



**New York City Council**

**Oversight Hearing: The State of the City's Tree Canopy – Committee on Parks and Recreation  
June 13, 2023**

**Testimony By: Emily Walker, Natural Areas Conservancy, Senior Manager of External Affairs**

My name is Emily Walker, and I am the Senior Manager of External Affairs of the Natural Areas Conservancy. Thank you to the Chair and the members of the Committee on Parks and Recreation for the opportunity to speak today.

We thank the Council for proposing Intros 1065 and 1066. As a proud member of the leadership committee of the Forest for All NYC Coalition, the Natural Areas Conservancy is in support of efforts to expand the canopy coverage of our urban forest to 30% of New York City's land by 2035.

We support the intent of Intro 1065, and offer the following points of feedback for consideration on the bill:

Urgent protection is needed for our existing urban canopy, particularly our forested natural areas. Of the 7 million trees currently in NYC, approximately 5 million are located within forested natural areas. It is worth noting that these 5 million trees store almost 70% of the city's carbon, providing an outsized level of value relative to other portions of our urban canopy. We appreciate that the bill explicitly calls out the need to "protect, care for, and expand the city's urban forest canopy", and ask that the Council and the Administration properly allocate the funds necessary to care for the existing canopy of our forested natural areas, which have received an annual average of 0.7% of the NYC Parks expense budget for care, despite comprising 24% of the city's parkland portfolio. Funding for our natural forested areas has been stagnant for years, and we run the very real risk of losing swaths of our natural forested areas if we continue this level of disinvestment.

We believe the success of the Urban Forest Plan rests on the ability of the public to have high quality access to the urban forest itself. The Mayor recently allocated funding in the FY24 Executive Budget to improve and promote the use of 300 miles of nature trails in our city's parks. This funding presents a very real opportunity to bring more New Yorkers into our invaluable forested natural areas. While we celebrate this new funding for trails, it is critically important that the FY24 budget include funding for parks and the urban forest, including \$3.5 million to continue the work of caring for our forested natural areas, and for the city to baseline this essential funding in future budget cycles.

We believe this plan should not be the exclusive responsibility of NYC Parks. The agency has vital expertise and guidance to share with the city about how to properly expand and care for our urban forest, which will be a critical part of the proposed plan. However only 53% of NYC's urban canopy falls under the jurisdiction of NYC Parks, with 47% of the remaining canopy falling on land belonging to other city agencies or private property owners. We recommend that the Urban Forest Plan be completed in tandem between another Mayoral agency (such as the Department of City Planning or the Mayor's Office of Climate and Environmental Justice) and NYC Parks. We



believe an interagency partnership on this issue would help elevate its importance, and the success of its implementation, particularly as it relates to the expansion of our urban canopy onto private property.

The Urban Forest Plan should be intentional about including considerations of environmental justice, climate change, and workforce development. We have long known that the current gaps in our urban canopy exist in communities citywide that have been subject to historic redlining and discrimination. These neighborhoods remain our most vulnerable with respect to climate change, and stand to benefit the most from a targeted expansion of our urban forest. We also believe that the expansion of the urban forest represents an opportunity to create reliable and quality green jobs for New Yorkers.

We believe the proposed timeline of the Urban Forest Plan being submitted by July 31, 2024 is aggressive, and recommend that an interim status report be submitted by this date, with the final plan being delivered by June, 2025. We also encourage the Council to support the goals outlined in the Forest For All NYC Urban Forest Agenda, and to include a target date of achieving our urban canopy goals by 2035. A timeline will help to ensure that the City moves forward with intention and clarity.

This legislation is an exciting opportunity to contemplate the entire life cycle of our urban forest and the multitude of benefits to New Yorkers.

Thank you again for your leadership and for the opportunity to testify today.

