did want to ask about the study, ah,
18 Commissioner, that you referenced, um, that I think
19 is looking to understand food production. Ah, do I
20 have that correct, at our community gardens, or am I
21 confused? Sorry, forgive me. The, the study you're
22 conducting now on community gardens?

23 COMMISSIONER SILVER: There's no, no, I
24 think that the Intro 1059, ah, Council Member Ayala
25 would like us to...

2 COUNCIL MEMBER LEVINE: Forgive me, yes.
3 But, ah, and the administration's position on that
4 is?

5 COMMISSIONER SILVER: Oh, we believe in
6 transparency. We'd like to actually elevate the work
7 that our community gardens are doing. So we'll work
8 with the council and we believe in transparency. Ah,
9 we're very grateful this is a one-time report that
10 would give the council information they need to
11 better understand what is happening in our community
12 gardens, specifically urban agriculture. So we're
13 certainly willing to work, ah, with the council. Ah,
14 we believe in transparency and we believe in
15 providing valuable information.

16 COUNCIL MEMBER LEVINE: Ah, thank you to
17 you, Commissioner. Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thanks to
18 Chair Ayala for, for your work in supporting, ah,
19 these critical Parks spaces and the volunteers.

20 COMMISSIONER SILVER: And welcome back to
21 the Parks Committee. It's good to see your face.

22 COUNCIL MEMBER LEVINE: Likewise.
23 Thanks, Commissioner.

24

25

2 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you, Council
3 Member Levine. Ah, we will now turn it back to Chair
4 Koo, who has some additional questions.

5 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Thank you. Ah,
6 Commissioner, I have one more question. Ah, there is
7 currently approximately \$900,000 in city funding that
8 has been [inaudible] and allocated to purchase a
9 parcel of the Frank White Memorial Garden located on
10 143rd Street in Council Member Levine's district that
11 is currently at risk and for sale by a private
12 entity. These funds were secured to allow the garden
13 to continue to operate, but we are hearing Parks have
14 not yet moved forward. Ah, what steps need to be
15 taken so that the purchase can move forward?

16 COMMISSIONER SILVER: I'm not familiar
17 with that specific garden. Ah, Director LoSasso, do
18 you have information about that specific situation?

19 DIRECTOR LOSASSO: Yes, thank you,
20 Commissioner, and thank you for the question, Chair
21 Koo. So the Parks Department did receive ULURP
22 approval to acquire a vacant parcel immediately
23 adjacent to a garden, um, and capital funds have
24 been, ah, provided, ah, through discretionary
25 allocations from Council Member Levine and, and

1
2 Borough President Brewer. But unfortunately the city
3 and the property owner have not been able to reach a
4 negotiated upon purchase price. My understanding is
5 that process continues. Um, but at this point, ah,
6 an agreed-upon price has not been reached.

7 CHAIRPERSON KOO: So can you, can your
8 staff like get back to us by Friday with the next
9 steps, ah, to, to ensure that we don't lose the
10 community garden?

11 DIRECTOR LOSASSO: I, I will be happy to
12 provide, um, follow-up information. But just to
13 provide one clarification, Chair. The existing
14 community garden is not at risk. This would be, ah,
15 an expansion of the garden onto a parcel that is
16 immediately adjacent to the...

17 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Yeah.

18 DIRECTOR LOSASSO: ...existing space.

19 CHAIRPERSON KOO: So, so...

20 DIRECTOR LOSASSO: I would be happy to
21 get you follow-up information.

22 CHAIRPERSON KOO: OK, yeah, please follow
23 up with us, yeah, because we don't want to lose the
24 money or lose the site, yeah. So, ah, thank you very
25

1 much. Ah, are there any other council members who
2 have questions?
3

4 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: No, Chair Koo, no
5 more questions from members.

6 CHAIRPERSON KOO: So, ah, we can go to
7 public hearing.

8 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you, Chair Koo,
9 OK. Ah, we'll now turn to public testimony. I'd
10 like to remind everyone that unlike our typical
11 council hearings we'll be calling on individuals one
12 by one to testify. As I stated earlier, each
13 panelist will be given three minutes to speak, so
14 please begin once the sergeant has started the timer
15 and given you the cue to begin. Council members who
16 have questions for particular panelists should use
17 the Zoom hand raise function. And I will call on you
18 in order after, ah, the panelist has completed their
19 testimony. For panelists, once your name is called a
20 member of our staff will unmute you and the Sergeant
21 at Arms will give you the go-ahead to begin upon
22 setting the timer. Please wait for the sergeant to
23 announce that you may begin before, ah, delivering
24 your testimony. At this time I'd like to invite Lynn
25 Kelly from the New York Restoration Project to, ah,

1 speak, and she will be followed by Jessica Saab from
2 New Yorkers for Parks.

3
4 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time starts now.

