

Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries,
and International Relations

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CITY COUNCIL
CITY OF NEW YORK

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

of the

Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries,
and International Relations

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Wednesday, May 13, 2026

Start: 1:02 p.m.

Recess: 3:06 p.m.

HELD AT: 250 Broadway - 8th Floor - Hearing
Room 1

B E F O R E: Hon. Dr. Nantasha M. Williams,
Deputy Speaker, Chair

COUNCIL MEMBERS:

Crystal Hudson
Farah N. Louis
Virginia Maloney
Chi A. Ossé
Althea V. Stevens
Sandra Ung

Other Council Members Attending: Hanks, Joseph,
Banks, and Public Advocate Williams

A P P E A R A N C E S

Expert Witnesses

Dr. Matthew Reilly

Herbert Seignoret

Dr. Elizabeth D. Meade

Dr. Aja Lans

ADMINISTRATION

Alton Murray,
Deputy Commissioner of the New York City
Department of Cultural Affairs (DCLA)

Brooklyn Public Library

Edwin Maxwell,
Chief Librarian at Brooklyn Public Library

Chris Hardy,
Design Director at MASS

Elizabeth Kennedy,
Elizabeth Kennedy Landscape Architect, PLLC

PUBLIC

Judith Insell,
Executive Director of the Bronx Arts Ensemble

Heather Quinlan,
Executive Director of the Northeast Corridor
Freedom Network

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

Cheryl Warfield,
Founder and Artistic Director of MORE Opera

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and International Relations

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2 SERGEANT HUANG: Sound check for the
3 Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries, and
4 International Intergroup Relations. Today's date is
5 May 13th, 2026, being recorded by Danny Huang in HR1.

6 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Good afternoon, welcome
7 to today's New York City Council hearing for the
8 Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries, and
9 International Intergroup Relations. Please silence
10 all cell phones and electronic devices. As a friendly
11 reminder, do not approach the dais.

12 Chair, we are ready to begin.

13 (PAUSE)

14 CHAIRPERSON WILLIAMS: [GAVEL] Thank you
15 so much for your patience. We were just waiting for
16 some people to come.

17 So, good afternoon, again. I am Deputy
18 Speaker Nantasha Williams, Chair of the Committee on
19 Cultural Affairs, Libraries, and International
20 Relations.

21 Welcome to our oversight hearing on
commemorating Juneteenth and honoring the burial
sites of formerly enslaved African Americans.

In addition to our oversight topic today,
we will be hearing the following legislation:

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and International Relations

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2 Introduction Number 220, sponsored by
3 Council Members Hanks and Rita Joseph, in relation to
4 the identification of formerly enslaved African
5 American burial sites.

6 Resolution 82, sponsored by Council
7 Member Fariás, celebrates the San Gennaro and the
8 Ferragosto Festival annually in September to honor
9 the contributions of Italian immigrants and Italian
10 Americans to the cultural, political, and economic
11 fabric of the City of New York.

12 Resolution Number 424, sponsored by
13 Council Member Kevin Riley, declares June 5th as
14 Kappa Alpha Psi Day in the City of New York to
15 recognize the fraternity's longstanding tradition of
16 fostering brotherhood, academic achievement,
17 leadership development, and community service.

18 Resolution 440, also sponsored by Council
19 Member Fariás, declares April 28th as Willie Colón
20 Day in the City of New York to honor the
21 multi-talented trombone player, band leader,
composer, and producer who was a New York City
pioneer of Latin music and a beloved salsa legend.

As well as the following legislation that
I have sponsored: Resolution 450, declaring May 10th

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2 as Maria Antonia Cay Day in the City of New York to
3 honor her enduring role in supporting and celebrating
4 the Puerto Rican community and in preserving and
5 uplifting its rich cultural heritage and traditions.

6 First, let me invite Council Member Hanks
7 and Council Member Joseph to speak about their bill.
8 Majority Whip Hanks?

9 MAJORITY WHIP HANKS: Thank you, Deputy
10 Speaker, Chair Dr. Williams, and thank you to
11 everyone else for joining us today for today's
12 hearing.

13 Intro 220 is deeply personal,
14 historically necessary, and long overdue.

15 Across New York City, African burial
16 grounds connected to formerly enslaved Black New
17 Yorkers have too often been erased, neglected, or
18 forgotten. These are not simply burial sites. They
19 are sacred places tied to families. And let me be
20 clear, this is not Black history. This is American
21 history. The formerly enslaved men, women, and
children buried in these grounds helped build this
country under unimaginable conditions. They deserve
dignity and recognition.

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2 As the representative of Staten Island's
3 North Shore, the issue is especially meaningful to
4 me. From Sandy Ground, the oldest Black settlement on
5 the East Coast, to the former Cherry Lane Cemetery,
6 burial place of Benjamin Prine, recognized as the
7 last person born into slavery on Staten Island, now
paved over as a strip mall.

8 This city carries an important African
9 American history that must be preserved. The painful
10 reality that burial grounds connected to African
11 Americans were simply paved over and forgotten makes
12 it very clear why this legislation matters. I want to
13 thank the scholars, the historians, the
14 archaeologists, and preservation advocates for doing
the important work of ensuring these stories and the
people connected to them are never forgotten.

15 I want to recognize Dr. Elizabeth Meade
16 of the Professional Archaeologists of New York City,
17 Heather Quinlan, who is here today to testify,
18 President of the Northeast Corridor Freedom Network,
19 and the many individuals committed to preserving this
history.

20 Intro 220 is about recognition,
21 education, accountability, and the preservation of

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2 those sacred spaces for future generations. Our
3 history cannot be paved over.

4 I want to thank my co-sponsor, Council
5 Member Rita Joseph, for joining me in doing this
6 important work. Thank you very much to this
7 committee. Thank you very much, Chair Dr. Williams,
8 and thank you, everyone, who's helping sign on to
9 this important legislation. Thank you.

10 CHAIRPERSON WILLIAMS: And before Council
11 Member Joseph goes, I also just wanted to add that
12 this hearing was because of her advocacy to make sure
13 that we were talking about African American burial
14 sites. So I just want to thank her for her advocacy.

15 COUNCIL MEMBER JOSEPH: Thank you, Chair.
16 Good afternoon. Thank you, Deputy Speaker Williams,
17 for your leadership in holding this important hearing
18 today.

19 Burial grounds represent an important
20 part of acknowledgment and remembrance of the City's
21 history. In 2021, the City produced a report that
included historical and archaeological research at
European contact, the land the Flatbush African
burial ground and the Bedford Avenue Church site
occupied, was inhabited by Canarsee, a band of Munsee

1
2 -speaking Lenape who are ancestors of today's
3 Delaware Nation, Delaware Tribe of Indians,
4 Stockbridge-Munsee Community Band of Mohicans, and
5 the Shinnecock Nation.

6 In 1800, between 70 and 80% of all
7 Flatbush families enslaved at least one person. When
8 enslaved people in Flatbush died, most were permitted
9 to be buried in the cemetery of Flatbush Reformed
10 Church, which was founded in 1654. It was the only
11 church in Flatbush for a long period. At an unknown
12 time, as early as the 17th century, after the Dutch
13 arrived, a separate burial ground for people of
14 African ancestry was established on the land of
15 Flatbush Reformed Church, owned at what is now the
16 intersection of Church and Bedford Avenue. Historical
17 documents established that it was used for new
18 burials through at least 1810 and possibly through
19 1840.

20 Now more than ever, we have the
21 responsibility to preserve burial grounds citywide,
focusing on three important pillars: the importance
of burial grounds, the importance of preservation,
and ensuring the Council continues oversight. Thank
you.

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2 CHAIRPERSON WILLIAMS: Thank you, Council
3 Member Joseph and Majority Whip Hanks.

4 Let me just say a few words about my
5 resolution, which celebrates the work of Maria
6 Antonia Cay, fondly known to everyone as Toñita.

7 Born in Puerto Rico, she came to New York
8 City as a teenager and began working as a factory
9 seamstress while designing, making, and selling
10 dresses through her own home-based business.

11 Eventually, she was able to buy the building where
12 she lives on the south side of Williamsburg. In 1973,
13 she incorporated a Caribbean baseball team and her
14 now-famous Caribbean social club, popularly known as
15 Toñita's. Her club has long served as the social and
16 cultural center for the Latino residents of her
17 neighborhood, and occasionally for those from outside
18 the neighborhood, like Bad Bunny. You might have seen
19 her featured in her friend's 2026 Super Bowl halftime
20 show, where she brought a bit of Brooklyn to Bad
21 Bunny's tribute to their beloved mutual Puerto Rican
culture and heritage. Toñita is truly one of a kind.

Now, let me say a few words about my
colleague, Council Member Riley's resolution
declaring January 5th as Kappa Alpha Psi Day in New

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2 York City. Over the past several years, the Council
3 has passed resolutions celebrating the work of the
4 National Pan-Hellenic Council, which is a
5 coordinating body of Black Greek letter organizations
6 of college-educated women and men committed to
7 community awareness and action through educational,
8 economic, and cultural service activities. The four
9 sororities and the five fraternities that make up the
10 National Pan-Hellenic Council, or affectionately
11 known as the Divine Nine.

12 So far, the Council has recognized the
13 work of three of the sororities, all of which have
14 city council members as members. Delta Sigma Theta,
15 which is my sorority and which I am very proud to be
16 a member of, Sigma Gamma Rho, which is Council Member
17 Joseph's sorority, in which she is equally proud, I'm
18 sure, to be a member of, and Alpha Kappa Alpha,
19 which, as many know, our former Speaker was an AKA,
20 as well as Council Member Farias.

21 However, Kappa Alpha Psi is the first
fraternity we have recognized. Not surprisingly,
Council Member Riley is a proud member. So four down,
five to go.

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2 And finally, a few words about our
3 oversight topic: In addition to the African Burial
4 Ground National Monument, the federally operated
5 visitor center with exhibitions and an outside
6 memorial, located on Broadway near City Hall, burial
7 sites of formerly enslaved African Americans have
8 been found throughout New York City. They include the
9 Old Town of Flushing Burial Ground, Flatbush African
10 Burial Ground, Harlem African Burial Ground, Inwood
11 African Burial Ground, Hunts Point Slave Burial
12 Ground, Cherry Lane Cemetery in Staten Island, and
13 the site of the Brooklyn Public Library's New Lots
14 Library. Each of these sites has a long history,
15 sometimes dating to before the Civil War and
16 sometimes dating to before the Revolutionary War.
17 Each of these histories is worth telling,
18 remembering, and preserving. And without thoughtful
19 and intentional preservation, these important sites
20 risk being neglected, forgotten, or even destroyed as
21 the city continues to change, grow, and develop.

18 We look forward to learning more about
19 some of these histories in this hearing. We also look
20 forward to discussing how to preserve them. The bill
21 that Council Members Hanks and Joseph introduced will

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2 support new efforts to find, document, and educate
3 the public about these and other burial sites of
4 formerly enslaved African Americans still waiting to
be rediscovered.

5 I will now pause because I know Council
6 Member Banks has one of these sites in his district
7 and wanted to share a few words.

8 DEPUTY LEADER BANKS: Thank you, Madam
Deputy Speaker and Chair.

9 Good afternoon, I speak today in support
10 of Intro 2020 legislation, which, when enacted, will
11 require the Department of Cultural Affairs to
12 maintain a list of all known burial sites of formerly
13 enslaved African Americans citywide. In addition to
14 also developing and implementing a plan to locate any
15 currently unmarked burial sites for formerly enslaved
16 African Americans citywide, this bill will also
17 require the DCLA to notify elected officials when a
18 burial site has been located in their district in
19 addition to developing an educational campaign to
20 inform the city residents about these sites, while
21 additionally creating and maintaining an interactive
map of the burial sites on the DCLA website.

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2 For my district, this is not only
3 practical, but it's personal. The New Lots Branch of
4 the Brooklyn Public Library in the East New York
5 district of the 42nd Council District, which I
6 represent, is currently undergoing a multi-million
7 dollar renovation. This project is not simply the
8 rebuilding of a library building, but it's a building
9 that will continue to serve as a transformational
10 representation of education and culture of East New
11 York and the surrounding community.

