

**Testimony of Riverside Park Conservancy
Before the City Council Budget Hearing
City Hall
March 12, 2021**

Riverside Park Conservancy was founded in 1986 by New Yorkers who were concerned that the New York City Parks Department was not doing enough to support their local park. These volunteers began what has been a decades-long collective grassroots effort to maintain and restore Riverside Park.

Today, 35 years later, the Conservancy has grown to be able to support full time gardeners, to support a robust volunteer program all year round, and to provide free public programming for the community. Funded entirely by private dollars, our organization supports the care of six miles, nearly four hundred acres, of parkland – which includes not only Riverside Park, but also Riverside Park South, Sakura Park, West Harlem Piers Park, and Fort Washington Park.

Unfortunately, all these decades later, the Parks Department’s resources and staff continue to be stretched thin over five boroughs, and parks around the City have suffered decades of degradation due to this chronic lack of fair funding. The impact of this neglect is often felt even harder in communities of color and low income areas, and aggravates existing issues of park equity.

At a time when New Yorkers are relying on their parks like never before – during a global pandemic - the NYC Parks Department budget was cut by \$84 million, the second largest budget cut of any City agency in 2020. This led to 1,700 fewer maintenance and operations seasonal staff around the City, which meant a significant reduction in work hours and maintenance visits to parks and playgrounds. The combination of reduced staff capacity and record-breaking traffic in parks culminated in the worst cleanliness conditions on record.

Riverside Park welcomes millions of visitors every year, and in 2020 there was a clear surge in park use that staff levels were simply unable to keep up with. The \$84 million cut was felt in every corner of the Park. Conservancy staff struggled to meet their responsibilities as they worked to fill gaps in maintenance that seasonal staff would usually fill.

Our parks are essential public infrastructure, and should be funded as such. For several years we have proudly been advocating as part of New Yorkers for Parks’ Play Fair coalition for increased funding for the Parks Department – and we consider this year’s platform as more urgent than ever. New Yorkers

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will continue relying on our public green spaces as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, and we ask that the NYC Council reverse last year's painful cuts, and restore the necessary funds to the budget as an immediate and necessary step toward adequately caring for our City's parks.

By properly maintaining our parks, we can help to ensure that the City's ecology - and our communities - are resilient and healthy, during this challenging moment and for years to come.