5 LYNN KELLY: Thank you, Council Member
6 Koo and the rest of the City Council. I appreciate
7 the invitation to be able to speak today. My name is
8 Lynn Kelly. I'm the executive director of New York
9 Restoration Project. Um, for those of you that don't
10 know us, ah, New York Restoration Project, we steward
11 over 80 acres of parkland on behalf of the city, um,
12 and we operate 52 community gardens, which is about
13 20,000 square feet of actually food production right
14 now throughout the five boroughs. Um, I think it's
15 been well documented about the benefits of community
16 gardens, um, health, mental, both mental and
17 physical, and especially so within the onset of our
18 pandemic. Um, it's proven itself time and time
19 again, gardens, green space, are essential city
20 infrastructure. What I want to point out, though,
21 and there's also, um, been additional documentation
22 on this through the Food Bank of New York City, New
23 York City residents make up half of all food-insecure
24 people in New York State and the rate here is rising.
25 We're 12% higher than the national rate. So between

1
2 rising unemployment, the impacts of the pandemic,
3 access to fresh healthy food is at a premium and it's
4 becoming harder and hard to obtain. And that's why,
5 um, at the beginning of the pandemic NYRP took
6 immediate action and we transitioned many of our
7 gardens that were used for passive recreation into
8 small mini urban agricultural oases in the city, um,
9 for, and for the surrounding communities. We
10 provided gardeners with starts for plants, like the
11 not actually the seeds but the actual starts, extra
12 tools, PPE equipment, in order to encourage increased
13 growth of produce in these neighborhoods for
14 distribution for free. And I'm happy to report that,
15 um, our gardeners are the heart and soul of our
16 network. Those volunteer gardeners grew over 90,000
17 pounds, um, since the onset of COVID and that's
18 equivalent approximately to \$180,000 worth of produce
19 that's been provided for free throughout the city at
20 no cost. Um, we really hope that the city and the
21 City Council can help support the work of NYRP and
22 our partners. Um, programs that allow New York City
23 residents to grow their own food are critical. They
24 need to be expanded. And we need to be able to seek
25 creative partnerships with city agencies. We applaud

1 your efforts on, ah, behalf of New York City to
2 advocate for this. I'm pleased to see so many of my,
3 ah, gardener colleagues on this call, as well as New
4 Yorkers for Parks. I wish we could come up with
5 another 8 million dollars for the Play Fair Campaign
6 again for community gardens. Um, but I'm here in
7 solidarity, ah, and hope that we really see this as
8 an opportunity for food production on some small
9 scale in New York City. Thank you.

11 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. Next
12 we'll hear from Jessica Saab from New Yorkers for
13 Parks. She'll be followed by Aziz Dehkan from the
14 New York City Community Garden Coalition.

15 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time starts now.

16 JESSICA SAAB: Good afternoon. My name
17 is Jessica Saab and I am the advocacy and
18 communications project manager at New Yorkers for
19 Parks. I want to thank the Committee on Parks and
20 Recreation for hosting today's hearing. Community
21 gardens play a critical and often overlooked role in
22 our city's open space network. With over 550
23 community gardens citywide these spaces which are
24 created and maintained by dedicated volunteers drive
25 grassroots neighborhood development, create space for

1
2 our vibrant multicultural communities and help
3 address food insecurity on a local scale. Many
4 gardens are the site of food production directly, but
5 others also act as sites for community-supported
6 agriculture distribution as well as composting. They
7 also provide a means for young New Yorkers to
8 directly interact with land in ways that are often
9 not available to residents in our dense city. During
10 the pandemic some community garden groups stepped up
11 even more, establishing community [inaudible],
12 connecting networks of mutual aid, and growing
13 additional food for neighbors. In 2019 New Yorkers
14 for Parks launched the Play Fair Coalition and
15 Campaign, which sought to increase the expense budget
16 for New York City Parks. One of the key pieces of
17 our budget platform was an 8 million investment into
18 our community garden network. We were thrilled when
19 the City Council secured this funding, which marked
20 the first-ever system-wide investment for community
21 gardens. This funding allowed New York City Parks to
22 hire 15 additional outreach coordinators for the
23 GreenThumb division, provide fencing and sidewalk
24 improvements, and provide materials for gardens
25 citywide. While this funding was not renewed in the

1
2 FY21 budget, we hope that the City Council and
3 mayor's office will continue to value and invest in
4 our community garden network and the incredible
5 network of dedicated volunteers who maintain them.
6 We are also testifying today in support of Intro
7 1059, which would require New York City Parks to
8 undertake a report to aggregate community gardens
9 citywide that are engaged in urban agriculture.
10 Having a detailed accounting of where there are
11 additional opportunities for green spaces and urban
12 food production in the city will provide useful data
13 for decision-makers and communities citywide. We
14 also believe the data gathered in this report would
15 help the city better allocate resources to gardens in
16 need of additional material support. The City
17 Council previously released a report called Growing
18 Food Equity in New York City, which proposed multiple
19 policy initiatives that would help garden groups
20 respond more effectively to issues in their
21 communities. We recommend that the council implement
22 those policies as well to better protect community
23 gardens and enhance their ability to thrive. Thank
24 you for allowing me to speak today. I'm happy to
25 answer any questions the council might have.

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CHAIRPERSON KOO: Thank you, Rebecca.
No, thank you, Jessica, sorry, yeah. So is there anything else, ah, the city can do to support community gardens and urban agriculture?

JESSICA SAAB: Um, well, as I stated...

CHAIRPERSON KOO: Yeah.

JESSICA SAAB: I think, we think that, um, that report, Growing Food Equity in New York City, outlined some policy initiatives that make a lot of sense for helping communities, community gardens continue to grow and, um, distribute things well. I think, as all have mentioned, it is based on volunteers, so it's tricky to codify this work and, um, but I do one of the policy initiatives that was mentioned in that report was finding a way to provide payment to volunteers for their work. So I think there are different ways that, um, gardeners can be helped in this.

CHAIRPERSON KOO: Thank you. So I, I wanted to ask Lynn Kelly the same question again. Can the city do more to help community gardens and agricultural groups?