12 As one of the largest libraries in the
13 Brooklyn Public Library system, the New Lots Library
14 has for decades been a central resource for seniors,
15 students, parents, immigrants, job seekers, and
16 lifelong learners in the 42nd Council District. And
17 for many residents, this library serves as a safe
18 space, a classroom, a gathering place, and a gateway
19 for unending possibilities.

20 What many may not know is that this
21 library sits on what is considered by many to be
hallowed ground. A former burial ground for enslaved
African Americans and their ancestors. Preservation
and ensuring care and dignity for the handling of
these sites, such as the burial grounds under and

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2 around the New Lots library branch, must be of the
3 utmost importance for this and every other such site
4 across the city.

5 In East New York, a community that is
6 made up of a majority Black and brown residents,
7 telling the stories of our ancestors is not only
8 important, but it's also essential. The streets of
9 East New York pay homage to many former slave owners,
10 and that is not our story. That's not the story I
11 want to see reflected for this district, a district
12 which has often been underserved, and where the media
13 is often quick to focus on negative stories.

14 We must educate the community on where
15 they come from and the importance of the
16 contributions of their ancestors. We must also
17 recognize the deeper truth that below this sacred
18 ground lies the remains of free and enslaved African
19 people from the Revolutionary era, individuals whose
20 lives, struggles, and contributions were too often
21 overlooked and left untold. Their presence calls us
to act with care, respect, and purpose. Preserving
this burial ground is not optional; it is a
responsibility. It's an act of acknowledgment. It's
an act of justice. It's an act of reverence for those

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2 who come before us and whose resilience helped shape
3 the very community we serve today.

4 This renovation project represents a
5 powerful opportunity to do just that. By
6 incorporating a dedicated space within the library to
7 honor this history, we ensure that future generations
8 will not only learn within these walls but also
9 remember. We transform this library into a place
10 where education and remembrance walk hand in hand.

11 Just as important, this project reflects
12 the voices of the community. Through extensive
13 outreach from residents, from seniors, young people,
14 and from families to those often unheard, it has been
15 made clear: this must remain a library first, but one
16 that also serves as an intergenerational hub rooted
17 in cultural recognition and shared history.

18 And beyond this site, we must take
19 broader action. The proposed measures to identify,
20 document, and educate the public about burial grounds
21 of formerly enslaved people across the city are
critical. We cannot protect what we don't have
knowledge of. We cannot teach what we do not
preserve.

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2 I'm proud to support this legislation and
3 this project, and I look forward to seeing them
4 brought to successful completion. Thank you, Madam
5 Chair.

6 CHAIRPERSON WILLIAMS: Thank you so much,
7 Council Member Banks.

8 And finally, rounding out our hearing
9 today, we will also get a glimpse of how some of our
10 brilliant arts and cultural organizations are
11 commemorating Juneteenth by providing programming
12 open to all New Yorkers.

13 Starting in the early days of the
14 COVID-19 pandemic as daily Zoom calls, and continuing
15 now as several-times-a-week Zoom calls, Culture@3 is
16 a space for the leaders of New York City's nonprofit
17 cultural institutions to connect and share resources
18 and support. Three years ago, in February 2023, the
19 anti-racism working group of Culture@3 made a request
20 for all arts and cultural organizations on the Zoom
21 call to put on a Juneteenth event. Ever since, and
thanks to Executive Director Regina Bain, the Louis
Armstrong House Museum has continued to provide
information about the arts and cultural community

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2 events commemorating Juneteenth, including upcoming
3 events for 2026.

4 The Louis Armstrong House Museum website
5 says this:

6 On June 19th, 1865, enslaved African
7 Americans in Texas learned that they were free—two
8 and a half years after the issuing of the
9 Emancipation Proclamation. Juneteenth, also known as
10 Freedom Day, has been celebrated in the African
11 American community for more than 150 years.

12 Juneteenth is a day to reflect on the past and look
13 to the future with action today.

14 On such commemoration, now in its sixth
15 year, is a joint venture of the Van Cortlandt Park
16 Alliance and the Bronx Arts Ensemble, led by
17 violinist and Executive Director Judith Insell. The
18 annual event is located close to the enslaved African
19 burial ground, which was consecrated on Juneteenth
20 2021 by the Van Cortlandt Park Alliance and New York
21 City Parks. This year, the festival event is
expecting 1,000 attendees.

And we have been joined by another one of
our lovely guests, who also would like to provide
some remarks, Public Advocate Jumaane Williams.

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2 PUBLIC ADVOCATE WILLIAMS: Thank you,
3 Madam Chair.

4 As mentioned, my name is Jumaane
5 Williams. I'm Public Advocate for the City of New
6 York. I want to thank Chair Williams and the Members
7 of the Committee on Cultural Affairs for holding this
8 important hearing.

9 New York City's and our entire country's
10 vast wealth was built on the backs of human beings
11 kidnapped and forced to labor against their will.
12 Although New York emancipated enslaved African
13 Americans earlier than the country as a whole, the
14 reverberations of that heinous crime unfortunately
15 live on today. Black New Yorkers still hold less
16 wealth, are more heavily policed, have less access to
17 high-quality services, and are leaving the city at
18 higher-than-average rates.

19 We are all living in a pretty concerning
20 and dark moment in our country's history. We are
21 seeing in real time state and national efforts to
prevent the teaching of Black history, including the
history of enslavement, and simultaneously
disenfranchisement of Black Americans by
redistricting our power away.

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2 In these uncertain times, it is more
3 important than ever that New York City's government
4 leads in educating ourselves and our neighbors on the
5 history of enslavement, which is the history of
6 America.

7 For that reason, I strongly encourage the
8 Committee and the Council to pass Council Member
9 Banks' bill, Intro 220, to identify and publicize the
10 locations of burial sites holding formerly enslaved
11 African Americans.

12 Teaching real history means highlighting
13 and uncovering brutal truths that have been lost,
14 which often means deliberately hidden. The burial
15 ground at 290 Broadway, which holds the bodies of
16 close to 15,000 enslaved Africans, was recovered just
17 35 years ago. It took over a decade to open an
18 official monument commemorating that spot.

19 Intro 220 will ensure that the City works
20 quickly and proactively to fully account for such
21 burial sites across our city and honor those that the
22 recorders of our history too often choose
23 specifically to forget.

24 Council Member Hank's important
25 legislation builds on our city's past leadership in
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2 this area, including the passage of Local Law 94 of
3 2024, which I championed in order to place an
4 informational sign marking the site of New York's
5 first slave market. Intro 220 is a vital step towards
6 ensuring New Yorkers are equipped to understand how
7 slavery shaped our city. In order to learn the past,
8 we have to first acknowledge it.

9 I also want to highlight the fact that
10 there is a chain at the bottom of the foot of the
11 Statue of Liberty. This was supposed to be a gift to
12 celebrate the freedom that was given, but they didn't
13 want it, and so they hid it on the foot. It's still
14 there for anyone who wants to see it.

15 It's also important to highlight the
16 bright spots in our past as well as our present. To
17 that end, I'd also like to express support for bills
18 from Council Members Fariás, Riley, and Williams:

19 Resolution 82 will celebrate the immense
20 contributions of Italian New Yorkers by recognizing
21 the Feast of San Gennaro and the Ferragosto Festival
by declaring April 28th as Willie Colón Day.

Resolution 440 highlights the musicians
and community leaders' resounding cultural impact
here and across the globe.

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2 Designating January 5th as Kappa Alpha
3 Psi Day, as Council Member Riley's Resolution 424
4 does, will rightfully spotlight one of the nation's
5 oldest Black Greek letter organizations and its many
6 contributions to our city.

7 And last but certainly not least, I'm
8 proud to support Resolution 450, creating Maria
9 Antonia Cay on June 20th to honor Toñita's 50+ years'
10 effort to uplift the Puerto Rican community in
11 Williamsburg and beyond.

12 I just want to end by saying anti-
13 Blackness is insidious. What is happening now in
14 removing history and even representatives in the
15 South is not a byproduct of MAGA. It is the purpose
16 of MAGA. It is the intention. It is what people want
17 to see happen. And anti-Blackness is so insidious,
18 even if you overcome and get into positions you're
19 supposed to, people are now using the word DEI as if
20 you were not capable of being in those positions.

21 So I always want to talk about it as a
specific thing because it unfortunately exists in
every space. In other communities, whether you're
talking about women or Asian or our Latino brothers
and sisters, immigrants, anti-Blackness is always

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2 there. So when I take my oldest daughter to pick up
3 some flowers for Mother's Day, and we have to hear in
4 Spanish that two "coloreds" just walked in, or my
5 then three-year-old comes home and says that someone
6 couldn't play with her because she was brown, it is
7 anti-Blackness that still exists. It is painful. We
8 are not making this up. And I want to say Black and
9 mean Black and not have people look at me as if we're
10 making things up.

11
12 So I'm very excited about what this
13 council is doing now in general, but in particular,
14 right now, where people are trying to reverse the
15 gains and pretend like that's not happening, I think
16 this is more important than ever.

17
18 I also want to leave by saying no one is
19 responsible for the system we're in now, whatever
20 your color, race, creed. But I think everyone is
21 responsible, so that my daughters can get a different
system than the one we have now. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON WILLIAMS: Thank you. And to
piggyback on what the Public Advocate said, in an era
when some localities and states are moving to wipe
education about Black history from public school
curricula, from university courses, and from public

1
2 discourse, it is important that here in New York
3 City, celebrations of Black history and culture
4 remain vibrant and accessible.

5 I want to just acknowledge some of my
6 colleagues on the Committee who are present: Council
7 Members Hudson, Maloney, who is here, Louis, who is
8 on Zoom, Hanks, Stevens, Joseph, and Banks.

9 I also want to thank Priyanka and Shakee
10 from my office, and the committee staff, Alejandro,
11 Regina, and Carolina.

12 And with that, I will just remind people,
13 from the public who wish to testify in person today,
14 that you must fill out an appearance card, which is
15 located on the desk of the Sergeant at Arms at the
16 back. Please fill out the slip even if you have
17 already registered to testify in advance.

18 When you are called, please limit your
19 testimony to two minutes, whether you are testifying
20 in person or on Zoom. I'm also going to ask my
21 colleagues to limit their questions and comments to
22 five minutes.

23 It is my pleasure to call our first
24 special panel of experts regarding African American
25 burial sites in New York City: Matthew Reilly,

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2 Herbert Seignoret—you have to tell me if I said that
3 right—and Elizabeth Meade and Dr. Aja Lans.

4 You can just restate your name for the
5 record, and whoever wants to start first.

6 DR. MATTHEW REILLY: Great. Good
7 afternoon, everybody. My name is Dr. Matthew Reilly,
8 and it's an honor to be here today to speak in
9 support of Bill 220 as a professor of anthropology at
10 the City College of New York and the CUNY Graduate
11 Center, a board member of the Professional
12 Archaeologists of New York City, and, of course, as a
13 New Yorker.

14 As an archaeologist of the African
15 diaspora with over 15 years of experience working in
16 the Caribbean and West Africa, I, in no uncertain
17 terms, fully support the spirit of this bill.

18 You'll soon hear from my colleague, Dr.
19 Meade, who will describe the incredibly rich history
20 of sacred Black burial sites across our city and the
21 ongoing threats they currently face. But in my very
short time, I implore you to consider the
unparalleled opportunity that this bill offers in the
midst of a crisis unfolding beyond the borders of our

1
2 city and encourage you to lean on the expertise of
3 city archaeologists and community stakeholders.

4 Black burial grounds continue to be
5 neglected and threatened across the country and
6 throughout the African diaspora. Development and
7 climate change, paired with a lack of proper and
8 enforceable legislation, often render communities
9 powerless when sacred sites are rediscovered,
10 disturbed, or destroyed.

11 In Barbados, where I've conducted
12 archaeological research for over 15 years, a
13 plantation burial ground was uncovered through
14 academic research over a decade prior to the
15 rediscovery of the African burial ground right here
16 in Lower Manhattan. Currently, a massive monument is
17 under construction at this Caribbean site that
18 promises to be a global beacon for honoring such
19 sacred spaces. The Heritage Park is in part inspired
20 by our nearby national monument at the African Burial
21 Ground. I bring this up because sites of the African
diaspora, especially burial grounds, are receiving
heightened attention on a global scale. And yet they
remain some of the poorest documented and least

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2 protected, including in the United States and our
3 city.

