



PARKS AND OPEN SPACE PARTNERS – NYC

**REPORT ON COVID-19 IMPACT ON PUBLIC SPACES
MAY 01, 2020**

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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has made it resoundingly clear that parks and open spaces are essential to the physical and mental health of our communities. In New York City, over 25 nonprofits have official agreements with the government to provide maintenance, operations, programs and community services for city-owned land. These organizations, which support 50% of public parks and open spaces in the city, rely primarily on private support.¹

As a result of the COVID-19 crisis, these organizations – which raise more than 85 percent of their annual operating budgets through private donations and earned revenue – have reported an anticipated decrease in revenue of up to 60 percent for 2020, which will translate into at least **\$37 million fewer dollars invested** into New York City’s public spaces. This includes approximately **40,000 lost hours of maintenance** and **110,000 lost hours of horticultural care city wide**, threatening core program service delivery to parks and open spaces at a time when New Yorkers need green space more than ever before. Groups expect an unprecedented number of people spending time in parks in the summer of 2020 which – along with deferred seasonal maintenance as a result of this crisis – will put even more stress on the already overwhelmed park workers.

This perfect storm of decreased staff capacity and increased use of public space will ultimately harm the overall condition of parks. A coalition of parks advocacy groups came together in April 2020, referring to itself as “Parks and Open Space Partners - NYC,” to help address the impacts of this crisis. This report shares the results of a survey of 20 of those organizations to examine the loss of operating revenue on staff positions, maintenance, programming – and the overall condition and usability of New York City’s parks. It is clear that, while public funds are critical, support from private philanthropy to sustain core operations will also be essential.

¹ New Yorkers for Parks Analysis of New York City Parks Data, April 3, 2020.

Overview

Often overlooked as core infrastructure, public parks play a vital role in physical and mental health. In the midst of COVID-19’s devastating impact on our city, public parks – fundamentally democratic and accessible public resources – have remained available to New Yorkers. Access to parks and open spaces is an important public health and equity issue – city parks are the primary interaction with nature for roughly half of all New Yorkers.

New York City relies on the support of more than 25 not-for-profit organizations that operate independently from the City and raise more than 85% of their annual operating budgets through private donations and earned revenue. The survey of these organizations, whose results are detailed in this report, reveals that there are dark clouds on the horizon. As a result of the COVID-19 crisis, these groups anticipate dramatic decreases in revenue, both in private philanthropy and in revenue-generating events. The lost revenues will directly result in a decrease in care and public programming in parks across the city – impacts which will be directly felt by park users, further exacerbate existing park equity issues, and threaten long-term consequences on the city’s resilience to climate change in the future.

In 2019, more than 250 organizations organized by New Yorkers for Parks came together under the “Play Fair Coalition,” and delivered a critical increase of \$43 million in the city budget for parks workers. Yet, parks are not categorized as an essential service when the city plans its budgets, and is therefore in danger each year of cuts, which are particularly concerning given the economic toll of the pandemic. There is a proposed reduction of \$61.3 million to the Parks Department’s budget in Fiscal Year 2021 – which represents 3% of PEG across all city agencies. These cuts, paired with the dramatic decrease in funds available for private not-for-profit organizations, will have a profound impact on the care and visitor experience of our city’s parks.

Public investment in the proper care of our parks has been insufficient even prior to the current grim financial forecast. Nonprofit groups have emerged to sustain our essential park infrastructure over the past three decades, increasing financial resources available for park management and the creation of new open spaces. The proposed cuts to NYC Parks through the Mayor’s PEG program and FY21 Executive Budget would leave the agency with staffing levels below those of 1977-78, which was the height of NYC’s fiscal crisis – and the time when NYC Parks were at their most vulnerable, unkempt, and dangerous.



The fiscal crisis of the 1970s left parks in severely deteriorated conditions.

Photos: Riverside Park, left; Highbridge Park, right.

Groups Surveyed

The following organizations were surveyed for this report:

1. Alliance for Flushing Meadows Parks Corona Park
2. Bronx River Alliance
3. City Parks Foundation
4. Freshkills Park Alliance
5. The Friends of Governors Island
6. Friends of the High Line
7. Gowanus Canal Conservancy
8. Hudson River Park Friends
9. Hunters Point Parks Conservancy
10. Madison Square Park Conservancy
11. Natural Areas Conservancy
12. New Yorkers for Parks
13. New York Restoration Project
14. North Brooklyn Parks Alliance
15. Prospect Park Alliance
16. Randall’s Island Park Alliance
17. Riverside Park Conservancy
18. The Trust for Public Land
19. Van Cortlandt Park Alliance
20. Washington Square Park Conservancy