LYNN KELLY: Ah, yes, I would concur with, certainly what Jessica has said, but I would

1
2 add this. A lot of the times the challenge between
3 partner organizations and the city, um, often have to
4 do with the, the red tape or the process that has to
5 occur. And there's a reason why there is a process.
6 I mean, the city has its, its process for a reason,
7 I'm not discounting that. But I'll give you an
8 example. In the case of NYCHA, ah, my organization,
9 organization over time was able to create a license
10 agreement with NYCHA as an agency so that as garden
11 groups that are parts of tenant organizations applied
12 to us to be able to do small-plot gardening and
13 otherwise under-utilized spaces we have a very
14 succinct, quick process for approval now that we
15 didn't have a year ago. So if there are ways of
16 creating streamlined approval processes so that we
17 can get things up and running, it's, I always say
18 it's, a garden is a lot different, setting up a
19 garden is a lot different than some of the large-
20 scale city capital projects and in my point of view
21 they don't need the same time of procurement or the
22 same type of level of, ah, scrutiny, perhaps. Um,
23 there should some process in place, don't get me
24 wrong. But I think if the council could encourage
25 agencies that have land, not just the Parks

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2 Department, but remember DOT has land, DCAS has land,
3 ah, DEP has land, NYCHA has land. They're, you know,
4 think about if there could be one sort of czar over
5 this, so to speak. I hate that word, but I can't
6 think of a better one at the moment, to really kind
7 of consolidate, ah, some of this work and the
8 processes with the city agencies. I think that would
9 go a long way. I mean...

10 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Thank you.

11 LYNN KELLY: [inaudible] Council Member,
12 I'll say this, like if ever there was a time to move
13 quickly and think creatively about how to get fresh
14 produce in New Yorker's hands, look at any corner in
15 any neighborhood where there's a food pantry and
16 there's your answer. So now is the time to, to
17 mobilize and, ah, I, I will hope that the elected
18 officials on this call and the administration can
19 figure out a way to work with us as partner
20 organizations to make that happen quickly. Thank
21 you.

22 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Thank you, yeah.

23 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. We'll now
24 hear from Aziz Dehkan from the New York City
25

1
2 Community Garden Coalition, and he'll be followed by
3 Raymond Figueroa.

4 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time starts now.

5 AZIZ DEHKAN: Hi, everybody, and thank
6 you for, um, letting me speak today. Chair Koo,
7 thank you very much for your pointed questions. Um,
8 your, your committee has come with some really good
9 questions to the commissioners and, and Bill LoSasso
10 on this call. Um, some of the things that have been
11 said, um, I have some issues with. Ah, I think the
12 word transparency has been bounced around a lot here
13 and, um, during the license negotiation I think there
14 was an extreme lack of, of transparency in how we
15 were working with each other. The license issue
16 could have been resolved months earlier had Parks
17 Department, um, held more fruitful discussions with
18 us, but that's water under the bridge, so to speak,
19 and now we need to talk about how we increase the
20 work of community gardens. How during this pandemic
21 we, um, find ways to increase food security in the
22 city and as people have spoken about it, um, you
23 know, community gardens are a definite outlet for
24 that. Um, I think part of what we need to do is in
25 this study, which I want to shout out to Rafael

1
2 Espinal who started this process years ago, um, my
3 question comes around to transparency again. And I'm
4 concerned, ah, following up with, ah, Councilman's,
5 ah, Council Member Levine's question, how is the DPR
6 going to conduct this study? Um, how will it be
7 shared? Who are they going to talk with, ah, about
8 this during the study? Um, how's it gonna be
9 presented back to your committee, Chair Koo? And,
10 um, how, how, how receptive are they going to be to
11 our questions and to the things that we see as
12 community gardeners, as we know the importance of our
13 own gardens. Um, so I'm, those are my real concerns
14 about this study. You know, we're in, the Community
15 Garden Coalition is, is in support of Intro 1059. I
16 think it's important to recognize what, ah, Jessica
17 Saab said about there are previous studies out there
18 that could be utilized. Ah, as a part of the New
19 York, ah, COVID-19 Coalition we've talking quite a
20 bit about food security and the community gardens'
21 roles in that food security issue, um, and food
22 insecurity. Um, as, ah, Lynn said, ah, all you need
23 to do is go to a food bank and see what that's about.
24 So anything that the, ah, GreenThumb and Commissioner
25 Silver can do to increase, you know, the ability and,

1
2 and Chair Koo you talked about, you asked about are
3 there rules that limit community garden activity.
4 And in a 17-page license there are a lot of rules
5 that do limit us in what we can do. So we would like
6 to see some of those relaxed and, you know, a
7 partnership with GreenThumb that, that goes back for
8 many years restored and that a communication
9 transparency would be a, a top of the list on this,
10 how this study is proposed. Thank you.

11 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Thank you for your
12 input, yeah.

13 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. Next
14 we'll hear from, ah, Raymond Figueroa of New York
15 City Community Garden Coalition and Pratt Institute,
16 and he'll be followed by Shahela Begum from Uprose.

17 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time starts now.