4 Knowledge, awareness, and transparency
5 are, of course, paramount to the proposed bill, as
6 they can play an outsized role in how sacred sites of
7 the African diaspora are documented. We should
8 remember that federal legislation, specifically the
9 National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, led to
10 the rediscovery of the African burial ground just a
11 stone's throw away from where we sit today. My
12 international colleagues regularly point to this
13 legislation as a source of inspiration, lamenting
14 that no such law exists in other African diasporic
15 contexts. While the legislation required that
16 archaeologists assess the site, it couldn't prevent
17 the initial unethical treatment of human remains as
18 archaeologists raced through the work under pressure
19 from developers. It was the concerted effort of
20 stakeholders and descendant community members who
21 then demanded respect and justice for those interred
at the site and thus reoriented the research process.

19 This new bill, 220, will bring community
20 members, specialists like archaeologists, and city
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1
2 officials together to ensure that similar tragedies
3 can be avoided in the future.

4 This bill has the potential to be a model
5 for legislation around the country and the world.

6 With that said, I implore you to harness the
7 expertise of specialists who know these sites and
8 their histories, who work closely with communities,
9 and who can offer guidance on not only how to
10 acknowledge these sites properly, but also protect
11 them for future generations and honor those interred
12 in the soils beneath our feet.

13 With that in mind, I close with a short
14 statement from PANYC (Professional Archaeologists of
15 New York City, Inc.) member and New York City
16 archaeologist, Dr. Jessica McClain (phonetic),
17 speaking on how collaborations can and should
18 function under this bill. She says, and I quote, "The
19 bill proposes that the Department of Cultural Affairs
20 be responsible for maintaining the proposed list of
21 all known burial sites of formerly enslaved Africans
citywide. The Landmarks Preservation Commission and
its Department of Archaeology already maintain lists
and maps of archaeological sites in the city,
including burial grounds. They are charged by the

1
2 City with the regulation and safekeeping of these
3 sites and resources. PANYC strongly recommends that
4 the Landmarks Preservation Commission be the city
5 agency responsible for these lists of all known
6 burial sites in the proposed bill, as we have the
7 requisite structure and expertise already in place."
8 It's calling for more formal collaboration between
9 these offices--end quote.

10 And with that, I thank you for all your
11 time, and I turn things over to my colleague Herbert
12 Seignoret.

13 HERBERT SEIGNORET: Thank you, man. Good
14 afternoon, and thank you for giving me the
15 opportunity to speak before the Committee.

16 My name is Herbert Seignoret, and I'm the
17 Director for Academic Advising at the Colin Powell
18 School for Civic and Global Leadership at the City
19 College of New York. I am also the Associate Director
20 for the Institute for the Exploration of Seneca
21 Village History. And it is in this capacity that I
lend my support to Build 220.

I have over 25 years of experience
working on archaeological sites in both New York City
and New York State and the Caribbean. I am also a

1
2 member of the Society for Historical Archaeology and
3 the Society of Black Archaeologists.

4 My interest in archaeology as a
5 profession began with the rediscovery of the African
6 burial ground, not too far away from here, during the
7 construction of the Foley Square Federal Building at
8 290 Broadway. It was then that I truly understood the
9 power of material culture and giving a voice to
10 communities that had long been silenced.

11 The rediscovery of the African burial
12 ground highlighted the importance that enslavement
13 played in the Northeast and in New York in
14 particular. It also demonstrated the significance of
15 the site to the descendant community, whose role in
16 saving it from destruction cannot be ignored.

17 I'll leave further discussion of New York
18 City sites to Dr. Meade and focus instead briefly on
19 Seneca Village.

20 Seneca Village was established in the
21 1820s as a free Black settlement. Documentary sources
indicate that by the mid-1850s, it was a thriving
community with a population of over 260 people.
Approximately two-thirds of the residents were of
African descent, while the remaining residents were

1
2 primarily European immigrants and Irish. The
3 community included a school and three churches. This
4 thriving community was eventually destroyed to make
5 way for the creation of Central Park, through one of
6 the earliest uses of eminent domain to acquire
private land in New York City.

7 An August 11th, 1871, article in the New
8 York Herald mentioned the discovery of two burials in
9 the newly created Central Park near 85th Street and
10 8th Avenue. This article described one individual
11 presumed to be white in detail, listing her name,
12 age, and gender, while identifying the other
13 individual only as "Negro composed beyond
14 recognition". There's no mention that a thriving
15 community had existed there only 15 years earlier.
Silencing of this community's history is evident in
this omission.

16 Prior to the creation of the Institute
17 for the Exploration of Seneca Village History,
18 Cynthia Copeland and Grady Turner curated an exhibit
19 at the New York Historical Society. Much of their
20 work was based on the book, *The Park and the People*,
21 which included a chapter on Seneca Village. Central
to the exhibit was the role of the village's free

1
2 churches, the AME Zion Church, the African Union
3 Church, and the All Angels Church. All three churches
4 had burial grounds associated with the lots they
5 purchased.

6 The Institute for the Exploration of
7 Seneca Village History conducted archaeological
8 excavation in the Seneca Village site during the
9 summer of 2011. Preliminary research on the site had
10 begun more than 10 years earlier through documentary
11 research. This research included the study of tax
12 records, court records, census data, church records,
13 and historical maps that identified the location of
14 the settlement's features, such as houses, churches,
15 barns, and cemeteries.

16 Before excavation began, the institute
17 employed non-invasive archaeological methods,
18 primarily ground-penetrating radar, which was used to
19 identify anomalies below the ground surface. The
20 survey indicated that there were remains of the
21 settlement. As earlier stated, there were three
churches associated with Seneca Village, and each
church had an associated cemetery. However, not all
the burials were of people who lived in Seneca
Village. The Institute for the Exploration of Seneca

1
2 Village History, out of concern and respect for the
3 descendant community, decided not to excavate in the
4 vicinity where burials were located.

5 This much-needed new bill will help
6 advance several of the goals of the Institute for the
7 Exploration of Seneca Village History, including
8 commemoration and memorization, public education and
9 awareness, and community engagement. The Institute
10 aims to work collaboratively with community members,
11 scholars, and local boards to ensure that descendants
12 and the broader public are involved in the
13 storytelling process, that a voice is restored to a
14 community that was silenced.

15 DR. ELIZABETH MEADE: Good afternoon, and
16 I share my colleagues' thanks to the Committee for
17 allowing us to speak to you today. I am Dr. Elizabeth
18 D. Meade, an urban historical archaeologist who's
19 been documenting the cemeteries of New York City for
20 more than two decades. Decades. As an archaeologist
21 with consulting firm AKRF, I have in recent years
served as the lead archaeologist for the
archaeological investigation of the Inwood Sacred
Site, a burial place for enslaved Africans and an
Indigenous ceremonial site, and I currently serve as

1
2 the deputy principal investigator for the
3 archaeological investigation of the Harlem African
4 Burial Ground.

5 My doctoral dissertation, completed
6 through the CUNY Graduate Center's anthropology
7 program, involved the documentation of more than 500
8 current and former cemeteries across the five
9 boroughs, more than half of which were redeveloped
10 with or without the removal of the human remains
11 buried within.

12 New York City's archaeologists have been
13 documenting cemeteries associated with enslavement
14 and the African diaspora for decades. It is a common
15 misconception that the African burial ground in Lower
16 Manhattan was inadvertently discovered by
17 construction crews, when in fact it was discovered by
18 archaeologists who were on site looking for traces of
19 the cemetery.

20 A new generation of urban archaeologists
21 is currently working with city agencies, community
groups, and descendant communities to reclaim the
burial places of enslaved people across New York
City, including at the Inwood Sacred Site and the
Harlem African Burial Ground in Manhattan, the

1
2 Flatbush African Burial Ground and Sankofa Park
3 Burial Ground in Brooklyn, the Hunts Point Enslaved
4 Persons Burial Ground and Van Cortlandt Park Enslaved
5 Persons Burial Ground in the Bronx, among others.

6 The Professional Archaeologists of New
7 York City, or PANYC, therefore support this proposed
8 legislation, which will help to increase the public's
9 awareness of the locations of sacred sites and help
10 descendant communities reclaim sacred spaces
11 associated with the remains of their ancestors.

12 Passing legislation that brings these
13 sacred places back into dialogue with present-day New
14 Yorkers is an important first step in righting the
15 wrongs of the past and ending the cycle of violence
16 perpetuated by allowing burial places that were
17 historically disrespected to continue to remain
18 unacknowledged.

19 To paraphrase from my own dissertation,
20 one of the most potent reminders of the horrors of
21 the enslavement of Africans and individuals of
22 African descent in New York City's history is the
23 lack of documentation of their burial places.

24 The burial site that is now known as the
25 New York African Burial Ground is one of the most

1
2 well-known cemeteries for enslaved people in the
3 modern United States. Its designation as the African
4 Burial Ground may give some the false impression that
5 it was the only site in use for the internment of New
6 York City's enslaved population. However, it was one
7 of many such burial sites. An untold number of burial
8 places for free and enslaved people of African
9 descent were never recorded, and for many others,
10 only limited documentary information is available.

11
12 New Yorkers of African descent
13 represented between one-tenth and one-third of the
14 city's population over time, and experienced higher
15 mortality rates in general. And yet, the number of
16 documented cemeteries in use exclusively by
17 individuals of African descent before statewide
18 emancipation in 1827 represents less than 4% of the
19 documented burial places known to have existed.

20
21 Segregated cemeteries used exclusively
for the interment of free and enslaved people of
African descent were one of the only cemetery
categories identified in my own research for which
almost all sites were redeveloped, and none were
preserved.

1
2 As such, the City That Never Sleeps was
3 quite literally constructed on top of the bones of
4 those whose stolen labor built it. Bills offering
5 legal protection to cemeteries are critical in any
6 city where the combination of increased population
7 density and the fast pace of development frequently
8 results in the discovery of seemingly forgotten or
9 abandoned human remains on construction sites.
10 However, legal protection is even more critical for
11 burial places associated with enslavement, as those
12 sites were often intentionally treated without regard
13 for basic human decency.

14 Colonizing forces in what is now New York
15 City mandated the segregation of cemeteries in 1697
16 and passed numerous laws in the 18th century that
17 placed restrictions on Black funerals designed to
18 prevent resistance against enslavers. These laws
19 restricted funerals for enslaved people to certain
20 times of day, placed limits on the number of mourners
21 allowed to be in attendance, and banned certain
funerary customs. These laws also resulted in
enslaved people lacking the legal or financial means
to protect their ancestors' burial places.

1
2 Many narratives surrounding enslaved
3 burial places suggest that they were redeveloped
4 after being forgotten. However, I argue that it is
5 more important to say that they were ignored.

6 Outside of the landmarking process, New
7 York City presently has no laws that protect former
8 cemetery sites from as-of-right development on
9 privately owned land until after human remains are
10 disturbed.

11 Similarly, the New York State Unmarked
12 Burial Site Protection Act, which went into effect in
13 2023, applies only after human bones have been
14 encountered during subsurface activity.

15 New York City environmental review
16 legislation allows for properties to be assigned
17 so-called E-designations pertaining to air quality,
18 hazardous materials, and noise, as a result of zoning
19 actions, providing a mechanism to force developers to
20 complete additional pre-construction testing and
21 analysis once a rezoning has gone into effect.
However, no such mechanism exists to protect sites
with documented archaeological significance,
including burial places.

1
2 The laws in place to protect human
3 remains after they are disturbed rely almost entirely
4 on construction crews to promptly and honestly report
5 that they have encountered human remains or suspected
6 human remains. Therefore, while PANYC is in full
7 support of the proposed legislation, we would also
8 encourage the City Council to explore ways to pass
9 legislation that will, at long last, provide
10 protection to known burial places before they are
11 disturbed.

12 Thank you for giving us this opportunity
13 to speak to you today, and we welcome your questions
14 later. Dr. Lans?

15 DR. ASIA LANS: I will be brief.

16 Thank you for having us here. My name is
17 Dr. Asia Lans, and I'm an Assistant Professor of
18 Anthropology and Africana studies currently at Johns
19 Hopkins, but home is New York, and that is where all
20 of my research is based.

21 I currently consult with AKRF on
bioarchaeological projects. So I work specifically
with human skeletal remains and focus on ancestors
who are members of the African diaspora.

