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Testimony to the Parks Committee of the New York City Council on the Mayor's Preliminary 2020 FY Parks Budget

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Bronx Council for Environmental Quality is an all-volunteer borough wide organization that seeks a sustainable environmental policy for all Bronx neighborhoods. We are proud to be a member of the Play Fair for Parks Coalition but my remarks today are intended to bring attention to capital spending and flawed fiscal policy and to direct your attention to the many worthy reforms advocated by the Center for Urban Future "A New Leaf" report and by Charles McKinney's "We Can Fix It" proposal.

In order to play a constructive role in the coming negotiations, the Parks Committee should address and face up to this central fact: there is a disconnect between the fiscal plan for capital parks spending, as reported to this committee, and the actual condition of parks as reported and lived by our citizens. Recognizing the poor conditions of existing parks at the neighborhood level gives this committee its best leverage for amending the preliminary budget and holding it, and the Mayor accountable to what council members want to achieve in their district, and more importantly, to the promises made to constituents. We urge you to place those needs and outcomes first, and adjust the budget to suit them; don't let the budget do your managing for you.

The perils of managing by budget are evident in the Mayor's preliminary capital budget. Key constituencies and neighborhoods are not represented. The borough of the Bronx, to use the example that is close to home for me, BCEQ, and 1.4 million people,, is represented by 3 capital projects--St. Mary's Park, Orchard Beach, and Bronx River Park--out of 39 in the 3 year fiscal cycle and has a share in a two others that are citywide--acquisition and equipment/repair. The budgeted amount for capital spending exclusively dedicated to the borough is 52% of Brooklyn and 38% of Manhattan. Though this amount may be based on population or proportional share of the budget as a whole it does not represent the actual needs and goals of the Parks department in the borough as measured by Community Board district needs statements, Community Board capital priorities, and perhaps most importantly, community activists and watchdogs.

The recent 25 anniversary of Bronx Parks Speak Up gave lifelong parks advocates the chance to take stock of successes, failures, and still-to-be determined parks projects. The Bronx Coalition of Parks and Green Spaces solicited reports from every community district and the three shared parks, Van Cortlandt, Pelham, and Bronx River. Out of the 15 districts, Speak Up recorded 8 successes, 2 broken promises, and 5 "not quites." The failure to act proactively to acquire parkland based on community needs and priorities is evident in the case of the Bronx Community District 4 Pier 5 acquisition by EDC, which removed precious potential capital investment and parkland acquisition from a scandalously underparked Bronx neighborhood

because the City Council did not make the ULRUP subject to alienation legislative requirements or recognize the significance of an informal park designation.

Bringing capital projects to completion is hampered by a tiny budget allocation for management and personnel within the Capital division itself. I recommend amending and adding staff to this crucial item in the budget and to add personnel at the operational level that will actually contribute to capital project completion. Be targeted: budget according to what you want to achieve. The Committee should also expand funding for the trail-blazing Community Parks Initiative and Parks without Borders, important measures through which this body can exercise independence and influence over capital spending and management. Lastly, lean more heavily on inter-agency funding, as so many of the documented problems and capital projects on DPR property involve water runoff, erosion, and underlying infrastructure.

New York City has a government because it owns, operates, and acquires parkland. Don't let our government shrink or shirk this core function. Do everything you can to stay in the capital and parkland acquisition business. In an era of "Open Space" requirements and so called "win-win" trade-offs, smart capital funding and policy is needed more than ever.