



City of New York Parks & Recreation



**Hearing before the
New York City Council
Committee on Finance
Jointly with the
Committee on Parks & Recreation**

Fiscal Year 2013 Executive Budget

May 16, 2012

**Testimony by
Adrian Benepe, Commissioner**

INTRODUCTION

Good morning Chairs Recchia and Mark-Viverito and the members of the Finance and Parks Committees. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the Executive Budget for Fiscal Year 2013.

Since we last met two months ago to discuss the Preliminary Budget, not much has significantly changed. We continue to provide fantastic opportunities for play, like our recent Street Games Festival held on Saturday, April 28th, and provide for the future of the environment of New York City through our spring planting days. We fulfill our core mission to keep our parks clean in spite of a challenging budget climate, all of which is a credit to the tireless staff of the Parks Department and the robust efforts of our volunteers.

I was pleased to report during my Preliminary Budget testimony all that we have accomplished over the year and the projects that we are looking forward to in the upcoming year. In my testimony, I will share with you a few new exciting projects that have moved forward since I was last here and express the challenges we continue to face in Fiscal Year 2013.

FY 2013 BUDGET OVERVIEW

The Parks Fiscal Year 2013 Executive Budget is \$304.9 million, a reduction of approximately 2.6 percent from the Fiscal Year 2012 adopted budget. The biggest reduction to our budget will be to our personnel. Our total agency full-time equivalent headcount, which includes seasonal staff and Job Training Participants will be 4,596 in Fiscal Year 2013, a drop of 13.5 percent from Fiscal Year 2012.

Thanks to the leadership of the City Council, funds were restored in Fiscal Year 2012 to keep all of our pools open for the entirety of the pool swimming season. Unfortunately, unless the City Council restores the \$1.5 million needed to operate the pools, we will be once again be forced to

close four pools and shorten the pool season for all the pools by two weeks citywide. The pools that will be closed are Wagner Pool in Manhattan, Howard pool in Brooklyn, Fort Totten Pool in Queens, and Faber Pool in Staten Island. Our decision was based on our judgment of several factors, including attendance figures, proximity to other pools, access to public transit and the location of the pools relative to residential communities.

The combination of a persistent hiring freeze and attrition programs has severely reduced staffing at all levels throughout the agency. Since 2008, Parks has experienced a 25 percent decline in full time staff and a 60 percent decrease in Job Training Participants in the Parks Opportunity Program (POP). Last year, because of the efforts of the City Council and your restorations of \$2.9 million for the JTP program, \$2.5 million for seasonal workers and \$1 million for playground associates, we were able to stave off cuts to our staffing. Unfortunately, without the Council's restorations to this funding, we will have to reduce our staff. This year, thanks to the Council's Fiscal Year 2012 restoration, we were able to have 1,556 JTPs maintain our parks. However, beginning in July, if the Council doesn't provide at a minimum that same level of funding, our JTP number will drop to 887, which represents a decrease of 669 JTPs or 43percent. This would undoubtedly have an impact upon the level of service that New Yorkers have come to expect from the Department of Parks & Recreation.

OPERATIONS

Our operations are tied directly to our operating budget. Our reduced staffing, particularly in the titles that make up the core of the Parks Department workforce, will present a challenge as we enter the height of our season. With a reduced number of staff imminent, maintenance and cleaning frequency will have to be reduced. We have been able to, on the whole, maintain our high ratings. However, the one area that we see our acceptable numbers continually decreasing is in our litter ratings. These ratings have decreased 2% from last year and 11.3% from 2006. This is one area in which everyday New Yorkers can help us and make the most impact. If park users take responsibility for the waste they generate and remove their litter, we all would see a dramatic increase in the cleanliness of our parks. We are calling on all New Yorkers to help us keep our parks clean by cleaning up after yourself when you leave our parks, pools and beaches.

In an effort to reduce the impact of our shrinking budget on the public, we are working smarter and harder, and have increased efficiencies by introducing new technologies. During the Preliminary Budget hearing, I spoke of our Asset Management Park System (AMPS) which will manage and track our assets and work orders and is allowing our staff to become increasingly more efficient. Our operations have also become greener by implementing the plans and goals in our Sustainable Parks Plan as we strive to be a leader in sustainability.

The Sustainable Parks Plan laid out 12 goals, 41 milestones and 36 indicators to measure, improve and communicate sustainable practices at Parks. Already we have increased recycling, leaf composting, and communication between Capital and Operations, and expanded training opportunities. This year, the Sustainable Parks Task Force will focus on further integrating environmentally friendly practices into our operations while helping the agency meet the resource conservation goals laid out in PlaNYC. Being sustainable doesn't have to be as complicated as restoring a natural wetland system, it can be as simple as turning off your ignition when you make a brief stop, or promising to reuse a water bottle, or to take the stairs.