1
2 I guess the point I want to make is to
3 reinforce that we should be protecting these sites so
4 that people like me are irrelevant. I've spent the
5 past couple of weeks going through the remains of
6 ancestors who were recovered from the Harlem African
7 Burial Ground. I would prefer that these ancestors
8 never have needed to come out of the ground in the
9 first place.

10 I would also recommend that we think more
11 broadly about which cemeteries we are protecting. So
12 I think rather than cemeteries with enslaved people,
13 it should be broader. It should be Black, it should
14 be African and African diaspora, something along
15 these lines. Because, as we know, slavery may have
16 ended, "But..." So, because of the history of
17 segregation of Black burial places, it is very likely
18 that there are cemeteries that perhaps post-date
19 enslavement but are Black cemeteries, or there are
20 existing cemeteries wherein the Black folks were
21 buried in a different part of it that often ends up
being ignored.

So yes, I would just like to make the
pitch to think about this more broadly and to also,
again, think of legislation that stops developers

1
2 from disturbing these burial grounds anyway if we
3 know that they existed there. Thank you.

4 CHAIRPERSON WILLIAMS: Thank you.

5 Just a few things I wanted to share that
6 the Council did a Juneteenth package that called on
7 the Commission of Racial Equity to do reparations and
8 truth and reconciliation. I was texting her as you
9 were speaking, because they actually have a current
10 application now. They are recruiting researchers to
11 come and work with them. It is a \$1.2 million grant.
12 The deadline is coming up pretty quickly, but I'm
13 just encouraging you all, because you clearly have
14 the expertise, and a part of why we passed Truth and
15 Reconciliation, and Reparations is to uncover the
16 many things that you all are researching, so that the
17 City can acknowledge harm. Because there was harm
18 done in Seneca Village, I just want to put that out
19 there, and I will make the connection. I'll work with
20 committee staff to make the connection with Linda
21 Tagani, so you can be connected to the work that we
have instructed her commission to do.

19 I also just wanted to acknowledge someone
20 who we have in the room in her official capacity as
21 General Counsel of the New York State Community

1
2 Commission on Reparations, India Sneed-Williams. So
3 people are very interested in this topic, and I'm
4 hoping folks can connect. She can raise her hand so
5 you can see who she is, and hopefully, you all can
6 connect with her as well.

7 So my colleague, who had to leave, who
8 was the bill sponsor, one of the questions she
9 had--Well, actually, you know what, let me take a
10 step back because this is probably for DCLA.

11 What types of burial places existed for
12 free and enslaved people of African descent? Anyone,
13 anyone can answer.

14 DR. ELIZABETH MEADE: So in New York City,
15 there were generally three very loose categories:

16 The first is kind of communal,
17 community-based burial places that were not tied to
18 kinship, not tied to to locations, so a site like the
19 African Burial Ground here in lower Manhattan,
20 Flatbush African Burial Ground, kind of a place where
21 anybody was allowed to be interred, where the
archaeological evidence of the African Burial Ground
kind of suggests they may have had some freedom to
express their own burial customs, traditions,

1
2 bringing cultural traditions over from Africa, that
3 sort of thing.

4 The second type is less well-documented.
5 We know about it, but it's essentially burial places
6 that would have occurred on private property, on
7 farms, by the enslavers. So they would have interred
8 the people whose stolen labor worked the land on the
9 property. Many of them often maintained family
10 cemeteries as well, and the enslaved people were
11 buried either around the family cemetery, adjacent to
12 the family cemetery, or somewhere else on the
13 property.

14 The third kind of general category, as
15 Dr. Lans alluded to, really continues past the period
16 of enslavement, and it's where formerly enslaved
17 people were interred later in the 19th century.
18 Churches took over the role of many burial practices.
19 There are quite a few AME churches throughout New
20 York that maintain burial places, as Herbert
21 mentioned, in Seneca Village.

 But it really continues well beyond that.
Even the patterns of segregation in New York City
burials continue into the 20th century. There are
predominantly Black cemeteries that were established

1
2 to provide burial places to the people who were shut
3 out of the city's other cemeteries.

4 So, as Dr. Lans mentioned, it's kind of
5 hard to capture all of the burial places where
6 formerly enslaved people may have been buried because
7 there were so many that were really just more African
8 diaspora-related cemeteries, rather than being linked
9 specifically to enslavement.

10 CHAIRPERSON WILLIAMS: And how are free
11 and enslaved people of African descent prevented from
12 protecting their burial places?

13 DR. ELIZABETH MEADE: So, legally, there
14 were laws that prevented protection elsewhere in the
15 city, if there were active stakeholders, family
16 members, people to speak up, about protecting a
17 cemetery, about, you know, people who owned the land,
18 had rights to the private land, who could prevent a
19 cemetery from being demolished.

20 In the case of the Harlem African Burial
21 Ground, we have documentation from the 1920s, when
the site was going to be redeveloped as a movie
studio. And the movie studio attempted to get title
insurance on the property, and initially were told
they could not because there had been a cemetery

1
2 there. And ultimately, the legal decision was that
3 because enslaved people could not own land, they did
4 not have any legal rights to the property that the
5 cemetery was built on, and it was allowed to be
6 redeveloped. So that kind of shows that it carried
7 well into the 20th century. There was knowledge that
8 the cemetery was there, and it didn't matter. It
9 ended up being a legal court case.

10 Another example, I always get the name
11 wrong. Hold on, I wrote it down. It has many names;
12 I've kind of consolidated them. The Little
13 Neck-Mattanacock-Hicks Waters Family Cemetery, out in
14 Queens, was the site of a decades-long battle by
15 family members. This was a cemetery used for both
16 Black and Indigenous people. It gets sometimes
17 categorized as a family cemetery, sometimes
18 categorized as a community cemetery. The history's a
19 little blurry. But essentially, the family elder
20 spent decades trying to fight the City from widening
21 Northern Boulevard to eliminate the cemetery. That
22 legal case was essentially lost when that man died,
23 and no one was left to fight.

24 But part of the reason why the City was
25 expanding the road to the north was that there were

1
2 very wealthy people who resided to the south who did
3 not want to lose part of their property, including a
4 notable state politician. So it was a decades-long
5 battle to essentially protect people's front yards,
6 and private property took precedent.

7 So there are lots of stories similar to
8 that where people tried and were just prevented,
9 either because they lacked the money, the resources,
10 or the legal standing to protect cemeteries.

11 DR. ASIA LANS: And if I could add to
12 that. A major issue across the country when it comes
13 to Black cemeteries is gentrification, and simply,
14 you know, Black people being prevented from owning
15 land, from owning homes. And once everyone with
16 memory of that space is out of a neighborhood, then
17 the claim can be made, "Oh, it's been forgotten". And
18 then there can be development, and then they might
19 find some human remains, and who knows what's going
20 to happen next?

21 CHAIRPERSON WILLIAMS: Thank you. Which
cemeteries associated with enslavement have been
documented? And what more can be done to identify and
document additional sites?

1
2 DR. ELIZABETH MEADE: So I think we've
3 named quite a few that are currently undergoing
4 archaeological analysis, for the last 10 years or
5 more. There are a number of them that I think are
6 less well known that don't yet have community groups
7 standing up for them. In my dissertation, I have a
8 map at <https://www.cemeteriesofnyc.com/>, where
9 anybody who's interested can look for some other
10 examples.

11 In addition to Seneca Village, there are
12 a number of AME Church cemeteries throughout New York
13 City. There are several late 19th, early 20th century
14 cemeteries, again kind of larger rural cemeteries
15 that were established for a primarily Black
16 population, who were excluded from other cemetery
17 sites.

18 So there are quite a few that are being
19 documented. There's just not a lot of public
20 knowledge of them yet. So this is where a bill like
21 this could really help promote knowledge and
encourage people to start to protect these sites.

As I mentioned before, the least
well-documented types of burial places associated
with enslavement are the ones that occurred on

1
2 private land. Enslavers typically did not record or
3 protect the graves of the enslaved people that they
4 interred, even when their own family cemeteries were
5 well protected, sometimes for centuries.

6 So, one of the things I'm encouraging
7 people to do more research on is to examine records,
8 property records, census records, and any kinds of
9 documentary records that we can, of people who owned
10 well-known, well-documented family cemeteries in New
11 York City who were also enslavers, and to try and
12 figure out if they could have interred enslaved
13 people on their properties and where those properties
14 were.

15 CHAIRPERSON WILLIAMS: I don't remember
16 who said it, but the comment that perhaps the most
17 egregious harm is the lack of documentation. And I
18 think New York City in general lacks documentation on
19 enslaved Black people in New York City. I don't know,
20 I guess people think that New York City didn't have
21 slaves. I don't really understand. I don't know, we
kind of gloss over slavery in New York City. And I
think there is a narrative, I've heard the Public
Advocate say this a ton of times, that, you know,
somehow slavery was just a product of the South. And

1
2 we know that not only did bondage occur in New York
3 City, but New York City was the financial arm in many
4 ways of enslavement. And as a city, I don't think
5 that we've done a good job at documenting that, and
6 then documenting, you know, the aftermath of slavery,
7 which many say, you know, still kind of kept us in
8 invisible bondage because of the many laws that not
9 only were passed nationally, but local laws that also
10 allowed for continued segregation and marginalization
11 of Black people in New York City.

12 I think of City of Yes, which we just
13 passed, where we repealed the Cabaret Law, and that
14 was specifically a racist law that was prohibiting a
15 lot of Black establishments from having certain types
16 of activities because of the fear of white people,
17 which was Black people and Black people partying in
18 Harlem.

19 And so, you know, up until just a few
20 years ago, we're still working to undo a ton of harm.
21 And I really do believe, and I'm hopeful that,
through our reparations work, our truth and
reconciliation work, the fact that the Charter
mandates required the Mayor's Office to have a
Mayor's Office of Equity and Racial Justice to

1
2 produce racial equity plans, that we can start the
3 process of at least telling the truth. Because I
4 don't think we tell the truth in New York City.

5 Council Member Joseph, I don't know if
6 you have any more questions?

7 COUNCIL MEMBER JOSEPH: I do. Thank you
8 so much, Chair Williams.

9 So I am part of that story you talk
10 about. So Flatbush African Burial Ground lives in my
11 district on Bedford Avenue and Church, and it was
12 built on. The remains were taken. There was a first a
13 public school, then it became a yeshiva, and then, in
14 2019, as I was running for Council, we discovered it,
15 a rediscovery of our ancestors.

16 But so many were taken away already. It
17 pains me every time I talk about that, the
18 manipulation of the land, the turning up of the soil,
19 the digging of the soil of the ancestors. I think
20 we're still working with, I believe, Howard
21 University to get that back. We're in the process of
22 memorializing that space. But it's harmful. A lot of
23 harm was done to that space. That's why we celebrate
24 our Juneteenth. We came together to do a GPR because
25 we wanted to see if there were any remains there. And

1
2 we brought social workers and therapists in case we
3 found anything that day to make sure that community
4 members were good.

5 So my question is, when a burial ground
6 is discovered, will it be demarcated or otherwise?
7 How do we continue to preserve that space for
8 generations to come? Because they were going to build
9 another housing site. It was set up for housing. And
10 we were like, not on our ancestors' bones. We cannot
11 do that.

12 So the community was in an uproar. At the
13 time, I was a candidate, and I was also an educator
14 who walked by that site for 22 years to go and teach
15 in New York City Public Schools, and never knew or
16 had a clue that this was one of the African burial
17 grounds in the city.

18 And so now I've been gifted by the
19 ancestors to memorialize and do right by them. So we
20 want to make sure that--how do we maintain them when
21 we find others? How do we also have funding, right?
Everything takes place with money. I don't care what
we say; everything has to move with money.

So how do we continue to memorialize them
as we're rediscovering them? Because they were here,

1
2 everybody just glossed over it like it never
3 happened. How do we continue to memorialize them as
4 we find them? How do we put funding into making sure
5 the Council is also funding this?

6 This goes hand in hand with money. I did
7 go visit Sankofa in East New York, and that's what
8 inspired me to work with Parks.

9 I think LPC should be an interagency
10 conversation, not just one. It should be LPC, DCLA,
11 whoever else can come in, even New York City Public
12 Schools. These, these things should be in New York
13 City Public Schools history books. It should not be
14 erased, as many erasures are happening.

15 You guys are the experts—how does someone
16 like me lead this work? It's been a lot, it weighs a
17 lot on my heart. So how do I lead this work and do it
18 right?

