



**New York City Council  
FY25 Executive Budget Hearing: Parks and Recreation  
Committee on Finance jointly with the Committee on Parks and Recreation  
May 20, 2024**

**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 at the Natural Areas Conservancy (NAC). Thank you to Chair Brannan and Chair Krishnan and the members of the Committees on Finance and Parks for the opportunity to submit comments today about the Executive Fiscal Year 2025 (FY25) Budget for NYC Parks.

Last month's FY25 Executive Budget release was tied to the City's launch of an ambitious Climate Budgeting initiative. In the Mayor's announcement, he stressed that NYC's budget must work toward reducing emissions, enhancing air quality, increasing heat and flood resiliency, elevating environmental justice, and creating green jobs. We applaud the City for taking this important step to ensure that we are making climate-smart budgeting decisions. But the substance of the FY25 Executive Budget for NYC Parks paints a different picture about how the city is prioritizing the environment.

Despite the fact that the FY25 Executive Budget is the largest ever proposed in NYC history at nearly \$112 billion, the \$582 million allocation for NYC Parks represents the lowest proportion of funding for the agency in over five years. Without action from City Hall to restore the budget for Parks by June 30, we will lose approximately 80% of the natural areas workforce who actively manage and care for our forests and wetlands. We will lose 50 Urban Park Rangers, whose programming helps educate New Yorkers about the natural wonders that surround us. We will again lose the chance to create dozens of new green jobs to make our trails system more safe and accessible, despite the fact that this funding was named as a PlaNYC 2023 priority by the Mayor.

Research consistently shows the benefits that our natural areas provide to New Yorkers, all of which align with the Mayor's Climate Budgeting goals:

- Our forested natural areas contain 5 million of the city's 7 million trees, which absorb a staggering 70% of the city's carbon emissions.
- Our forests absorb as much stormwater as \$580 million worth of new green infrastructure each year.
- Our forests can be up to 13 degrees cooler than our streetscapes during extreme heat events.
- In a social assessment done by the US Forest Service, they found that NYC's natural areas are the only place where over 50% of New Yorkers go to experience nature.

The benefits these spaces provide can only exist if we are actively funding the care, maintenance, and programming of our natural areas. If the City really means to combat the



effects of climate change, the answer couldn't be clearer — invest in Parks and natural areas. The need to create green jobs and care for our local ecosystems is not just needed in the future, it is urgently needed now. Restoring the budget for NYC Parks will not only ensure that New Yorkers have access to parks that are clean, safe, beautiful, and resilient, but will also create hundreds of green jobs. This budget cycle, we urge the City Council and the Mayor to be true climate leaders and push forward their promising Climate Budgeting initiative by increasing funding for NYC Parks for the benefit of all New Yorkers.

Thank you.

### **NAC's Priorities for the FY25 NYC Parks Budget**

- **The budget for NYC Parks must be restored, and we call for an end to the hiring freeze placed on the agency.** For too long, our Parks colleagues have been asked to do more with less. This is particularly problematic in the realm of natural areas management, which often takes many years of targeted care and restoration.
- **We ask that the Administration restore the \$2.4M in baselined Trails Formalization funding,** which was announced as a signature priority of the Administration on Earth Day 2023. This funding would establish a citywide team of 26 to improve our 300-mile network of nature trails. This work supports access to 10,000 acres of forested natural areas, and helps protect the health of these spaces by reducing forest fragmentation and ecosystem disturbance, and helping to manage invasive species.
- **We ask that the \$2.5M added by the City Council for FY24 to support the continuation of 51 critical Natural Areas management positions be renewed and baselined.** The benefits provided by our forested natural areas are many, including cleaning our air, absorbing stormwater, and storing nearly 70% of NYC's carbon. These natural areas are critical public infrastructure, and we call on the City to appropriately invest in the workforce that performs the important work of caring for these spaces.
- **We ask that the 50 Urban Park Ranger positions set to expire at the end of June be renewed and baselined.** The Rangers provide public education and interpretive programming about our local ecosystems, perform vital wildlife management, and provide enforcement services that make our natural areas safer and more accessible to more New Yorkers. Similar to recreation centers and fitness facilities, programming in our natural areas serves to activate these park spaces and welcome New Yorkers.
- **We ask the Administration and the Council to ensure that there are resources in place to support the successful creation of the NYC Urban Forest Plan as required by Local Law 148.** We believe that in order to create the most successful plan possible, the City must commit funding for a robust, multi-agency planning process, including sufficient funding for a rigorous community engagement effort that will lead to the creation of the plan by the July 31, 2025 deadline.