



**Hearing before the New York City Council
Committee on Parks & Recreation jointly with the Committee on Finance
Fiscal Year 2021 Executive Budget
May 18, 2020**

Testimony By: Mitchell J. Silver, FAICP, Commissioner

Good afternoon, Chair Dromm, Chair Koo, members of the Finance and Parks Committees, and other members of the Council. I am Mitchell Silver, Commissioner of the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, and I am joined here “virtually” today by a number of our senior staff, including First Deputy Commissioner Liam Kavanagh, Deputy Commissioner for Urban Park Service and Public Programs Margaret Nelson, and Matt Drury, our Director of Government Relations.

To begin, I would like to start off with a message of thanks. Thank you to our Parkies on the frontlines for their tremendous work in the field every day of this horrific crisis. This includes the dedicated and hard-working staff of our Urban Park Service, Maintenance and Operations, Public Programs and Forestry divisions making our green spaces safe and clean for parkgoers. I would also like to thank our executive staff, who work long hours, coordinating with the Mayor’s Office and other agencies to carry out immensely complex operational and logistical projects, at a scale that would have been unimaginable just months ago. I would also like to thank our staff tele-working diligently from home, helping to flatten the curve, and maintaining productivity while balancing the needs of their children, parents, partners, and roommates. This ordeal has affected every New Yorker, as we are all contending with the tragic impacts of the pandemic, and our agency staff is no exception. Even while dealing with personal loss and physical and emotional stress, every single member of our agency has stepped up when the City needed them most, and so to them, I wish to extend my appreciation and thanks.

We are learning countless lessons through this crisis, but one thing has become increasingly clear, if there was ever any doubt -- our City parks and open spaces are critical infrastructure that is absolutely vital to New Yorkers. While primarily remaining indoors is important to help stop the spread of the coronavirus and get the city through this crisis, many have come to further appreciate the physical and mental health benefits that come from being able to get some fresh air or exercise. Parks have become



sanctuaries of sanity during this time. We continue to stress to our parkgoers to please wear face coverings when you can and to also maintain the proper physical distancing from those who are not part of your household. Our staff has worked extraordinarily hard to make our properties safe and to preserve the exceptional benefits people have come to expect from our parks system.

Our agency has been remarkably resilient during this crisis, as we have reassigned staff and repurposed some of our properties in order to optimize the agency's ability to assist in beating back this virus. Our Parks Enforcement Patrol officers and our Urban Park Rangers have been working as part of a multiagency effort to enforce proper social distancing protocols. Additionally, we have re-assigned staff to help further ensure that park goers can relax and enjoy our open spaces in a safe manner. The creation of our Parks Social Distance Ambassadors program, made possible largely through the redeployment of Public Programs staff, has been key to keeping park goers safe. These field staff, in addition to educating visitors on social distancing protocol, have also been distributing face coverings to New Yorkers in need. We have distributed close to 200,000 face coverings through roving engagement and over 545,000 face coverings through 143 tabling events carried out over 9 days in 77 parks across the five boroughs.

We have also repurposed many of our properties and facilities, as well. Seven of our recreation centers now are Food Distribution Sites, with our staff serving as site managers and running the day to day operations with the help of the National Guard and other City agencies. To date, the City's Food Distribution Sites, using TLC-certified for-hire drivers, have delivered over 9 million meals to our most vulnerable New Yorkers. Central Park and Flushing Meadows Corona Park have been sites for emergency field hospitals, providing more capacity for a healthcare system that was heavily taxed in the early weeks of the pandemic. This past Thursday, the Mayor announced the expansion of COVID testing sites, including two that will take place at Parks recreation centers. Beyond the strict confines of our parks, we are working with our fellow agencies to identify streets that can be closed to vehicular traffic and made fully available to pedestrians, and as of today, the City has opened over 30 miles of streets and protected bike lanes, creating more room for New Yorkers to spread out safely. To help mitigate the impact of the necessary closures of playgrounds and other active recreational amenities, City streets both inside and adjacent to our parks were some of the initial streets designated for New Yorkers to enjoy this



opportunity, and we look forward to working with our fellow agencies as that effort continues. And, for those who are unable to get out to our parks, even for a brief visit, we have created Parks@Home--which features virtual content on our website and social platforms serving the young and the young-at-heart, including live park tours, meditation, fitness, art classes, and other fun activities.

Even though I can tell you about the several ways that this agency has been able to remain strong throughout this crisis, there was no way to avoid many difficult decisions. Indeed, many more tough choices will need to be made going forward. While this public health crisis continues, it would be unsafe to permit the large public programs and gatherings in parks that people have grown to love and to expect, especially in warmer weather. We have had to cancel hundreds of events over these past few months, and unfortunately, we are prepared to cancel more, as necessary, to keep New Yorkers safe. The harsh reality of the ongoing and impending economic crisis has also presented the City with sobering choices regarding funding choices. As the Mayor asserted when he released the budget, the lack of clear fiscal support from state and federal sources will make it difficult to maintain normal levels of spending, leading to the need for Citywide cuts and savings across agencies. In many cases, the proposed budgetary savings in the Mayor's Fiscal Year 2021 Executive Budget will impact programs that would have been difficult, if not impossible, to carry out during a pandemic. We must all recognize that this challenging economic environment will require significant sacrifices.

Despite the tough outlook for the city's immediate economic future, do not underestimate the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation. Under this Administration, we have been consistently creative and innovative, and we will continue to do so. As long as New Yorkers want to enjoy their parks and open spaces, our agency will find a way to make sure they can have fun, healthy, and happy experiences, because that's what we do best. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today and for your dedication to providing great parks and open spaces for all New Yorkers. We look forward to continuing to work alongside you in helping make our park system the best it can be. We would now be happy to answer any questions that you may have.