19 HERBERT SEIGNORET: I think it's
20 long-term. And as the African Burial Ground showed
21 us, the power of the community in mobilizing and
resisting what was attempted to be done is important.
Sensitizing a growing number of our public members
about the importance of that history and the
contribution that has been made by our ancestors is

1
2 important. So through education, through public
3 mobilization, then legislation can come into play.
4 But the public has to be empowered and recognize that
5 they have power in mobilizing support for that sort
6 of endeavor.

7 COUNCIL MEMBER JOSEPH: I have community
8 support. Thank God for that. I have the community
9 support, but we want to make sure, as the Council,
10 that we're doing so much more.

11 DR. ASIA LANS: Yeah, I mean, what you're
12 doing so far, I feel like, is how most of these
13 projects start. But I do think there are some good
14 frameworks. Like, we don't have to reinvent the
15 wheel.

16 COUNCIL MEMBER JOSEPH: Right.

17 DR. ASIA LANS: There are a lot of places
18 that we can look for people using different methods
19 and how they're going about it.

20 So, for example, there's the Black
21 Cemetery Network that offers a lot of resources
online. There's also, for example, I live part of the
year in Maryland now. Maryland State has been doing
some really interesting things around protecting
Black cemeteries.

1
2 I don't know what happened with this, but
3 a few years ago, the federal government had set aside
4 \$3 million, which isn't much, through the National
5 Park Service, that was supposed to go to— they would
6 give out grants to people who were trying to preserve
7 Black cemeteries. But I don't know that it ever
8 materialized, because the other thing is thinking,
9 you know, more broadly with federal legislation too.

10 But it does take money, and I feel like a
11 lot of what I will see is like real grassroots
12 efforts unless we can get, you know, folks to buy in
13 who are, you know, working with the cities or states
14 that we already have resources.

15 Because it's like you're asking a
16 question that I think a lot of us are still
17 struggling with constantly in these places. Because
18 it is so expensive. And you're somewhere like New
19 York City, where we have to balance the needs of
20 living people with how we treat our ancestors. And
21 that's never straightforward. And I think even, you
know, your example was really great, because some
other cemeteries, the descendant communities have
chosen to treat differently.

1
2 So I think it's really a case-by-case
3 sort of thing. But long term, I mean, I think for
4 most of us, we think like legislation or something,
5 some sort of public trust perhaps. I don't know.

6 DR. ELIZABETH MEADE: And in terms of
7 getting it started, I think every- as Asia said,
8 every site is different. There's no cookie-cutter
9 approach. So it really kind of has to be a
10 hyper-local, born out of the community and out of the
11 community, you know, conversation and what they want.

12 Not every cemetery has had the same
13 history. Not every cemetery is going to be treated
14 the same moving forward, according to the community's
15 wishes. So it starts with just listening.

16 And as for the funding part, I don't
17 think it's a coincidence that all of the sites we've
18 talked about that have been documented by
19 archaeologists are all on city-owned property.

20 COUNCIL MEMBER JOSEPH: Yeah. Interesting.

21 DR. ELIZABETH MEADE: I think the struggle
with private landowner rights is very strong. And
it's hard to find ways to-- It's very rare that a
private landowner is willing to engage in this sort
of work.

1
2 COUNCIL MEMBER JOSEPH: Of course.

3 DR. MATTHEW REILLY: One thing I would
4 just quickly add, in terms of legislation, there is
5 federal legislation to protect indigenous burial
6 grounds around the country. That was passed in 1990.
7 But no such comparable act exists for the protection
8 of Black burial grounds.

9 There is nothing prohibiting a city
10 council from passing such a law, but it would entail
11 a lot of community engagement based on what Dr. Meade
12 was saying. There's a lot of diversity in terms of
13 how these burial grounds were constructed and what
14 community needs might be. But legislation that has
15 the teeth to protect these sites is lacking. And many
16 of our colleagues in the field have called for such
17 legislation over the years.

18 COUNCIL MEMBER JOSEPH: That's why we're
19 here today. And that's why I'm so grateful to Chair
20 Williams for entertaining when I said, we need to do
21 this because this is what's happening across the
city. In Harlem, the Bronx, and Staten Island,
they're showing up. How do we show up for them as
well and preserve them and maintain them?

1
2 Do you have a time, a reasonable time
3 frame for development and implementation of a planned
4 survey? Where does that live? How do we do a survey
5 to identify unmarked enslaved African burial sites? I
6 know there's no timeline. I know it's as they come
7 along. Lately, it's been how they are showing up, but
we're showing up for them as well.

8 DR. ELIZABETH MEADE: By survey, do you
9 mean the map that the bill is proposing?

10 COUNCIL MEMBER JOSEPH: The map, how do we
11 add more to it, and how do we continue to build it?
12 You have the foundation, so we just need to continue
13 to build on it.

14 DR. ELIZABETH MEADE: I would say it's
15 just continued research. I often said when I was
16 doing my dissertation, the number of cemeteries I
17 discovered by accident was not small. You know, you
18 just stumble through records, and you find an offhand
19 reference. So it's really just charging historians,
20 archaeologists, and scholars with paying more
21 attention and looking for those offhand references in
diaries and property records, things that just make
casual references to a cemetery that can then be the
jumping-off point for more research.

1
2 So that, that I think is the starting
3 point, because, otherwise, there's no-- the same
4 resources for preserved cemeteries don't exist for
5 the ones that were redeveloped.

6 COUNCIL MEMBER JOSEPH: So we're building
7 this from scratch.

8 DR. ELIZABETH MEADE: Yeah.

9 COUNCIL MEMBER JOSEPH: I kind of like
10 that idea.

11 So we should have historians,
12 archaeologists... (CROSS-TALK)

13 DR. ELIZABETH MEADE: Archivists and
14 genealogists.

15 COUNCIL MEMBER JOSEPH: Genealogists
16 should also be a part of that team?

17 Are we training the next generation of
18 scholars for that type of work, and making sure that
19 there's enough representation in that field as well?

20 DR. ASIA LANS: Excellent question. I try
21 desperately, but I mean, archaeology, which in the
United States falls under anthropology, is a very
anti-Black discipline. In fact, the position I took
was so that I could go into Black Studies rather than
stay in Anthropology.

1
2 So there are more of us with, like, the
3 Society for Black Archaeologists. But that is a
4 struggle that has been going on for well before me,
5 for decades, trying to get more Black students into
6 these fields.

7 I mean, part of the struggle is that I'm
8 often arguing against Science, you know, with a
9 capital 'S', wherein, to many people, many of my
10 colleagues, they still, if they were given the
11 choice, would, you know, excavate a cemetery for fun,
12 for science, for knowledge. So that's a much bigger
13 question, I would say. Matt, you're a professor, too,
14 so...

15 DR. MATTHEW REILLY: I think locally there
16 are, of course, success stories, and I fully agree
17 with Dr. Lans in terms of the climate and inheritance
18 of our discipline. Thankfully, in New York, we do
19 have a successful pipeline of students of African
20 descent who are eager and passionate about this work.
21 Several come to us not knowing about any of this
history and leave our halls of CUNY institutions
wanting to pursue a master's degree or a PhD to
become the next generation that can lead this charge.

1
2 So there are folks out there. We just
3 need to give them the task.

4 COUNCIL MEMBER JOSEPH: I need to meet
5 them. I'm also the Higher Education Chair in the New
6 York City Council, so I need to create that pipeline
7 to make sure that representation does matter as we
8 discover these.

9 How many members do you have in your
10 society?

11 DR. ASIA LANS: I just counted them the
12 other day. Oh gosh, it's like 280.

13 COUNCIL MEMBER JOSEPH: I didn't mean to
14 put you on the spot... (CROSS-TALK)

15 HERBERT SEIGNORET: It's grown
16 significantly. When we first started, there was a
17 handful. Right now, when we have meetings, the rooms
18 are packed.

19 DR. MATTHEW REILLY: The society was only
20 founded in 2011.

21 COUNCIL MEMBER JOSEPH: 2011? Wow.
So we have a lot of work to do.

HERBERT SEIGNORET: We have made a lot of
inroads, but there's still a long way to go.

COUNCIL MEMBER JOSEPH: Yeah, we did.

1
2 HERBERT SEIGNORET: When I teach at Seneca
3 Village, I try to make it engaging, have students
4 become archaeologists. So rather than tell them about
5 history, we give them primary source documents so
6 they actually work with actual documents and see how
7 history is documented, how they can tell a story
8 through the documents that they are looking at. And
9 every time they analyze it, I always see something
10 different because the perspectives are always
11 different. So most students come with an intention to
12 pursue a certain career, but showing them the
13 possibility of different pathways gives them a chance
14 to think of alternative career paths.

15 For example, I came to study
16 Architecture, I did for a couple of years, and then
17 with the rediscovery of the African Burial Ground, I
18 shifted from Architecture to Archaeology.

19 COUNCIL MEMBER JOSEPH: We need that
20 shift.

21 In your testimony, you talked about
Central Park as one of the first towns. Is there any
marking or celebration of the community that lived
there that was driven out through eminent domain?

1
2 HERBERT SEIGNORET: There are plaques in
3 place. The Institute for the Exploration of Seneca
4 Village, Community Board 10, and the Central Park
5 Conservancy worked together to install plaques
6 commemorating the site. So there are plaques denoting
7 where certain individuals lived, and where cemeteries
8 are located. But these are temporary. They have done
9 work to extend the time that they're there. More work
10 needs to be done in looking at how technology can be
11 used so that when somebody passes through the area by
12 using the QR codes, you can get more information that
13 is beyond what is on the plaque.

14 COUNCIL MEMBER JOSEPH: That it was a
15 thriving community, and they were driven out through
16 eminent domain to build a park.

17 HERBERT SEIGNORET: Yes.

18 COUNCIL MEMBER JOSEPH: I'm sure a lot of
19 folks don't know that. Exactly.

20 So, Chair, I'm going to pass it over to
21 you.

CHAIRPERSON WILLIAMS: Thank you. Just one
final question, and it really does sort of dovetail
out of what Council Member Joseph said. Just as a
Council, any thoughts on what our role should

1
2 continue to be in supporting future work in this
3 area, or in supporting the work that has already been
4 done?

5 What I'm hearing is that the bill is
6 relegated to enslaved folks, but that we might want
7 to expand it. So just thinking about, like, future
8 work or current work, how can we as a Council support
9 that? What do you think our roles can be?

10 And I know that is a big question, so I
11 also say that oftentimes, real work happens after the
12 hearing. So I do look forward to hopefully connecting
13 with you all after the hearing as well.

14 DR. ELIZABETH MEADE: I guess, if they
15 don't already exist in areas where we do have some
16 documentation of these types of burial sites, helping
17 community groups form that can help build the
18 education and engagement component.

19 A lot of the best work that's been
20 happening in recent years has been the product of
21 community involvement and community engagement, and
communities pushing city government, pushing
politicians to get sites investigated, to fund this
type of work.

1
2 So I think it's really just supporting it
3 at the community level. Finding the people in those
4 areas who want to do this work, who may not know that
5 there's a cemetery in their backyard, and helping
6 nurture that and grow those community groups. Because
7 that does seem to be the primary driver of the
8 successful documentation and awareness campaigns of a
9 lot of the sites around the city.

10 CHAIRPERSON WILLIAMS: Well, thank you so
11 much for coming and for traveling from afar, even
12 though New York City is home. We appreciate you very
13 much. And again, I know this will not be the last
14 time we engage with you. And again, thank you so much
15 for your personal interest in these topics, for doing
16 the work that obviously needs to be done, often is
17 not being done, and is overlooked. So thank you so
18 much.

19 PANEL: Thank you.

20 HERBERT SEIGNORET: It's a pleasure.

21 CHAIRPERSON WILLIAMS: Okay, our wonderful
22 friends at DCLA, thank you so much for coming and
23 being here and listening to the expert panel.
24 Although I've already read ahead in your testimony,
25 and even the expert panel mentioned that another

Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries, 65
and International Relations

1
2 agency might be better equipped. We're still very
3 excited to see you. And I will now turn it over to
4 Committee Counsel to swear you in.

5 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Good afternoon. Could
6 you please raise your right hand?

7 Do you affirm to tell the truth, the
8 whole truth, and nothing but the truth before this
9 Committee, and to respond honestly to Council Member
10 questions?