The Role and Impact of Parks and Open Space Partner Groups in New York City

Originally formed from a grassroots response to the fiscal crisis in the 1970s, today there are over 25 nonprofit organizations which work to bridge gaps in capacity to care for parks, gardens, and other open spaces. These groups provide crucial support for 15,000 acres of parkland and green space, accounting for 50 percent of the city’s total public green space; they employ over 500 full-time staff and hundreds of seasonal workers; invest private funds of over \$150 million annually in public land; and engage more than 100,000 volunteers annually to help care for parks and gardens.² There are also nearly 600 other formal and informal collectives with modest (or no) budgets, many in under-resourced communities, that rely on thousands more volunteer hours to support and program local parks, gardens, playgrounds, and open spaces. Working in conjunction with these organizations are advocacy groups, which have a broader focus on the city’s entire network of parks and open space, and advocate for more public support of these spaces.



New York City’s patchwork of parks and community gardens

² New Yorkers for Parks Analysis of New York City Parks Data, April 3, 2020.

Not-for-profit organizations have invested immense private resources to improve New York City’s parks and open spaces. The results have been significant; only a few examples highlighted below.

Before



After



The Prospect Park Parade Ground is one of the city's most active recreational sports hubs with 40 acres of courts and playing fields. It suffered years of severe neglect and deterioration, and was restored by Prospect Park Alliance in 2004. This is an essential recreational resource for the Brooklyn community, particularly the Flatbush community, which has a high prevalence of diabetes and other health issues.

Before



After



The Alliance for Flushing Meadows Corona Park has successfully restored lawns and continuously performs regular maintenance to sustain the improvements.

Before



Sherman Creek was essentially a dumping ground until the 1990s, when New York Restoration Project revitalized the area into a waterfront habitat on the Harlem River.

After



Before



After



Riverside Park Conservancy transformed a vacant space along the Henry Hudson Parkway into a pollinator meadow.

Before



After



The Gowanus Canal has seen vast improvements as the Gowanus Canal Conservancy creates gardens in formerly unutilized space.

Survey Results

In April 2020, we surveyed these groups to assess the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on these organizations. We asked them to project layoffs, maintenance and programming shortcomings, and other critical gaps in operations in the second two quarters of 2020, March 15 to September 15.

Survey results indicate:

Direct Impact on Parks and Open Spaces

- ❖ A combination of staff cuts and social distancing measures will result in 39,668 lost hours of maintenance and 109,384 lost hours of horticultural care citywide.
- ❖ Loss of thousands of volunteers who would have contributed an estimated 259,000 additional hours working on various projects;
- ❖ Approximately 541,700 trees, shrubs, perennials, and annuals will not be planted in 2020 as a result of this diminished capacity;
 - 3,400 trees (often called the “lungs of the city”) will not be pruned;
 - over 150 acres of lawns will not be mowed, seeded, or given regular maintenance at the time of year when these spaces experience high traffic from park visitors on a daily basis.

Outlook on City Budget

- ❖ 90% of the organizations believe that parks, gardens, and open spaces will severely deteriorate as a result of this funding crisis.
- ❖ 79% believe that past physical improvements in their park, garden, or open space will be lost completely if adequate maintenance funding – from city or private sources – is not delivered.
- ❖ 85% of the groups surveyed were **not** confident that the City will provide adequate funding for parks, gardens, and open spaces in the FY2021.

Revenue Losses

- ❖ The organizations are preparing for an average of 32% revenue loss just this year; the hardest-hit organization in the study is bracing to lose 68% of its income in 2020.
- ❖ As a result, parks and public spaces in New York City will see a reduction of more than \$37 million in direct, privately-sourced investment from these organizations, which is instrumental to their everyday functionality.

Public Programming and Challenges as Summer Approaches

Open space groups anticipate a surge in the number of park visitors in the summer months as social distancing protocols are relaxed. This is especially true among young people who have lost summer camps, volunteer programs, and internship opportunities cut from the city’s budget. These groups are doubly challenged: they must brace for the maintenance demand of increased park use while also preparing for the usual increase in summer upkeep, all with fewer financial resources.

Additionally, open space groups will be unable to hire most of the temporary positions necessary to cover critical seasonal needs. The decision to eliminate the city’s Summer Youth Employment Program leaves 247 paid positions for local youth unfilled, a disservice to the city’s youth and the maintenance and operational support of our public spaces. Some conservancies have already seen an uptick in garbage buildup with the first reductions in staff capacity. And aside from accumulation of garbage, a lack of regular maintenance creates risks to public safety as unsafe conditions like trip hazards, broken pathways and staircases, fallen tree limbs, and other immediate problems are not quickly addressed.

Further, social distancing protocol has necessitated the cancellation of 3,826 public events in our parks and open spaces as of April 2020, leaving an estimated 1,643,000 individuals without the programming they rely on to stay engaged with their communities.