GEARING UP FOR THE SUMMER

We hired over 1,400 lifeguards last summer – a record-breaking number and a longstanding goal of the Parks Department. This allowed us to fully staff city beaches and pools and open more beaches than ever in recent times.

We are happy to be a little more than one week away from ushering in our 2012 beach season. We hope to see you and the millions of New Yorkers who enjoy our 14 miles of beaches this summer. The beaches officially open on Saturday, May 26th, but we are celebrating the coming summer season for a full week. The beach opening ceremony for Staten Island is scheduled for Wednesday, May 23rd at 11am; for Coney Island, on Thursday May 24th at 11am; Rockaway's beach opening will be on Friday, May 25th at 11am, and Orchard Beach in the Bronx is on Friday, May 25th at 12pm. We welcome you to join us at any and all of these events.

Street Games, one of our favorite warm weather kick off events, is now in its fifth year. It brings out thousands of kids and adults alike to learn (or relive) some of the classic street games from the 60's and 70's and reintroduce them to a new generation with a modern twist! Over 6,000 people attended Street Games this year held in Manhattan's Thomas Jefferson Park which featured standard favorites such as Double-Dutch, stickball, pogo sticks, hula hoops, live entertainment, arts & crafts, and new activities such as soccer, street hockey, and handball.

MillionTreesNYC UPDATE

On Saturday, April 28th, we were joined by our partners at the New York Restoration Project, NYC Service, our other sister agencies and more than 400 volunteers at Conference House Park in Staten Island planted 7,500 trees and 2,250 shrubs at the MillionTreesNYC Spring Planting Day. Other parks hosting planting events that day were: Clearview Park, Crocheron Park, and Powell's Cove in Queens; Wolfe's Pond Park in Staten Island; and Pelham Bay Park and Van Cortlandt Park in the Bronx. Over the course of the day, 20,000 trees were planted citywide.

I'm happy to report that we have exceeded our planting goal by 17 percent. As of last week we have planted **585,207** trees. The New York Restoration Project has also launched a homeowner tree giveaway program with the aim of inspiring more homeowners to increase our city's canopy by planting trees in their front or back yards. Thirty tree giveaway events have been scheduled for spring 2012 with the goal of providing over 5,000 trees to private property owners. This is the largest number of trees available during MillionTreesNYC seasonal giveaway events to date. NYRP and other non-profit organizations have leveraged individual and corporate donations to purchase and plant trees on other public lands including schoolyards, public housing campuses, libraries, community health centers, and senior centers.

To ensure these public trees are properly watered and cared for, the Parks Department and NYRP has partnered with community groups and block associations to oversee the care and stewardship of the newly planted trees. In 2009 we launched the Stewardship Corps which works with the city's botanical gardens and other partners to engage a broad cross-section of New Yorkers in citizen tree care. Since its pilot year in 2009, StewCorps offered over 700 free tree care workshops and trained over 7,000 people. In April 2012, we launched applications for our new StewCorps Mini-Grant program to provide funding to committed community groups dedicated toward organizing and strengthening tree stewardship efforts in their neighborhoods. The

Stewardship Corp has proudly received funding from the Mayor's Fund to support these efforts for the past three years.

PARTNERSHIPS FOR PARKS/OUTREACH

It's My Park Day is just around the corner on Saturday, May 19th. Partnerships for Parks, which is run together with City Parks Foundation, will be supporting 156 community-led volunteer projects and events at over 145 parks and green spaces throughout the five boroughs. Each It's My Park Day, thousands of New Yorkers come together to volunteer and celebrate their neighborhood parks and public spaces throughout the five boroughs. We invite New York City residents to join in local volunteer projects and free cultural events in their neighborhood parks. Registration is not required – simply find a local park that is hosting an It's My Park Day activity and show up on that day. It's My Park Day is a great opportunity to meet local park groups that need year-round help from caring neighbors.

It's My Park Day has become a signature event for Partnerships for Parks and it grows every year. We take great pride in seeing the number of community groups that come together for the love of their neighborhood park and we would not be able to do the work that we do without them. Our stewardship groups are the backbone of the parks system. The fall It's My Park Day had 178 groups with a total of 5,700 participants volunteer for 154 events in 138 of our parks and we are on track to exceed those number this weekend. I encourage you to stop by your neighborhood park, roll up your sleeves and help with the volunteer efforts across our city to beautify our parks.

It's a very simple formula- the parks that fare best and look the best are often those where citizens are involved with the life of the park, and half of our parks have one or more volunteer groups associated with them. In calendar year 2011, we have added 182 new organizations to our database of volunteer groups. Keep in mind that our volunteer groups range from schools to nonprofits to city agencies, as well as friends of parks groups and represent anyone that we have worked together with to support their park. Our volunteers organized 658 cleanups which represents a 5 percent increase in the number of events from last year. We depend on our partners even in the best of times and in tougher times their support to our park system is crucial.