11 PANEL: (INAUDIBLE)

12 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. You may
13 begin your testimony.

14 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER MURRAY: Sitting up
15 here, I feel totally at a disadvantage. I just
16 traveled from across the street. It's good to be
17 here, and it's good to see familiar faces. I'm going
18 to read my testimony first and then take some
19 questions.

20 Good afternoon, Deputy Speaker Williams
21 and Members of the Committee. I am Alton Murray,
Deputy Commissioner of the New York City Department
of Cultural Affairs.

1
2 I'm here to testify regarding today's
3 topic, commemorating Juneteenth and honoring African
4 burial sites of formerly enslaved African Americans.

5 Juneteenth was made an official holiday
6 in 2021. It was, for the past 156 years, after the
7 last enslaved people learned of their emancipation
8 after the Civil War. It took a generation of advocacy
9 for this historic milestone to be more broadly
10 recognized. But five years on, we New Yorkers have
11 embraced the opportunity to celebrate, reflect, and
12 come together to continue the unending work of
13 imagining a more inclusive and just society.

14 The Department of Cultural Affairs is
15 proud to support a wide range of organizations whose
16 programming in honor of Juneteenth is as diverse as
17 our city's cultural sector.

18 Our grantees bring in performances,
19 workshops, exhibitions, and other community-driven
20 programming for New Yorkers to engage. I'll give you
21 a few examples. The Jamaica Center for Arts and
Learning, also known as JCAL, will commemorate
Juneteenth with art and film programming that
examines the continuing journey towards liberation.

JCAL's Juneteenth programming will unfold across its campus and is free and open to the public.

Black Spectrum Television will present theatrical programming examining the history and long significance of Juneteenth through dramatic performances and community dialogue.

Studio Museum in Harlem will mark Juneteenth with a full day of workshops, gallery conversations, performances, and healing-centered programming rooted in Black artistic expressions and community care.

Snug Harbor Cultural Center and Botanical Gardens, and the Staten Island Community Alliance will present the 6th annual Juneteenth Freedom Festival. This day's celebration of food, music, and culture is a meaningful way to commemorate and honor the end of slavery in the United States while bringing the community together.

Weeksville Heritage Center will commemorate Juneteenth with liberation-centered talks, archival storytelling, performances, food vendors, and community gathering located on the site of the nation's first Black community. The Weeksville

1
2 celebration foregrounds Black history, resilience,
3 and cultural memory.

4 The New York Botanical Garden will
5 present programs exploring Black ecology, foodways,
6 healing gardens, and storytelling traditions. The
7 celebration connects environmental education with the
8 stories and cultural practices of the African
9 diaspora.

10 There are many, many more listed in our
11 written testimony. I encourage you to continue to
12 read it. But, in the interest of time, I would like
13 to talk about our partners in Parks.

14 Our partners in New York City Parks and
15 New York City Tourism also have a robust list of
16 programming happening across the city. We're proud to
17 support, in partnership with the New York City
18 Council, this broad range of cultural activities and
19 programming honoring this year's Juneteenth holiday.

20 I'd also like to note that many
21 organizations, especially Black-led organizations,
have been celebrating Juneteenth in our city for many
years before it became a federal holiday. This is
another example of the groups we support leading the

1
2 way when it comes to programming that is rooted and
3 accountable to our communities.

4 Regarding the proposed legislation, we
5 thank you for highlighting the urgent need to think
6 deeply about how we honor the burial sites of
7 formerly enslaved African Americans in our city.

8 DCLA offices are just around the corner
9 from the African Burial Ground National Monument in
10 Lower Manhattan. This marks the site where upwards of
11 15,000 intact remains of enslaved and free Africans
12 who lived and worked in New York were found during
13 the construction of a federal building.

14 Through our Percent for Art program, DCLA
15 commissioned artist Lorenzo Pace's soaring Triumph of
16 the Human Spirit just a few steps away in Foley
17 Square to honor and draw attention to this important
18 site.

19 In Harlem, we are supporting the efforts
20 of the New York City Economic Development Corporation
21 to commission a permanent monument and cultural space
honoring an African burial ground founded under a
longtime MTA bus depot.

 In Brooklyn, the Flatbush African Burial
Ground was in use from the 17th to the 19th century.

1
2 After community members advocated for the site to be
3 preserved as open space, it was transferred from HPD
4 to NYC Parks in 2022. With funding supported from the
5 Council, and in close consultation with the local
6 community, NYC Parks is undertaking a capital project
7 to design and build a park space that commemorates
and honors the site's history.

8 The written testimony submitted today
9 from the Landmark Preservation Committee includes
10 information on a number of other burial grounds that
are preserved and honored across the city.

11 Collectively, these sites tell the
12 stories of the members of the African diaspora who
13 came to our city, often in bondage, who laid the
14 foundation for a flourishing Black culture that
defines so many parts of our city today.

15 As noted in our written testimony of our
16 colleagues at Landmark Preservation Commission, the
17 tragic national pattern of disregard for African
18 American burial grounds left most uncounted,
unprotected, and rarely documented on the maps.

19 LPC raised another valid concern, such as
20 the risk of looting and vandalism that may result
21

1
2 from public disclosure of unmarked archaeological
3 sites.

4 This work should only be undertaken in
5 consultation with the descendants' community, who in
6 some cases may find disclosure appropriate or, in
7 other cases, prefer to keep the location of the site
private to protect it.

8 While we share your commitment to
9 honoring the legacy of African ancestors who lived
10 and died here, DCLA is not likely not the best agency
11 to lead this work. We are primarily a funding agency,
12 and we do not have the in-depth expertise or
13 resources to oversee this kind of historical landmark
14 assessment with the care and precision it deserves
15 and demands. But as we have with other African burial
16 sites, we would be honored to work in commission with
17 a commemorative monument and artwork when the sites
18 are identified and capital projects initiated, and
more broadly to support these efforts in
collaboration with our grantees who have relevant
expertise.

19 We look forward to further conversation
20 about the most effective way to accomplish our shared
21 goals for more fully honoring and recognizing these

1
2 sites. And the weeks leading up to Juneteenth offer
3 an ideal opportunity to have this important
4 conversation.

5 Thank you for the opportunity to testify
6 today, and I'm happy to take any questions you may
7 have.

8 CHAIRPERSON WILLIAMS: Thank you.
9 Actually, Dr. Meade, can you come back? Because I
10 have a question for you.

11 We did see the... Thank you, we'll
12 continue to look at LPC's testimony. It came in
13 today? Yeah, it came in today, so we didn't have time
14 to look at it ahead of time. But I know they have a
15 whole section on looting and site disturbance.

16 Do you think that is a valid concern?

17 DR. ELIZABETH MEADE: I'm sorry, can you
18 say it again?

19 CHAIRPERSON WILLIAMS: So, LPC, the
20 Landmarks Preservation Commission, submitted written
21 testimony, and I know, Commissioner Murray just
mentioned this as well, that they believe that if we
publicize where some of these unmarked sites are, it
may result in looting and vandalism.

1
2 So I just want to know from your
3 expertise if you think that is a valid concern.

4 DR. ELIZABETH MEADE: In some cases,
5 absolutely. And that's always a concern in
6 archaeology. And for a lot of our environmental
7 review work, we do conceal the locations of
8 archaeological sensitivity, for anywhere where people
9 can actually access. And, you know, someone could go
10 into Central Park and dig, sure.

11 CHAIRPERSON WILLIAMS: Mm-hmm.

12 DR. ELIZABETH MEADE: In other places,
13 it's not likely, you know, sites that are under
14 pavement, under buildings, then there's no real risk
15 of that. You know, someone would have to get a
16 backhoe out there, and that would be a very different
17 story.

18 So, in some cases, absolutely, yes, that
19 is correct, but not all.

20 CHAIRPERSON WILLIAMS: Okay, thank you so
21 much.

22 Commissioner, a question that the bill
23 sponsor had was whether her bill should explicitly
24 authorize contracts and grants. I know you mentioned
25 you're primarily a funding agency. So she was

1
2 interested in knowing if the bill should be amended
3 to explicitly authorize contracts and grants.

4 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER MURRAY: It's not
5 something we have discussed internally, and I can't
6 see why it wouldn't be. We do have a peer review
7 process, so grants are not evaluated internally.

8 We have over 250 community members who
9 are experts in arts and culture, not so much in
10 heritage, who evaluate the proposals and make the
11 determination of how the grants are funded.

12 CHAIRPERSON WILLIAMS: Another question
13 about funding: should New York City create a
14 permanent cemetery maintenance fund modeled after
15 Virginia's African American Cemeteries Fund?

16 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER MURRAY: We haven't
17 given it much thought, but we are open to continuing
18 this discussion.

19 CHAIRPERSON WILLIAMS: Okay, we have
20 questions. Council Member Joseph?

21 COUNCIL MEMBER JOSEPH: Once we
22 memorialize, for example, the Flatbush African Burial
23 Ground, will we need some type of maintenance? How do
24 we maintain and upkeep them so they are, you know,
25 not dilapidated and run down after a while?

1
2 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER MURRAY: The sites
3 that we have installed public art, we do build in, in
4 some instances, a maintenance fund.

5 Because every specific site will have
6 different challenges, so to have a conversation that
7 is so hypothetical that we can't really- your site
8 may not require a public art monument. You may decide
9 to go in another direction. So it depends on each
10 project to have specific challenges that we would
11 have to look at individually.

12 COUNCIL MEMBER JOSEPH: Okay, okay.

13 And you mentioned in your testimony that
14 the African burial grounds should remain- should go
15 to LPC and not DCLA?

16 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER MURRAY: One of the
17 experts mentioned that as a possibility.

18 COUNCIL MEMBER JOSEPH: Right, correct.

19 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER MURRAY: We are not
20 identifying any- this is such a big conversation.

21 COUNCIL MEMBER JOSEPH: Mm-hmm!

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER MURRAY: What we would
really love to do is sit down and have a more
thoughtful approach to this. We are not fully
endorsing any one particular agency. It should be a

1
2 collaborative process, but we don't think that we,
3 the way we are structured and our expertise, are
4 equipped to manage, conduct, and orchestrate this
5 project, this initiative.

6 COUNCIL MEMBER JOSEPH: Okay, thank you.

7 CHAIRPERSON WILLIAMS: I have a question,
8 it's probably pretty broad, and then I'll go more
9 micro.

10 In preparation for hearings...

11 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER MURRAY: Yes?

12 CHAIRPERSON WILLIAMS: Like, what is the
13 process? Because like, when I hear you say that you
14 haven't put any thought into it, it makes me
15 concerned that there was no due diligence and prep
16 for the hearing. And I know sometimes we don't send
17 the questions, which is something that I'll continue
18 to remind our collective staff to do because I do
19 believe that it should be a fair exchange. Like, I
20 expect you to have answers, but I know sometimes in
21 order for you to have answers, we in turn probably
need to share the questions. I don't know if that was
the case. That's fine if it wasn't. We didn't send
the questions?

UNIDENTIFIED: (INAUDIBLE)

1
2 CHAIRPERSON WILLIAMS: Okay, well,
3 that's-- I will have a conversation internally about
4 that. But moving along...

5 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER MURRAY: No, but I
6 would like to just address that.

7 This is such a big, big subject, and it's
8 important to me as an African American that it's done
9 right. But we cannot come prepared for a big
10 discussion about something so big that we can't-- we
11 don't have the expertise to discuss in preparation
12 for a hearing. We need archaeologists and
13 genealogists and all these people to be in the
14 conversation. So that's why I said we're not prepared
15 to have that big discussion.

16 CHAIRPERSON WILLIAMS: Okay, thank you.

17 Have you spoken to other agencies about
18 this bill? I know you said you aren't endorsing one
19 particular agency. Have you had any discussions in
20 preparation for the hearing?

21 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER MURRAY: Yes, we have,
we have, multiple. Yes, multiple agencies...

(CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON WILLIAMS: What agencies?

1
2 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER MURRAY: We talked to
3 Landmarks Preservation, and we talked to Parks.

4 CHAIRPERSON WILLIAMS: Okay, what has DCLA
5 done to encourage Juneteenth commemorations, either
6 by cultural organizations that it funds or by
7 community groups?