Impact on Natural Areas and Climate Resilience

One third of New York City parkland – 10,000 acres – are natural areas including forests, wetlands, and grasslands. These areas provide invaluable benefits to New York City, such as coastal storm protection, reduction of extreme summer temperatures, and improvements to both air and water quality. New York City’s natural areas also provide habitat for thousands of species of plants and animals, with more than 350 species of birds calling the city home. There are over 300 miles of trails available for people to explore the city’s natural areas. In the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, there has been unprecedented use of these spaces because they offer ideal conditions for social distancing. However, groups surveyed indicated that the lack of staff to patrol and manage these areas means that the additional volume of people will be damaging to natural areas, and can increase safety concerns for park visitors.

Furthermore, New York City forests cover 7,300 acres, and are already approaching a “tipping point,” as the health and diversity of the tree species experience rapid decline which requires immediate restoration and management.

In the absence of funding to continue ongoing restoration initiatives, groups surveyed anticipate severe (possibly irreversible) impact to these systems. Natural areas are of crucial importance, but without adequate resources, the condition of these spaces will severely decline. The consequence of inaction may unravel years of diligent restoration work and climate change mitigation measures and reverse these group’s investment and diligent management of these 10,000 natural acres of safe recreation space.

Impact on Individual Parks, Gardens, and Open Spaces

Each organization was asked to provide the top three concerns for the particular space(s) in their purview for the coming year. Nearly all participants expressed concerns regarding ability to deliver basic care to park facilities and plantings in the immediate future, with several groups commenting on specific projects, improvements, and initiatives that will be delayed as a result of COVID-19. Organizations expressed concern that impending capacity cuts due to COVID-19 will further exacerbate existing park equity issues and inhibit their ongoing work on park equity initiatives.

Some of the most significant impacts identified by groups include:

- ❖ **Seasonal maintenance** (Alliance for Flushing Meadows Parks Corona Park, Bronx River Alliance, Friends of Governors Island, New York Restoration Project)
- ❖ **Horticultural care** (Alliance for Flushing Meadows Parks Corona Park, Bronx River Alliance, Friends of Governors Island, Friends of the High Line, Hudson River Park Friends, Hunters Point Parks Conservancy, Prospect Park Alliance, Randall’s Island Park Alliance, Riverside Park Conservancy, Washington Square Park Conservancy)
- ❖ **Free public programs and education** (Alliance for Flushing Meadows Parks Corona Park, Bronx River Alliance, City Parks Foundation, Friends of the High Line, Hudson River Park Friends, Hunters Point Parks Conservancy, North Brooklyn Parks Alliance, Prospect Park Alliance, Randall’s Island Park Alliance, Riverside Park Conservancy, Van Cortlandt Park Alliance, Washington Square Park Conservancy)
- ❖ **Thousands of lost volunteer hours to improve public spaces** (Bronx River Alliance, City Parks Foundation, Friends of Governors Island, Hudson River Park Friends, Madison Square Park Conservancy, New Yorkers for Parks, Riverside Park Conservancy, Washington Square Park Conservancy)
- ❖ **Cleanups of public spaces and on shoreline** (Bronx River Alliance, Van Cortlandt Park Alliance)
- ❖ **Mowing** (Bronx River Alliance, Madison Square Park Conservancy)
- ❖ **Public safety measures** (Bronx River Alliance, Prospect Park Alliance)
- ❖ **Standard park maintenance and new improvement projects** (Friends of the High Line, Hunters Point Parks Conservancy, Madison Square Park Conservancy, Natural Areas Conservancy, North Brooklyn Parks Alliance, Prospect Park Alliance, Randall’s Island Park Alliance, Van Cortlandt Park Alliance, Trust for Public Land)
- ❖ **Training and support for small parks and open space conservancies and friends groups around the city** (City Parks Foundation, Natural Areas Conservancy, New York Restoration Project)
- ❖ **Advocacy for additional funds for parks and open spaces** (City Parks Foundation, New Yorkers For Parks, Trust for Public Land)

Comments from Parks and Open Space Organizations

“Once an abandoned dumping ground, the Bronx River has seen a tremendous revitalization thanks to a unique partnership between government and communities. \$200M+ has been invested in park and ecological restoration projects over the past 20 years. Together, we can weather the storm of COVID, but we cannot turn our backs on the progress we have made.”

Maggie Greenfield, Executive Director, Bronx River Alliance

"Many of the neighborhoods that have been hardest hit by COVID are those with the least amount of green space, and which rely on volunteer support to build community around those public spaces. Privately funded conservancies help ease the burden on NYC Parks so that the agency can focus its resources in areas without the benefit of such organizations. At the same time, those volunteers – many of whom are elderly and vulnerable – will need extra support, training, and PPE from our Partnerships for Parks program to ensure that they are able to work safely in their communities."