RECREATION

Fitness equipment at NYC Parks recreation centers gets an inordinate amount of use which in the past has led to a high out-of-service rate. Recreation tackled this issue head on in FY12, and through a series of strategic adjustments, dramatically improved the way we maintain fitness equipment. For instance, the division reduced a 3-5 month turnaround time on broken equipment to 3-4 weeks by establishing new maintenance contracts and by tracking the life of the equipment and work orders on AMPS (Asset Management Performance System). In July 2011, 6% of fitness equipment in our recreation centers was out of service; today the total is less than 2%. Additionally, DCAS has registered Life Fitness and Precor equipment on requirement contracts which will translate into faster delivery and improve the division's ability to replace equipment.

Between January and June, 2011, Recreation purchased 73 pieces of cardio equipment and 21 pieces of strength equipment. Additionally, in FY12, an additional 125 cardio pieces and

32 strength pieces have been added to the division's inventory. Overall, we have added 251 pieces of new strength and cardio pieces in the last 16 months.

Walk NYC is a free, citywide initiative encouraging New Yorkers to get fit, stay fit, and engage in healthy activity—all while enjoying the outdoors of NYC Parks. With funding from Empire Blue Cross Blue Shield, this program provides qualified walking instructors to lead a program focused on stretching, form, and core muscle strength not only as a part of the walk, but also as a part of designated warm-ups and cool-downs.

For calendar year 2011, there were 16,750 visits and 1,410 walks offered at 25 sites throughout the five boroughs. Walk NYC instructors utilize the local community and parks, which provide a unique and natural environment for fitness walks. Walkers boasted of improved health, increased balance, improved endurance, and significant weight loss. Some walkers trimmed down one entire clothing size while others lost over 100 lbs.

We also continue to offer programs for New Yorkers of all abilities through our Adaptive Recreation programming.

In February 2012, we have introduced an adaptive swim program for people with disabilities at nine recreation centers throughout the city. The adaptive swim program offers aquatic exercise therapy to improve range of motion, mobility, muscle tone, coordination and strength. It also offers swim instruction that focuses on basic swimming and safety skills. To date we have had more than 100 people participate with disabilities that involve Multiple Sclerosis, Cerebral Palsy, spinal cord injuries and many other mobility limitations.

This winter, Parks also implemented a Saturday adaptive sports program for children with physical disabilities at Al Oerter Recreation Center in Queens. Children learn the basics of wheelchair basketball and track & field with an opportunity to participate in regional competition. Additionally, for the past 5 years we have partnered with the United States Paralympics (a division of the United States Olympic Committee) to offer adaptive sports programs for children and adults with physical disabilities. This month we will host the 3rd Annual Adaptive Sport Track & Field Open at Icahn Stadium on Randall's Island where we expect to serve more than 100 students with disabilities.

NATURAL RESOURCES GROUP

While we are serious about having fun, we are serious about protecting and restoring our natural environment (which we at Parks find to be fun). Sustainability drives the work of our Natural Resources Group with some positive developments for New York City's "wild kingdom". The hard work of the Natural Resources Group has paid off as our environment is the cleanest it's been in decades.

For over 25 years the Natural Resources Group has pursued science-based restoration of Parks' 10,000 acres of natural areas. Over the past year we have made significant strides in restoring forests and wetlands and studying our process, effectiveness, and impact.

We have made several advances that have gotten some notable attention. I am happy to share some of the Natural Resources Group's recent groundbreaking work with you. We are monitoring our ever changing environment in several ways. Firstly, NRG established dragonflies as bioindicators for rapidly assessing the health of wetlands and salamanders as indicators for

forest restoration. Secondly, we installed monitoring devices to measure salt marsh subsidence to help us plan for climate change and sea level rise. We completed the second year of an invasive plant management study along the Bronx River and monitored newly created oyster reefs at the mouth of the Bronx River. Great things are happening along the Bronx River. Not one, but two beavers have returned to the Bronx River. They're the first beavers to be spotted in the city in more than a century. NRG has continued plant conservation programs by collecting seeds from five uncommon plant species within New York City and are expanding native seed production, and successfully germinating (getting them to sprout from seeds or cuttings) difficult but valuable species—all programs that will strengthen our restoration work.

CONCLUSION

We are grateful to our partners and friends in the New York City Council. We realize that in this tough economy you have to make the same hard decisions that we do, but we all have the same goals: to provide clean and safe open space to our residents and visitors. We are proud of our world class parks, and with your continued support and continued restorations we can keep them that way.

I thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

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I represent: Park 5

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Name: ~~Adrian Benepe~~ Commissioner Adrian Benepe

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Date: May 16, 2012

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Name: Deputy Commissioner Larry Scott Blackman

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