8 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER MURRAY: We continue
9 to be an engaging partner in the Juneteenth
10 initiatives. Referring back to the testimony I just
11 read, a few organizations that we support that are
12 doing Juneteenth work, and the list is robust, and I
13 encourage you to read it again.

14 But we are a passionate supporters of the
15 Juneteenth Initiative, and we continue to look for
16 opportunities to fund more grantees. With the new
17 addition of \$10 million added to the DCLA budget, we
18 will be out there promoting opportunities for
19 organizations that are very, very versed in doing
20 this work to submit proposals for funding. And we
21 encourage you to be a partner in talking to your
community organizations that are doing this work to
apply for a DCLA-funded grant. We leave the work up
to the experts who are doing it, and so we support
them with funding.

1
2 COUNCIL MEMBER JOSEPH: You say this is a
3 big topic, so maybe we— there should be a part two,
4 but how are Juneteenth programming and burial site
5 recognition connected as part of a coherent
6 commemorative framework rather than treated as a
7 separate effort? You see how I also questioned that
8 this work should not just live in one agency, that it
9 should be an interagency effort.

10 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER MURRAY: Okay.

11 COUNCIL MEMBER JOSEPH: There should be
12 Parks, it should be DCLA, it should be LPC. Everybody
13 will play their role. You'll carry the cultural part,
14 they'll carry the preservation part. So each of these
15 agencies will play a role.

16 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER MURRAY: Absolutely.
17 So repeat the question?

18 COUNCIL MEMBER JOSEPH: Chair Williams, I
19 think we need to have a roundtable.

20 How are Juneteenth programming and burial
21 site recognition connected as part of a coherent
22 commemorative framework rather than treated as
23 separate efforts?

24 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER MURRAY: So in DCLA,
25 there is no initiative to make it a coherent

1
2 commemorative experience. We do promote and support
3 cultural organizations. Our commissioners in the past
4 have attended and highlighted these programs. We
5 continue to be a very passionate funder. We encourage
6 organizations to let us know when they have events so
7 we can uplift them. Because all of these are
8 independent organizations, doing independent work, it
9 would be another big discussion to have about how we
10 encourage all of these organizations to collaborate,
11 to exchange information, and work. So, currently,
12 it's not a focus of the agency. What we try to
13 encourage is more funding, more support for the
14 community.

15 COUNCIL MEMBER WILLIAMS: Related but
16 unrelated, the Freedom Trail Task Force. So when we
17 passed our Juneteenth package bills, that was one of
18 the bills. The bill didn't compel a particular agency
19 to provide oversight, and so I am just inquiring if
20 you are aware of this task force and if you can share
21 any updates on its status.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER MURRAY: I'm not in a
position to share any updates now.

CHAIRPERSON WILLIAMS: But are you aware
of the task force?

1
2 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER MURRAY: I am aware of
3 it, but I do not have any updates I can share with
4 you.

5 CHAIRPERSON WILLIAMS: Is your agency
6 involved in it? Because I know the bill called for...

7 (CROSS-TALK)

8 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER MURRAY: We're
9 involved in the conversation. Yes.

10 CHAIRPERSON WILLIAMS: Do you know what
11 other agencies?

12 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER MURRAY: I do not
13 right now. No.

14 CHAIRPERSON WILLIAMS: Okay.

15 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER MURRAY: I'm not
16 personally involved, but I can get back to you with
17 that information.

18 CHAIRPERSON WILLIAMS: Do you know who is
19 managing that?

20 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER MURRAY: I do not
21 right now. I can get back to you and let you know.

CHAIRPERSON WILLIAMS: Okay. Okay, thank
you so much. I will work on my end. I don't know why
we have this policy where we don't send you stuff in
advance. So I'm going on record and saying that I do

1
2 not like that because I want you to come to the
3 hearing with answers. But again, I recognize that if
4 you don't have the questions, it's hard to produce
5 answers. So I appreciate you being here. And like I
6 said, I'm committed to figuring out internally how,
7 at the very least, in my committee, we can share
8 questions in advance. Because I think this is
9 probably like the second time that I've had a hearing
10 with DCLA, and it doesn't seem like you all have
11 answers or have put any real thought into preparing
12 for my hearing.

13 I appreciate you very much. Hopefully, we
14 can have a real conversation offline with respective
15 agencies that would also, to your earlier point about
16 you having some conversations, might be good agencies
17 to connect with around this topic.

18 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER MURRAY: I do
19 appreciate your perspective, but I'd also like to
20 reiterate that we are a funding agency. We fund
21 nonprofit organizations. We want to be a contributing
partner to this conversation. And as a person of
color, an African American man, I think it should not
be decided in such a small amount of time. There
should be more collaboration, more engagement. At

1
2 DCLA, we are really passionate about this issue. We
3 want to be a thought partner in this. We want our
4 expertise to be valued. So when we come to the table,
5 and we present ideas, they're ideas which we have
6 lived with. We've thought through them, and they fit
7 within our expertise.

8 We're great at funding. We're great at
9 managing capital projects and giving our nonprofit
10 partners the knowledge they need. But this particular
11 heritage topic needs to be well thought out and
12 addressed in a more deliberate way. Thank you for
13 your time.

14 CHAIRPERSON WILLIAMS: I agree with you,
15 and I don't think that I'm expecting the agency to
16 come to a hearing with all of the answers, but I do
17 expect that the agency come to the hearing with a
18 pathway as to how they could potentially implement
19 something of this nature and/or provide a more robust
20 reason as to why it might be challenging. And perhaps
21 we should have— did we invite LPC?

UNIDENTIFIED: LPC wasn't called.

CHAIRPERSON WILLIAMS: Okay, so perhaps we
should have invited LPC or other agencies, because I
do acknowledge that LPC's testimony is a little bit

1
2 more robust on the issue of the bill, but we didn't
3 call them, so maybe we should have called them. Happy
4 to take responsibility for that.

5 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER MURRAY: We champion
6 funding.

7 CHAIRPERSON WILLIAMS: Mm-hmm

8 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER MURRAY: I imagine LPC
9 champions heritage work. So maybe there is a path
10 forward with some funding and heritage work...

11 (CROSS-TALK)

12 CHAIRPERSON WILLIAMS: Maybe we
13 (INAUDIBLE) We perhaps-- perhaps we should have
14 called them... (CROSS-TALK)

15 DEPUTY COMMISSIONER MURRAY: And Parks and
16 Education, we all can get together and have a real,
17 meaningful, robust conversation so that all these
18 sites can be identified and properly commemorated,
19 hopefully with a really, really amazing public art
20 installation. Thank you for your time.

21 CHAIRPERSON WILLIAMS: Thank you.

Okay, now we have a Zoom panel with
Libraries. I will now call on the panel from
Libraries: Edwin, Elizabeth, and Chris.

1
2 EDWIN MAXWELL: Thank you. Good afternoon,
3 my name is Edwin Maxwell, and I'm the Chief Librarian
4 of the Brooklyn Public Library. So thank you, Speaker
5 Menin, Deputy Speaker Dr. Williams, and especially
6 Council Member Chris Banks, for his partnership and
7 leadership on the New Lots library project.

8 I have submitted my full testimony for
9 your review, but there are a couple of things I just
10 want to touch base on.

11 As many others have said, this project is
12 deeply personal to me. Earlier in my career, I served
13 as the branch manager of New Lots Library, and I've
14 spent years working alongside that community that
15 deserves and is excited about this state-of-the-art
16 library.

17 But before with the library project, as
18 Council Member Banks said earlier, we have to
19 remember that this is a sacred space. The East New
20 York African Burial Ground is the resting place of
21 free and enslaved Africans buried generations ago
beneath Sankofa Park and beneath the site that will
be the new library.

For years, that history lived mostly in
fragments and community memory until local leaders

1
2 Catherine Greene and Eleanor Pickney helped bring it
3 to full light through their research, advocacy, and
4 persistence.

5 Over the last three years, Brooklyn
6 Public Library has engaged deeply with the community,
7 and the message that we heard was clear: we have to
8 honor the past while also celebrating the vibrant
9 present and future of East New York.

10 We also work closely with community
11 members to develop procedures for the respectful
12 treatment of any remains that could potentially be
13 discovered during construction.

14 The design team, Mass Design Group,
15 Marble Fairbanks, and Elizabeth Kennedy Landscape
16 Architects, approached this work with tremendous care
17 and thoughtfulness. There are many meaningful
18 elements throughout the design, but one of my
19 favorites is the veil (INAUDIBLE) that's toward the
20 entrance, symbolizing the way community leaders
21 lifted the veil on the site's history and brought it
into the public view.

Brooklyn Public Library is honored to
steward this work, and I look forward to welcoming
you all at the ribbon cutting in just a few years so

1
2 you can experience the beauty and meaningfulness of
3 this space firsthand. Thank you.

4 (PAUSE)

5 CHAIRPERSON WILLIAMS: Chris, followed by
6 Elizabeth.

7 CHRIS HARDY: Hey everyone, thank you for
8 the opportunity to speak today in support of this
9 bill.

10 My name is Chris Hardy. I'm a design
11 director at MASS, a nonprofit architecture firm,
12 which stands for Model of Architecture Serving
13 Society. Our work spans contexts, geographies, and
14 building types, but often focuses on reckoning with
15 systemic erasure.

16 By creating space that centers memory in
17 the public realm and therefore raising public
18 consciousness, we can contribute to healing on
19 community and national scales.

20 We had the privilege and pleasure to work
21 towards that goal with our many project partners on
the New Lots Branch. The Brooklyn Public Library's
collaboration with so many community voices has led
to this project's acknowledgment of the history of
the East New York African Burial Ground. The branch

1
2 will be located further west, respecting the burial
3 ground, and Remembrance Plaza will unify between the
4 library and the Sankofa Park sites and establish
5 space for reverence. All the contributions that have
6 been instrumental in getting the project to this
7 stage and is an example of the hard work and
dedication that's required to do projects like this.

8 It is our hope that this project can
9 serve as an opportunity for collective learning,
10 reinforcing the mission of the library, a place to
11 reconcile and a place to celebrate. It's our hope
12 that honoring this burial ground is but a step on a
13 journey, one that's much bigger than any one project.
It's an opportunity for us to curate our collective
future.

14 Thanks for your time today.

15 CHAIRPERSON WILLIAMS: Thank you.

16 Elizabeth?

(PAUSE)

17 ELIZABETH KENNEDY: Good afternoon. I hope
18 I'm in Room one, and I will be brief.

19 My name is Elizabeth Kennedy. The
20 landscape architecture firm that bears my name has
21 been involved in the design commemoration of the

1
2 enslaved African burial ground at New Lots, the
3 enslaved African burial ground at Inwood, and the
4 enslaved African burial ground on the banks of the
5 Collect Pond, which is also known as the African
6 Burial Ground National Monument. We were also
7 considered for the work to commemorate the enslaved
8 African burial ground within Van Cortlandt Park, but
9 we didn't get that job.

10 While I want to assure you that we do not
11 specialize solely in enslavement narratives, as other
12 experts have testified, unrecognized sites of
13 enslaved and free African burials are everywhere. The
14 writer Shane White and painter Francis Guy attest to
15 the ubiquity of enslavement in the 18th-century
16 Hudson Valley and throughout Long Island, and the
17 banality of its cruelty, banality that Hannah Arendt
18 described as the "ordinariness of evil" when
19 referring to the Holocaust.

20 This banality lies at the heart of this
21 cultural erasure. Burial grounds of enslaved and free
Africans are so frequently found within the footprint
of public land—parks, schoolyards, bus depots,
municipal parking lots—that their situation
interrogates the city's history of land stewardship.

1
2 And while these grounds share common threads in
3 purpose, each has a backstory that renders it unique.

4 So how can the commitment of
5 organizations like the Brooklyn Public Library
6 support this Resolution? Community institutions like
7 libraries are also everywhere. Their approach to
8 public engagement can confront general ignorance of
9 and indifference to complex narratives of place and
10 identity through design. Also, libraries inherently
11 convey joy, a central aspect of African survival in
12 enslavement and freedom. Like the Smithsonian
13 Institution, libraries disseminate knowledge into the
14 world. The design of the New Lots Branch architecture
15 and landscape does exactly that, demonstrating
16 through its melding of shelter and ecology into a
17 sanctuary of an urban hush harbor, how local civic
18 spaces may intertwine mission with highly local
19 spatial and sociocultural histories to situate
20 library arts firmly within a greater context of
21 sacred space. Thank you.