18 RAYMOND FIGUEROA: Ah, thank you very
19 much. I first want to acknowledge the leadership of
20 Chair Koo, ah, and Councilwoman Ayala, very much so,
21 and I want to recognize also Council Member Levine
22 for his, ah, long-standing leadership, ah, as it
23 regards community gardens. Ah, thank you again for
24 convening this hearing. I'm, ah, very, very
25 grateful. Um, I just wanted to respond, I believe,

1 in terms of my remarks in, in a couple of ways. Ah,
2 first, I think what needs to, you know, with, ah, ah,
3 and I want to direct this directly to Chair Koo, one
4 of the things that the city really needs to think
5 about is incorporating what I would call, ah, an
6 anti-racism equity lens, ah, ah, in terms of
7 assessing how to move forward with, um, ah, the
8 consideration of community gardens in the siting.
9 Why do I say that? Um, the community gardens
10 historically, um, have, have arisen in communities
11 that have been historically marginalized as a result
12 of structurally racist policies implemented via the
13 city. Redlining, urban renewal, planned shrinkage
14 were all aimed at relegating communities of color and
15 disenfranchising communities of color economically
16 and socially. What happened in response is that
17 community residents rose up, not accepting poverty,
18 not accepting racism, but accepting their sense of
19 human dignity and reclaiming the spaces that have
20 been abandoned, their communities that have been
21 abandoned, ah, you know, as community gardens. And
22 so that dynamic is still at play when we're, ah,
23 considering community gardens. Why? Because as we
24 can see from the pandemic the way it's played out,
25

1
2 um, it's played out in such a way where there is
3 disproportionate morbidity and mortality in
4 communities of color. Where these community gardens,
5 in the same places where these community gardens are
6 located. Ah, what I'd like to say is that for
7 example in the Bronx, community gardens organized
8 themselves, I want to say a dozen, ah, approximately
9 a dozen of us community gardens organized ourselves
10 to aggregate our harvest. We grew, ah, anywhere from
11 5 to 10,000 pounds, I don't have the exact number, I
12 know that's a big window, um, depending on how we
13 measure, but it was, ah, it was over 5000 pounds of
14 food that we moved. And, ah, um, market valuation in
15 excess of, ah, \$36,000. The point being, um, is that
16 community gardens have risen, um, to the occasion to
17 respond, ah, to this, ah, situation of the pandemic.
18 The city needs to really think that if it is not
19 healthy, um, from a community health perspective,
20 from a citywide perspective, the economy is not going
21 to be, ah, healthy as, as well. People are not going
22 to be [inaudible]...

23 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time expired.

24 RAYMOND FIGUEROA: ...any healthy. Um, I
25 just want to just finally say that, um, at Pratt, out

1
2 of Pratt Institute we've conducted a number of
3 studies. Not only are community gardens growing food
4 in a very robust type of way, ah, we are also, ah,
5 benefitting the city fiscally in terms of our
6 ecological system services, meaning that, um, in the
7 year that we, last year when we measured, ah,
8 ecological system services, just out of a sampling of
9 20 gardens, ah, the city is realizing 1.3 million
10 dollars in savings, ah, to its sewage infrastructure,
11 to its energy infrastructure, ah, and, and so forth
12 as a result of ecosystem services. So the
13 combination of benefits to local communities in, in
14 terms of lowering pollution and benefitting the city
15 fiscally, as well as producing health-promoting food,
16 and there's nothing more health-promoting than
17 locally, ah, ah, grown nutrient-dense food. So I
18 just wanted to, ah, offer that for your
19 consideration. Thank you very much.

20 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Thank you. Thank you
21 for your suggestion and your input. Thank you.

22 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. Ah, we'll
23 now hear from Shahela Begum of Uprose, followed by
24 Alexis Mena of Universe City NYC.

25 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time starts now.

1
2 SHAHELA BEGUM: Good afternoon. My name
3 is Shahela Begum and I'm the resilience coordinator
4 at Uprose. I'm here today on behalf of Uprose to
5 express our support for Intro 1059. Founded in 1966,
6 Uprose is Brooklyn's oldest Latino community-based
7 organization. Uprose is an intergenerational,
8 multiracial, and nationally recognized [inaudible]
9 grassroots organization that works at the
10 intersection of racial justice and climate change.
11 Thank you for addressing the need for community
12 gardens and urban agriculture as a way to address
13 resiliency efforts throughout the city. New Yorkers
14 are extremely resilient in engaging with resources to
15 provide supplemental food benefits for their
16 community. However, this type of engagement should
17 not fall on the community alone. The City Council
18 Parks and Recreation Committee must commit to do more
19 in support of community gardens in low-income
20 communities and communities of color. Providing
21 funding support and valuable resources to front-line
22 communities secure the future of urban agriculture.
23 COVID-19 has made a huge impact on communities of
24 color, especially in urban areas, such as New York
25 City, forcing to reallocate resources and cut

1 programs such as compost collection. Due to these
2 types of cuts in environmental sustainability many
3 New Yorkers turn to their local community gardens for
4 their composting needs. Community gardens took much
5 of the burden off the Department of Sanitation by
6 reducing excess food waste and scraps in our
7 landfill. Composting sites in local gardens
8 throughout the city also play a vital role in
9 building healthy organic soil to use for gardening
10 and distribution. Low-income communities look to
11 these gardens as a source of supplemental food where
12 there's a growing food crisis during the pandemic.
13 The variability of food growing depending on local
14 neighborhoods represents the many diverse ethnicities
15 and cultures that represent New York City. For all
16 of these reasons, community gardens function not only
17 as ecologically resilient hubs for the city, but also
18 uphold social cohesion and resiliency of our people.
19 There are a myriad of benefits that [inaudible]
20 functions of urban agriculture, one of which is
21 climate resiliency. New York City receives an
22 average of 45 inches of annual rainfall, which makes
23 it difficult for our existing infrastructure to
24 process, leading to combined sewage overflows and
25

