

**Testimony for NYC Council Committee on Parks and Recreation
Emily Nobel Maxwell, Cities Program Director, The Nature Conservancy in New York
October 22, 2020**

My name is Emily Nobel Maxwell and I am the director of The Nature Conservancy's Cities Program in New York. The Nature Conservancy is the world's largest conservation organization, and our more than 600 scientists and 3500 team members located in all 50 U.S. states and 70 countries work to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends. We have 90,000 members across New York State, 35,000 of whom reside in New York City. The Nature Conservancy's New York City Program promotes nature and environmental solutions to enhance the quality of life of all New Yorkers. In New York City, we are convening the NYC Urban Forest Task Force, advancing the science and policy of green roofs, supporting NYC Housing Authority (NYCHA) to conduct a tree inventory on their property, and conducting a comprehensive analysis of the state of NYC's urban forest that will be released early next year. Statewide, we work with government and non-government partners to tackle climate change, protect land and water, sustainably provide food and water, and build healthy cities.

In many ways, the title of this hearing itself, "Improving the Equity of Green Space throughout the City in Light of the Covid Epidemic," marks a tremendous step forward. I want to commend and to thank Councilmember Koo and this Committee for considering this broad and forward-looking approach. Green space, and potential for more of it, exist both within and beyond the boundaries of NYC parkland, and it is wise to approach it as such. Green space is crucial for the health and safety of New Yorkers and for the livability and economic recovery of NYC. The COVID-19 pandemic has put a spotlight on crucial societal issues that compel us to think about green space equity. As the world warms and weather patterns become more unpredictable, and as NYC faces [significant increases in the number and intensity of heat waves](#) in the coming decades, the role of parks and green spaces in mitigating the urban heat island effect will become even more critical. Simply put, our lives depend on nature, and City residents who have access to more nature and green space in their neighborhood will suffer less in a climate-changing world. However, these many functional benefits cannot be fully realized through the simple existence of parks and green spaces; sufficient commitment to their consistent and long-term operations, maintenance, and programming is required.

Before talking about the diversity of green spaces in NYC and opportunities to increase equity in relation to COVID-19 and other critical social issues and environmental issues, I must underscore that we are starting off with inequitable resources for parks and green spaces. Despite the laudable efforts of this committee and hundreds of advocacy groups across the city, NYC Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) is chronically underfunded. While managing, caring for and programming 14% of NYC's land, in a good year, [DPR receives less than one percent of NYC's total budget](#). The extreme cuts DPR experienced under the COVID-19 constrained budget are shocking considering both the crucial role parks play in providing safe and healthy respites for New Yorkers during this trying time and the tiny percentage of the NYC budget for which DPR's budget accounts. Disinvesting from parks makes no sense in the short or the long term given the role they can play in NYC's recovery – from safe recreational spaces to economic engines.

[Recent research](#) led by the New School with partners including The Nature Conservancy underscores the need for parks and open spaces. There is overwhelming and consistent public recognition of the many benefits of parks and open space. Eighty-eight percent of respondents reported that they currently consider parks and open space to be either "extremely important" or "very important" for their mental health. Eighty percent of respondents

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reported that parks and open space were either “extremely important” or “very important” for their physical health. Mental health was also identified as more important than physical health, highlighting the value of urban parks and open spaces for alleviating stress, anxiety and other mental health conditions, which are all the more critical in the face of COVID-19. The majority of respondents said they had some access to an urban park or open space, but the “perceived access,” or ease with which people feel they can reach desired urban parks or open space sites, differed based on location. We found that residents in Queens and Brooklyn overall have lower perceived park and open space access, as well as receive less of their desired features from these spaces. This is particularly concerning as studies show that neighborhoods in Queens disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 are also at higher risk for and incidence of conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, exposure to extreme heat, poor air quality, and heart failure.

New York City’s urban forest, composed of all the trees across New York City, is another core component of NYC’s green space. Our urban forest cools the air, offers shady respite from heat, sequesters carbon, increases energy efficiency, and contributes to New Yorkers’ health and wellbeing. Through our own analysis, and a collaborative partnership with NYC Environmental Justice Alliance, [Just Nature NYC](#), we have documented many inequities in our urban forest and therefore inequities in the important benefits trees provide New Yorkers. Our urban forest includes individual street trees, large stands of natural forested areas and everything in between. But the extent of the urban forest across the city as a whole and at different geographic scales is uneven. As of 2017, urban tree canopy (or tree cover), varies significantly across boroughs (from about 18% cover in Brooklyn to about 31% cover in Staten Island). City Council Districts range in cover from about 10% canopy to over 40% canopy. Investments both to manage and protect existing canopy, including the funding of the [Forest Management Framework](#), and to increase canopy in areas with less, are crucial to providing more equitable access to the benefits of trees, from shade and cooling to mental health, all even more important in the COVID-19 era, particularly in the most heat vulnerable and frontline communities.

As we consider additional opportunities for green space, we must also look to NYC’s rooftops. Of NYC’s 1 million buildings that are home to about 40,000 acres of rooftop space (that’s about equivalent to a whole borough), [our research](#) reveals that as of 2016, there were only about 730 green roofs (totaling approximately 60 acres). Further, these are largely concentrated in a few areas of the city and not serving those communities most affected by COVID-19 and heat stress, who might benefit most directly from additional green space and its benefits. While not all roofs may be appropriate for green roofs, we have a long way to go to take advantage of this opportunity. We encourage the City to advance green roofs on its own properties, including and especially NYC schools. It’s crucial that the City advance its implementation of [Local Laws 92 & 94](#) to advance green roofs, which may serve as a good job generator. It is also important to enact rulemaking for the improved [Green Roof Tax Abatement](#) to unlock that incentive to help expand green roof installation and stimulate NYC’s recovery, and that equity is attended to as the intent of these laws is implemented.

There are a few other areas of opportunity which bear consideration. NYCHA’s open spaces often serve as some of the only open space in neighborhoods that lack these amenities. There is a huge opportunity to improve, further green, protect, and enhance access to NYCHA’s open spaces, and we encourage the Committee to take a hard look at that opportunity. Further, NYC’s community gardens serve as vital green spaces, but lack sufficient protection and expansion opportunities which should be pursued. And lastly, while we must of course invest in our public sector,

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NYC's green spaces would not be what they are without a [vital civic sector](#) composed of non-profits and volunteers. The groups that steward, tend and advocate green spaces must be recognized, uplifted and resourced at the same time as we sufficiently invest in the public sector.

The protection, maintenance, stewardship, programming, access, and expansion of green space in NYC present tremendous opportunities to advance equity and drive NYC's COVID-19 recovery. In doing so, we can create a more racially and economically just city. Nature-based jobs can play both a crucial role in providing safe and healthy employment for New Yorkers and in enhancing green spaces to improve quality of life during and after the pandemic. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony. The Nature Conservancy is pleased to help advance this important discussion.

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