18 CHAIRPERSON WILLIAMS: Thank you. Anyone
19 else online, or what am I doing?

20 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: I think that was it
21 for the...

1
2 CHAIRPERSON WILLIAMS: That was it for
3 online for now. Okay, back to in-person.

4 I now open the hearing for public
5 testimony. I remind members of the public that this
6 is a formal government proceeding and that decorum
7 shall be observed at all times. As such, members of
8 the public shall remain silent at all times.

9 The witness table is reserved for people
10 who wish to testify. No video recording or
11 photography is allowed from the witness table.

12 Further, members of the public may not
13 present audio or video recordings as testimony, but
14 may submit transcripts of such recordings to the
15 Sergeant at Arms for inclusion in the hearing record.

16 If you wish to speak at today's hearing,
17 please fill out an appearance card with the Sergeant
18 at Arms if you have not already done so and wait to
19 be recognized.

20 When recognized, you will have two
21 minutes to speak on today's hearing topic:
22 Commemorating Juneteenth and Honoring Burial Sites of
23 Formerly Enslaved African Americans.

24 We will hear all in-person testimony
25 first and then turn to testimony on Zoom. If you have

1
2 a written statement or additional written testimony
3 you wish to submit for the record, please provide a
4 copy of that testimony to the Sergeant at Arms.

5 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: (INAUDIBLE)

6 CHAIRPERSON WILLIAMS: I will now call
7 the first panel from the public. They already spoke.
8 So we see that we have the library folks online
9 raising their hands, Edwin and Chris. I don't know if
10 this is an old hand. Chris, I think you're unmuted.

11 (PAUSE)

12 Okay, so moving along to our in-person
13 testimony, we will call Judith, Heather, and
14 Samantha. Yeah, Samantha Bernadine. Oh, she left.
15 Okay, that happens. Our hearings take forever.

16 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: (INAUDIBLE)

17 CHAIRPERSON WILLIAMS: DJ McDonald? Did DJ
18 McDonald also leave?

19 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: (INAUDIBLE)

20 CHAIRPERSON WILLIAMS: Okay.

21 JUDITH INSELL: Good afternoon, Chair Dr.
Williams and honorable Members of the New York City
Council. My name is Judith Insell and I'm the
Executive Director of the Bronx Arts Ensemble.

1
2 On June 19th from 4:00 to 8:00 p.m., the
3 Arts Ensemble and Van Cortlandt Park Alliance will
4 present our 6th annual collaborative Juneteenth event
5 honoring the enslaved African burial ground located
6 in Van Cortlandt Park, as well as all enslaved
7 African American people who have helped build our
8 great city.

9 Together, our two Bronx cultural
10 institutions have presented Juneteenth events since
11 2021, providing attendees with spiritually moving
12 content and encouraging them to reflect on Juneteenth
13 and the burial grounds' historical significance.

14 With an estimated 1,000 people to attend
15 this year's event, we have decided to expand to a
16 full-fledged festival format featuring multiple
17 locations in the park with four hours of events
18 planned, ranging from an African drumming
19 presentation, a libation ceremony, a New
20 Orleans-style second line, and performances by the
21 Bronx Arts Ensemble.

22 This year's celebration is significant.
23 It will include the unveiling of design ideas for a
24 reimagined enslaved African burial ground. The
25 general public will view the work of three design

1
2 guide teams who are part of a collaborative of
3 architects, designers, and community members who have
4 spent the past two years developing ways to
5 respectfully honor the enslaved African legacy in the
6 park.

7 This reimagined design will memorialize
8 the people who lived, worked, and ultimately died on
9 the Bronx plantation that is now parkland.

10 Many New Yorkers have no idea that our
11 city was built on the backs of enslaved Black and
12 Indigenous people. At a time when our country is
13 erasing painful history out of convenience and fear,
14 our great city has the opportunity to elevate the
15 history and contributions of Black Americans instead
16 of hiding from the truth.

17 Bronx Arts Ensemble and Van Cortlandt
18 Park Alliance applaud the City Council's efforts to
19 support a policy to broaden awareness of Juneteenth
20 and honor the burial sites of enslaved African
21 Americans in our city.

We hope this is just the beginning of a
wave of financial support to carry out this important
work. Thank you.

1
2 HEATHER QUINLAN: Thank you. Good
3 afternoon, Dr. Williams and Members of the Committee.
4 My name is Heather Quinlan. I am a filmmaker,
5 historian, and Executive Director of the Northeast
6 Corridor Freedom Network, and here today to testify
7 in support of Intro 220, which was originally called
8 the Benjamin Prine Act.

9 Benjamin Prine, whom I have a photo of
10 right here, was born enslaved on Staten Island in the
11 late 1700s. He later became a well-known Staten
12 Islander whose obituary appeared in newspapers across
13 the country, from the New York Times to the Chicago
14 Tribune to the Iowa Gazette, when he died in 1900 at
15 more than 100 years old.

16 According to an obituary at the Elmira
17 Star Gazette, quote, "His stories of historical
18 events were the talk of Staten Island," end quote.

19 Benjamin Prine was buried at Cherry Lane
20 Cemetery, an African American burial ground seized in
21 1954 for unpaid taxes and paved over for commercial
development. The location of Mr. Prine's remains, as
well as those of the estimated hundreds buried there,
many of them babies and children, is unknown.

1
2 Over the last several years, researching
3 Cherry Lane for my documentary "American Graveyard",
4 I've learned how fragile these histories are. For
5 many African American families, burial grounds are
6 among the only surviving links to the past because so
7 many records were fragmented, lost, erased, or indeed
8 didn't exist in the first place.

9 Benjamin Prine's descendants, who live
10 less than a mile from where he was buried, had never
11 heard of him, even though members of their own family
12 had once served on the cemetery board, and they were
13 alive when the cemetery existed. This is what erasure
14 looks like.

15 This legislation matters because there
16 are still burial grounds across New York City that
17 remain unmarked, undocumented, and vulnerable to
18 being lost again.

19 This act gives us the opportunity not
20 only to identify these sites but to restore memory,
21 dignity, and historical continuity.

I have also submitted written testimony
for the record, including a 1908 municipal tax roll
identifying Cherry Lane as exempt, alongside a later

1
2 court judgment that effectively claimed no cemetery
3 existed there. Thank you.

4 CHAIRPERSON WILLIAMS: Thank you. We have
5 questions.

6 COUNCIL MEMBER JOSEPH: Earlier, I had
7 asked a question about Juneteenth and African burial
8 grounds being celebrated together, but not as a
9 separate celebration.

10 What's your thought on that?

11 HEATHER QUINLAN: I think that's a very
12 important thing to happen throughout the city. Ever
13 since 2021, when Van Cortlandt Park Alliance came to
14 the Bronx Arts Ensemble and asked us to partner in a
15 celebration of the lives of the people that they had
16 discovered there on the park land, it was very clear
17 that we needed to be a part of this initiative moving
18 forward.

19 Each year, our celebration has grown by
20 at least 100 to 200 people a year. So we have people
21 coming from all over the city, not just the Bronx. We
also get people who come from Westchester.

It's one of the most incredibly moving
things that the Bronx Arts Ensemble does all year
long. To experience it, particularly for myself as an

1
2 African American person, to have people come who— we
3 have a plaque at the burial ground—who come, they
4 have special moments there. They cry, they scream out
5 in joy, they dance. Every single emotion you can
6 imagine happens that day.

7 Our Juneteenth celebration just would not
8 be the same without actually connecting it to the
9 enslaved people who are right there. It takes on a
10 totally different meaning. And we celebrate them, and
11 we celebrate the lives and the work that they did
12 there in one of the largest parks in New York City;
13 there would be no space there without what they did
14 to create it.

15 So I do believe that it takes on a higher
16 elevated meaning when you put Juneteenth together
17 with the African burial grounds around the city.

18 COUNCIL MEMBER JOSEPH: Thank you.

19 Is there a marker around Cherry Lane, or
20 is anyone trying to preserve what's happening? Can
21 you give us an update?

JUDITH INSELL: That's a very good
question. Santander Bank, which is a tenant on the
property, took it upon themselves to fund a boulder,
plaque, and a memorial garden that they pay for. The

1
2 landlord does not want any other recognition. His
3 belief is we've given you a boulder, so that's it.

4 I would love to think of this as a case
5 study for how, if we do not get permission to be on
6 the actual property, which could take a long time to
7 do, and I believe this has been done in Bethesda, to
8 do a ground penetrating radar survey on the
9 perimeter. Because I actually think a lot of the
10 remains--the remains don't adhere to the boundaries,
11 right? So I do think that there would be remains
12 found on the streets and on the sidewalks that the
13 descendants, who I am here on behalf of as well,
14 would really love to have that kind of closure. And
15 so that is what we're looking for right now.

16 COUNCIL MEMBER JOSEPH: Maybe there's a
17 grant out there to help you with the GPR.

18 JUDITH INSELL: Yes, indeed. And, I
19 certainly-- I hope there is, because I think we do
20 have the okay from the Department of Transportation.
21 It's just a matter of getting someone out there to
really, actually do the work. That would be
fantastic. Yeah.

COUNCIL MEMBER JOSEPH: Thank you both.

1
2 CHAIRPERSON WILLIAMS: Final panel on
3 Zoom. Lucy, (INAUDIBLE), and Cheryl.

4 SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

5 (NO RESPONSE)

6 CHAIRPERSON WILLIAMS: The following
7 witnesses were also signed up to testify remotely.
8 I've read the list, and if any of you are online or
9 here in person, please raise your hand.

10 I just want to note that this concludes
11 our in-person portion of our public testimony, and we
12 will move to remote public testimony.

13 Again, if you're testifying remotely,
14 please listen for your name. I already called your
15 name, but once your name is called, a member of our
16 staff will unmute you. You may then start your
17 testimony once the Sergeant at Arms sets the clock
18 and cues you to begin.

19 So we can start with Cheryl.

20 SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

21 CHERYL WARFIELD: Good afternoon. Thank
22 you, Deputy Speaker, Dr. Williams, and Committee
23 Members, for hearing my testimony.

24 And thank you, City Council, for your
25 leadership regarding the fiscal year 2027 budget for

1
2 arts and culture. We are grateful for your support
3 and for your belief in what we do.

4 I am Cheryl Warfield, a professional
5 opera singer and Founder and Artistic Director of
6 MORE Opera, a community-based nonprofit vocal arts
7 organization blazing a trail in culturally responsive
8 musical programming and arts education in New York
9 City.

10 I testify today regarding Juneteenth, our
11 country's most recent federal holiday. It is truly an
12 American holiday, and it is for and about all of us.

13 My small-budget not-for-profit
14 organization makes a big impact in underserved and
15 under-resourced communities in the Bronx, Manhattan,
16 and, as of fiscal year 2026, in Queens.

17 We train members of the community, all
18 ages, backgrounds, and levels of musical training, to
19 participate in community choruses singing with our
20 professional company members.

21 Since 2022, we have celebrated Juneteenth
with concerts that are free and open to the general
public. Our concerts are vocal concerts with a
historical narrative focusing on the music and the
story behind Juneteenth for preservation purposes,

1
2 and we draw parallels to colonialism and other forms
3 of oppression to show how the themes of resilience
4 and strength and the desire for freedom are
5 universal.

6 This year, we will present ten Juneteenth
7 concerts throughout three boroughs.

8 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time expired.

9 CHERYL WARFIELD: Thank you very much. I
10 will submit the rest of my testimony.

11 CHAIRPERSON WILLIAMS: Thank you. The next
12 person is (INAUDIBLE)

13 SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

14 (NO RESPONSE)

15 (PAUSE)

16 CHAIRPERSON WILLIAMS: Okay, I believe
17 this concludes our hearing.

18 If anyone else present in the room who
19 has not had the opportunity to testify, but wishes to
20 do so, please raise your hand. Seeing no one else who
21 wishes to testify, I would like to note that members
of the public who are not able to testify can submit
written testimony to testimony@council.nyc.gov within
72 hours of this hearing.

Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries, 103
and International Relations

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Thank you so much to our Sergeant at
Arms. This hearing is adjourned. [GAVEL]

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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 no interest in the outcome of this matter.



Date May 21, 2026