1 CSO. We see ongoing flooding every time it rains
2 continuing to be a major problem in front of, in
3 front-line communities that also have to deal with
4 pollution and flood damage. Urban agriculture is one
5 way to relieve an excess amount of rainfall from
6 overflowing our infrastructure since much of the rain
7 is absorbed into the soil and spread slowly
8 throughout. Furthermore, community gardens are also
9 well known for rainwater harvesting in large tanks,
10 which also plays a vital role in alleviating CSOs.
11 Urban agriculture designs offer solutions for a
12 healthier New York, reducing flooding pooling in
13 front-line neighborhoods along with simultaneously
14 producing the need for healthy food. Air quality and
15 temperature is dramatically improved with the
16 increase of community gardens where cities suffer
17 from overheating...

18
19 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time expired.

20 SHAHELA BEGUM: ...due to urban island
21 effect. Thank you for allowing me to testify.

22 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. We'll now
23 hear from Alexis Mena of University New York NYC,
24 followed by Maureen O'Brien from the Brooklyn Botanic
25 Garden.

1 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time starts now.

2 ALEXIS MENA: Sorry, I was on mute. Good
3
4 afternoon, everyone. Thank you for this opportunity
5 to speak today. Ah, my name is Alexis Mena. I'm a
6 lifelong resident of Brooklyn, New York, ah,
7 specifically East New York. Um, I'm an organizer,
8 I'm a farmer, and a [inaudible] community chef. Um,
9 I have been part of [inaudible] NYC with five
10 community gardens, two school gardens, and two
11 [inaudible] New York City, and I think that we need
12 to see more support, ah, direct financial support to
13 people who are taking on, ah, urban farming projects
14 and landscaping and beautifying the, the parks. Um,
15 two fundraisers a year, ah, if you think about most
16 of these community gardens are working on small, ah,
17 series of, of funders and followers, ah, [inaudible]
18 locally. So the most that they are fundraising in
19 these, between these two, ah, proposed fundraising
20 events is somewhere between \$1000 to \$5000 on
21 average, from what I've heard back from a lot of the
22 other, um, partners. This is insufficient. We need
23 more direct support [inaudible].

24 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Sir, we're losing
25 your, ah, your signal a bit. Is there a way we can,

1
2 is there a way you can move to a location, ah, where
3 you can get more clarity? If not, we can return to
4 you at a later point.

5 ALEXIS MENA: [inaudible] which is the
6 public land of the city. Thank you for my time.

7 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: OK, thank you. We'll
8 now hear from, ah, Maureen O'Brien from the Brooklyn
9 Botanic Garden, ah, who will be followed by Joseph
10 Raver or Reger from the Elizabeth Street Garden.

11 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time starts now.

12 MAUREEN O'BRIEN: Thank you. Good
13 afternoon, everyone. Ah, thank you, ah, Chair Koo,
14 ah, council members, everyone here attending from
15 GreenThumb and other organizations. I also want to
16 shout out Brenda Duchene, Barbara Adamson, and Alexis
17 Mena, out there, people who are community gardeners
18 out there doing the work. So glad to see you. Ah,
19 my name is Maureen O'Brien. I'm the community field
20 manager at Brooklyn Botanic Garden, and I work with
21 community gardens and urban farm volunteers in
22 Brooklyn. Um, ah, BBG supports community gardens and
23 public open green spaces and we do support a study on
24 the prevalence of urban garden food production and
25 agriculture in New York City. Um, ah, we suggest

1 that this study focus, ah, very specifically on the
2 volunteer gardeners, ah, what community gardens and
3 farms have and are doing, and what specific support
4 would be helpful. Ask and listen to the gardens and
5 farm leaders first. And learn and gather advice
6 about what they're doing and what they need, and if
7 they would like to do more. Our gardeners, who are
8 volunteers, are literally the people on the ground.
9 They're working with the soil and growing and they
10 know what they need to continue doing that. Not
11 every garden is interested in food growing and there
12 are some limitations with soil and, um, other, you
13 know, contaminations that not every single, ah,
14 situation is appropriate for food growing. Ah,
15 ornamental horticulture and herbs and pollinator
16 gardens are also super important, ah, to support the
17 food growing, ah, efforts. Ah, we advise that the
18 study also prioritize communities affected by food
19 apartheid, gardens and farms led by black and brown
20 people, neighborhoods that are low income and have no
21 or low food access. Ah, healthy food and seeing food
22 being grown is really important, ah, so that people
23 can develop healthy eating habits, even if the food
24 coming from the garden is not actually eaten. It's
25

1
2 important that people know where food comes from and
3 we really, ah, just, um, praise the council for, ah,
4 taking a deep dive into more food access for people
5 in New York. Ah, thank you so much. I want to leave
6 with, ah, one thing that Leah Peneman stated
7 yesterday at a conference at BBC, at BBG, sorry,
8 we're in a triple, we're now in a triple pandemic,
9 the COVID crisis, climate change, and racism. All of
10 these three things can be affected in a positive way
11 through community garden support.

12 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Thank you.

13 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. Next,
14 next up is Joseph Reiver from Elizabeth Street
15 Garden, who will be followed by Sarah Williams of
16 Green Guerrillas.

17 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time starts now.