Heather Lubov, Executive Director, City Parks Foundation

“Freshkills is a park that is only just becoming: the site is closed to the public for now, except for the public programming that we offer. The project is big and complicated, and needs every bit of momentum that comes from public enthusiasm – but if we can't sustain that support, I worry for the future of this icon of resilience and reclamation.”

Eloise Hirsh, Park Administrator, Freshkills Park

“The Friends' financial support and volunteer programs provide critical care for Governors Island's park and open spaces. While we do not know what the months ahead hold, we know that our existence is part of the lifeblood of our City and that our parks must continue to survive – and thrive – for the future.”

Merritt Birnbaum, Executive Director, Friends of Governors Island

“This crisis has illuminated the importance of parks and public spaces in our communities. This is about large parks but also about the interstitial green spaces outside our front doors: the street trees, gardens, and waterfronts that create a habitable city. It is more important than ever to fund the stewardship of these spaces and plan for neighborhood-scale resiliency that can protect each and every one of us.”

Andrea Parker, Executive Director, Gowanus Canal Conservancy

“Our parks are providing what New Yorkers desperately need right now: nature, fresh air, physical and mental wellness resources and some semblance of normalcy in these completely abnormal times. We must continue to support them to guarantee these benefits during this crisis.”

Connie Fishman, Executive Director, Hudson River Park Friends

“New Yorkers need access to parks now more than ever. This includes safe access to our forests and wetlands, which offer opportunities for stress reduction, and space for social distancing.”

Sarah Charlop-Powers, Executive Director, Natural Areas Conservancy

“The COVID-19 epidemic has made our advocacy work more urgent than ever. Even as New Yorkers flock to parks in search of refuge, potential budget cuts threaten the ability of parks partner organizations and nonprofits to keep doing the essential work of maintaining open spaces and keeping them safe. These groups have a deep understanding of what the communities they serve need now and going into the future. With COVID-19 racking the City, we can’t afford to lose them.”

Paul Gottsegen, Board Chair and Acting Executive Director, New Yorkers for Parks

“Parks workers are essential and their bravery should be praised. Our staff are keeping NYC’s open spaces maintained and safe but it is getting harder with increased use, fewer staff and decreased financial support. NYC needs parks now more than ever, but it’s unrealistic to think we can keep up this pace without help.”

Lynn Kelly, Executive Director, New York Restoration Project

“At a time when New Yorkers rely on their parks as essential to their mental and physical health, it is imperative that those spaces are maintained to the quality standard that our city deserves.”

Katie Denny Horowitz, Executive Director, North Brooklyn Parks Alliance

“In these unprecedented times, our parks are one of the few places open to our community. Prospect Park Alliance needs to do its part to help keep up with increased usage in the face of significant challenges. It is critical for all New Yorkers to have access to safe, clean parks, today and in the challenging times ahead.”

Sue Donoghue, President, Prospect Park Alliance

“As Park stewards during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Randall’s Island Park Alliance is taking measures to protect the health of park patrons. We understand that green open space is more important than ever and are working to ensure the Park stays open for all to enjoy.”

Aimee Boden, President, Randall’s Island Park Alliance

“Parks are more important than ever, and we need to make sure that the groups that support them are able to survive this crisis.”

Dan Garodnick, President, Riverside Park Conservancy

“COVID-19’s closure of community playgrounds at schools has exposed the unfair and uneven access to quality parks across the city. We’re concerned that families in disadvantaged neighborhoods don’t have access to open space.”

Carter Strickland, New York State Director, The Trust for Public Land

Conclusion

Parks, gardens, and open space provide innumerable health benefits to individuals and communities, and will play a critical role in our city’s collective recovery – bringing fresh air, recreation, creativity, and solace to so many New Yorkers.

The NYC Parks Department is already facing budget cuts in FY21 (with the non-baselined Parks Equity Initiative being particularly vulnerable). All parks and public spaces – in particular those in under-resourced communities without the benefit of privately-funded conservancies – will be especially vulnerable to these cuts. Those with private conservancies and friends groups will be called upon to do more to fill in the gaps, at a moment when their revenues are sharply declining.

New York City’s parks, gardens, and open spaces will need a combination of public and private support to ensure that they remain accessible, safe, and healthy spaces for all New Yorkers – both during the COVID-19 crisis, and into the future. The coalition of organizations surveyed for this study hope to convey the need to prioritize parks as essential infrastructure that deserve support from public and private sources, both for the resilience of the city and for the health of all of its inhabitants. **When we take care of our parks and open spaces, they take care of us.**