18 JOSEPH REIVER: Hi there. Um, I just
19 want to thank the City Council for, for hosting this
20 meeting. Um, you know, I think a good question
21 that's come up, ah, from Council Member Koo is that
22 if there is anything the city can do to continue
23 helping community gardens and green infrastructure,
24 ah, to let you know. Um, you know, along with
25 everything that's, that's been discussed here, I

1 think an important starting point is protecting and
2 preserving community green space that's at risk and,
3 ah, already exists. Ah, as many of you may know,
4 Elizabeth Street Garden is at risk of being developed
5 and has been pitted against the need for affordable
6 housing. Um, the garden itself is over 20,000 square
7 feet of green space, actual green space in Little
8 Italy, which is very underserviced. Um, it's
9 recreational areas, but it's also community garden
10 beds. Ah, it's an outdoor museum as well. But
11 within these community garden beds we have volunteers
12 and neighbors growing food, ah, growing vegetables,
13 fruits, along with plants, ah, and we have actually
14 over 100,000 visitors each year. We have hundreds of
15 free public programs based in educational workshops
16 with local public schools, ah, based in gardening,
17 ah, wellness, and arts and culture. Ah, all of this
18 is being done by volunteer-based organizations at
19 zero cost to the city. I know a big discussion has
20 been, you know, the funding with these community
21 gardens, ah, and the funding with GreenThumb.
22 Everything we're doing in Elizabeth Street Garden is,
23 ah, at no cost to the city whatsoever. And because
24 of the size that we are, we're able to accommodate
25

1
2 all of these different functions. Ah, in 2019 the
3 City Council voted in favor of destroying Elizabeth
4 Street Garden. Ah, many council members are on this
5 board. Um, and it doesn't have to be this. It
6 doesn't have to be this affordable housing or green
7 space. It can be both and we can achieve both, and
8 we've actually identified an alternative site that
9 can provide more housing. Um, so I think, you know,
10 this pandemic has really highlighted the need for
11 open green space. Um, and it's highlighted the need
12 for community gardens and it's actually, ah, given us
13 an opportunity to achieve, ah, more affordable
14 housing with existing vacancies, ah, and more
15 creative thinking that way. And so we really need to
16 prioritize the green spaces and preserve that which
17 exists. And so, you know, I, I urge the City Council
18 to start, to start, ah, ah, looking at new
19 approaches, ah, and, and shifting their perspectives,
20 um, and, and saving spaces like Elizabeth Street
21 Garden because community gardens in general should be
22 at the forefront of our plans for urban agriculture
23 and our plans for pandemic recovery strategy. Ah,
24 these things are intertwined. Um, they're interwoven
25 and they both are vitalities to the city, ah, and

1 community healthy. So, you know, I just, I want to
2 highlight Elizabeth Street Garden because it's a
3 perfect example, ah, and we really can set, ah, a new
4 precedent in the way we're ah, we're unfortunately
5 being met with this housing versus green space, or
6 green spaces at risk, East River Park as well. You
7 know, these discussions, the community should be much
8 more involved, I feel, ah, personally, ah, and then
9 speaking on behalf of the garden, ah, the City
10 Council, I urge you to, to really sit down and listen
11 with the community because we're putting forth, ah,
12 creative plans and we really want to work with, ah,
13 with you to achieve the, ah, preservation...

14
15 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time.

16 JOSEPH REIVER: ...of these green spaces,
17 like Elizabeth Street Garden. Thank you.

18 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Thank you.

19 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. Next up
20 is Sarah Williams from Green Guerrillas, who will be
21 followed by Kara Goad from Earth Justice.

22 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time starts now.

23 SARAH WILLIAMS: Thank you. I'm Sarah
24 McCullough Williams, executive director of Green
25 Guerrillas, a nonprofit that supports community

1 gardens and activates youth engaged in food justice
2 across the city. Communities that were already
3 experiencing food insecurity before COVID-19 are now
4 depending on community gardens to survive. This year
5 many gardeners ramped up their food production for
6 distribution to families, neighborhoods, and local
7 organizations in need, sometimes uniting with other
8 gardens to distribute across large networks, as Ray
9 mentions, has happened in the Bronx, as also
10 happened, ah, elsewhere across the city. Even before
11 this time of extreme need, however, community
12 gardeners have been vital members of a larger
13 movement towards food sovereignty and have been
14 working vigorously for the right to healthy, fresh,
15 culturally relevant food, the right to green space,
16 and community land ownership and the right to
17 healthy. For these reasons and many more we support
18 this initiative proposing a detailed study into food
19 production in community gardens, ways to increase
20 their food production, and channels for making
21 neighborhood-grown food available to the community,
22 and we thank Council Member Ayala for bringing this
23 legislation. However, we express concerns about the
24 ability of the Parks Department to adequately
25

1 undertake this study. On key issues, including
2 composting in the city, Parks leadership has not
3 upheld the interests of those who are working for
4 food justice. We urge the city to think and work in
5 expansive ways to support and recognize the value of
6 community gardens across the city. Simultaneous to
7 this, we ask that the unpaid volunteer labor being
8 done by community gardeners be recognized within the
9 proposed Parks Department study and recommendations.
10 Community gardeners do essential life-nurturing work
11 to heal the soil, to foster a connection with nature,
12 to act for food justice, to preserve and protect the
13 health of their families and neighbors. The most
14 prolific and powerful community gardeners are often
15 people of color, often from low-income communities,
16 often women, often immigrants. Their work has
17 tremendous community value, but it lacks vital
18 economic support. We ask the city to increase their
19 support for community gardens as essential
20 infrastructure for neighborhood food production and
21 to offer creative, adequate, and community-affirming
22 funding to ensure that they can provide increased
23 health and environmental benefits, um, to communities
24 across the city. Thank you for your time.
25

2 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Thank you.

3 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. Ah, next
4 is, ah, Kara Goad from Earth Justice.

5 KARA GOAD: Hello, thank you. Yes, my
6 name is Kara Goad. I'm a legal fellow at the
7 Sustainable Food and Farming Program at Earth
8 Justice, and I'm [inaudible] in support of Council
9 Member Ayala's bill. We support this bill because it
10 will bring more attention to the many benefits that
11 community gardens provide to New Yorkers, which I'd
12 like to highlight today. Community gardens offer
13 numerous benefits to gardeners, neighbors, and garden
14 visitors, including the opportunity to participate in
15 urban agriculture. Through urban agriculture our
16 community gardens, community members gain access to
17 fresh and nutritious foods, including traditional
18 foods that they might be otherwise unable to find.
19 For example, at the Rockaway Youth Task Force Urban
20 Farm in Queens gardeners grow callaloo, a popular
21 Caribbean ingredient, ah, that's not commonly
22 available at supermarkets. In addition, community
23 gardens offer neighbors the opportunity to learn
24 about agricultural techniques. And one of these
25 techniques is composting, a traditional method of

1 enriching the soil and recycling the food and plant
2 waste. In 2018 the BK Rot Program at No Wastelands
3 Community Garden in Bushwick took in 70 tons of food
4 waste for composting. And if the success were
5 replicated at more community gardens it would
6 contribute significantly to the city's waste
7 reduction goals. The city's community gardens also
8 offer space for innovation in urban agriculture. For
9 example, the Impact Farm at Harlem Grown, ah, has a
10 solar-powered greenhouse and a vertical farming
11 hydroponic system and it's one of the first of its
12 kind in the United States. Urban agriculture at
13 community gardens is especially important for people
14 living in neighborhoods without easy access to fresh
15 foods. It's been a key resource during the COVID-19
16 pandemic, which has heightened food insecurity. Ah,
17 in response to the pandemic community gardeners
18 across the city increased production and distributed
19 fresh and healthful foods to neighbors and food banks
20 in need. Ah, yet the pandemic also made clear that
21 much more is needed, which is another reason we
22 support this bill that will help establish the
23 foundation for expanding community garden and food
24 production. By requiring the Parks Department to
25

1 collect information on urban agriculture our
2 community gardens and make recommendations for
3 expanding the number of gardens, ah, the bill further
4 the benefits that community gardens offer. That
5 information collected will highlight the important
6 role that community gardens play in increasing access
7 to fresh fruits and vegetables and it will support
8 calls for the city to provide more resources and
9 support to community gardeners. Um, so for all these
10 reasons we support the bill. We also urge the City
11 Council to take additional steps to protect the
12 city's community gardens, which have few legal
13 protections. Um, in November of 2020 Earth Justice,
14 the New York City Community Garden Coalition, and 52
15 other organizations partnered to submit a petition to
16 New York City agencies requesting that they designate
17 all New York City community gardens as critical
18 environmental areas pursuant to the state
19 environmental quality review act. Ah, this petition
20 is available on Earth Justice's website and I urge
21 you to visit it, as it contains a tremendous amount
22 of information about community gardens. A critical
23 environmental area designation would increase
24 protections for community gardens by requiring the
25

1 agencies fully evaluate the impact of certain
2 actions, like nearby construction, on the gardens,
3 yet at the same time it would not unduly tie the
4 city's hands from moving forward with necessary
5 projects. Um, our petition also asks the city to do
6 a study of the gardens not specifically described in
7 the petition to confirm the critical environmental
8 area designation is appropriate for them. To assist
9 with that study we created a form on our website that
10 community gardeners can share information about their
11 gardens, including whether the garden is used for
12 food production. Ah, we've received information
13 about 20 gardens and over 300 people have signed on
14 for our petition, which shows the wide [inaudible],
15 ah, interest in this issue and support for this bill.
16 So in sum because community gardens enhance public
17 health, provide natural settings, celebrate the
18 cultures of the gardeners and their neighborhoods,
19 and contribute to the city's sustainability efforts,
20 we urge the committee to pass this bill and to also
21 consider additional bill to grant critical
22 environmental status to all of New York City's
23 community gardens. Thank you for the time.

25 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Thank you.

1 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. Ah, next
2 up we have two individuals who registered under the
3 name Brenda Thompson Duchene. Ah, I'm going to call
4 up, ah, the first person, if you could state your
5 name for the record and also let us know who, if you
6 are aware who the other person might be.

8 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time starts now.

9 BRENDA THOMPSON DUCHENE: Good afternoon.
10 I'm Brenda Thompson Duchene. The person is
11 [inaudible] also in my [inaudible] the garden, she's
12 one of my gardeners. One of the thing I heard today
13 from, um, GreenThumb saying they're helpful. I feel
14 they're not helpful in a sense that I want to thank,
15 um, [inaudible] Inez Barron because the garden that
16 she spoke about is my garden. The garden have a, a
17 greenhouse, 25 x 40 feet, that have been there seven
18 years. It incur increment weather. Um, when, when
19 we was told that we cannot install the electricity,
20 um, we had Brooklyn Range came in to do assessment
21 and they said, OK, this is what we can do. All I'm
22 hearing from GreenThumb is take down, take down.
23 When they take down this greenhouse, which is growing
24 food in it, are they gonna replace it with the same
25 size? One of the things is as I hear everyone say

1 in, in Brownsville, it's in Brownsville, we started
2 11 years ago growing fresh vegetables 'cause no one
3 will come into the neighborhood. We did a study on
4 food that was in the neighborhood which was lousy.
5 It was poor quality. For two years we did the study
6 with the supermarkets. These gardens is essential
7 with the growth that we need to be able to give out.
8 With this pandemic we gave out over 1500 free bags of
9 food. The greenhouse, what we trying to do, is grow
10 all year round. With that building it took away all
11 our sunlight. We even can't start, like now we start
12 the seedlings, we can't do that. If GreenThumb
13 really want to help us they have agencies that could
14 come in and help us, see what we can do to get this
15 lighting. Instead of tearing down and spending what
16 you don't have, let's work with what we have and see
17 what we can do. If it's really [inaudible] that is
18 that terrible and they can't do anything, well
19 Brooklyn Range gave us a assessment something could
20 be done. It don't have to be taken down. What are
21 we gonna do to help the community? We need
22 transparency as Aziz and everyone else said. I don't
23 feel there's enough transparency. I don't feel is
24 enough support. Yes, they give support, but not
25

1
2 enough. And if they really want to help a community
3 that is lacking in, in fresh vegetables, no one
4 didn't want to come into Brownsville. That's why we
5 started [inaudible] of Elegance Foundation, it's a
6 nonprofit, that we could take care of the community
7 and give with other people did not want to come in to
8 help. We are helping ourself and we need the
9 support. Thank you for your time. And if you have
10 any questions I would love to answer.

11 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Thank you.

12 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. Ah, thank
13 you very much, and I will now ask your fellow
14 gardener to come up and testify, and, again, can you
15 please, ah, just state your name for the record since
16 we don't have it on your, listed as your Zoom
17 profile.

18 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Your time starts now.

19 BARBARA ADAMSON: My name is Barbara
20 Adamson and I'm currently a member of [inaudible] of
21 Elegance and as Brenda Duchene said we've been
22 growing produce through, ah, Sustain Brownsville and,
23 ah, other areas because no one wanted to come into
24 this area. Um, as she said, we gave out over 1500
25 bags of food and if we keep this greenhouse we can

1 definitely start, like we always do, in late
2 February, early March, so that our seedlings are
3 ready to go in the ground at the end of the first
4 frost, which allows us to have extra growing time and
5 giving vegetables to the community that needs them.
6 Ah, we have horrible soil and GreenThumb just came in
7 and we have taken up what's there and over the last
8 11 years, ah, different people, I can speak for
9 myself, I've been purchasing soil to go in my beds to
10 compensate for what I feel is the inadequate soil
11 that we've been getting. Um, there's just no
12 cooperation. Why can't, um, members of GreenThumb do
13 the DOB for us? We don't have that kind of money.
14 They have staff that can do the research, find out
15 what we need so that we can keep the same size
16 greenhouse and continue the production of what we've
17 been doing for the last years. But with all of this
18 going back and forth, back and forth, I mean, it's
19 preventing us from doing the most we can do. Ah,
20 GreenThumb took down a small fence around our garden,
21 what, what, three feet, and, ah, now the garbage is
22 spilling from the building next door onto the
23 sidewalk and they're gonna blame us for the area
24 being dirty. Where are they going with that three
25

1 feet? It's just, it's like a dictatorship now. I
2 mean, gardening used to be fun. Ah, most of us are
3 senior citizens. I'm 72 years old. And we go to the
4 garden, we do what we have to do on the days that we
5 need to do it. But we're older and they're just not
6 trying to help. It's like they're pushing the senior
7 citizens out for modern technology, ah, the, the
8 licenses agreement, ah, it has more pages in it than
9 a mortgage. I mean, we're not college students. Ah,
10 we are baby boomers and we don't understand a lot of
11 the information...

12
13 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time expired.

14 BARBARA ADAMSON: ...that's been given to
15 us. But, ah, they just want implement their rules
16 and regulations and if you don't agree with them
17 then, ah, you're pushed out. My three minutes is up
18 so I'll just be quiet.

19 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Thank you.

20 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you very much.

21 Um, that was our last registered panelist. Ah, if we
22 have inadvertently missed anyone who is registered to
23 testify and has not yet been called, please use the
24 Zoom raise hand function and you'll be called on to
25 speak. Seeing none, I'll now turn it back to Council

1
2 Member Koo to offer any closing remarks and adjourn
3 the hearing.

4 CHAIRPERSON KOO: Thank you, Chris.

5 Before we close, I want to thank Parks Department,
6 Commissioner Silver, Assistant Commissioner
7 Biederman, and director of GreenThumb, ah, Bill
8 LoSasso. And also our committee staff, Chris,
9 Patrick, Chima, Monica. And of course my staff,
10 Elaine, and also I want to thank all the public
11 participants, Lynn Kelly, Jessica, ah, and all the
12 other ones. So thank you for coming. This is very
13 meaningful and fruitful testimony. Ah, so the
14 meeting will come to, will be adjourned. [gavel]

15 UNIDENTIFIED: Ending live stream.
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C E R T I F I C A T E

World Wide Dictation certifies that the foregoing transcript is a true and accurate record of the proceedings. We further certify that there is no relation to any of the parties to this action by blood or marriage, and that there is interest in the outcome of this matter.



Date February 27, 2021