

**Testimony of State Senator Daniel Squadron to New York City Council Committee on
Parks and Recreation: Equity in Parks
April 23, 2014**

My name is Daniel Squadron, and I represent the 26th District in the New York State Senate. My district includes the Manhattan neighborhoods of Tribeca, Battery Park City, the Lower East Side, Chinatown, the Financial District, Little Italy, SoHo, Greenwich Village and the East Village and the Brooklyn neighborhoods of Greenpoint, Williamsburg, Vinegar Hill, DUMBO, Fulton Ferry, Brooklyn Heights, Cobble Hill, Carroll Gardens and Gowanus. Thank you for the opportunity to testify at this hearing regarding equity in parks funding.

This is a debate that is long overdue, and I was pleased to propose a Neighborhood Parks Alliance that has helped to move this debate forward. Solving today's parks funding reality -- which relies too heavily on member items, does not leverage philanthropic donations for the system as a whole, and is, at its core, woefully insufficient -- is critical for parks equity.

As this conversation moves forward, we can agree that there's been a great deal of disagreement. At the very least I hope there is consensus around the following five principles:

- 1. All neighborhoods deserve good parks; nicer parks cannot be reserved for wealthier neighborhoods.*
- 2. There needs to be a stronger, more urgent push for public parks funding.*
- 3. Outside support must be more equitably distributed, and should be encouraged.*
- 4. Community engagement strategies and best practices should be shared.*
- 5. The parks system, including recreation centers, pools, and other facilities, is a single unified network and should be strengthened.*

1. All neighborhoods deserve good parks; nicer parks cannot be reserved for wealthier neighborhoods.

It is generally true that parks with well-funded conservancies in affluent neighborhoods have more amenities, better security, and are better maintained than parks in neighborhoods whose residents cannot afford to pay for upkeep of their local park -- the neighborhoods that need green space the most. In a city as wealthy as New York, it is absurd that parks are allowed to deteriorate in neighborhoods because those neighborhoods cannot afford to pay more for their upkeep. It is a tragedy of the commons when our public spaces are allowed to fall into disrepair, not because the park is not valued or needed, but because it is used to its fullest capacity and the system fails to give it the required attention.

Some say that the only solution is to turn away private support and allow our marquee parks to deteriorate. But that is a false choice. These are common spaces shared by entire communities; private citizens should not be required to fund them.

But that is the system we have today: a two tiered system in which affluent neighborhoods with resources have nice parks while parks in less wealthy communities deteriorate. It's not that we should allow our marquee parks to fall apart; we must ensure they stay strong.

My Neighborhood Parks Alliance would create linkages between affluent conservancies and needy parks, forging a system that can begin to alter this dynamic.

2. There needs to be a stronger, more urgent push for public parks funding.

Those of us in elected office and in advocacy roles cannot lose sight of our responsibility to push for more parks funding, even when many of the loudest voices enjoy parks that are not suffering the consequences of cuts. No doubt many of you were here when I testified before this committee's budget hearing last month to say that the City's budget allocation for parks is woefully inadequate. If there is one thing we can all agree on, it is that.

At that hearing, I discussed that a Neighborhood Parks Alliance would dramatically change the mishmash way that parks are currently funded by creating linkages between communities with the greatest wealth and those communities that are underfunded.

I find it disheartening that, in 2001, there was greater outcry about a Parks Department budget that is identical as a share of the City's budget compared to today. The biggest difference between then and now is the increase in dollars that generous conservancies spend to maintain and improve a small number of fortunate parks in affluent neighborhoods.

The lack of capital budget for New York City's Parks Department is, of course, a major source of the problem. Its absence requires the department to rely on a patchwork medley of funding sources, including member items from elected officials, and of course, philanthropic donations.

A Neighborhood Parks Alliance would not erase disparities in parks funding overnight, or even in a year, but it can and should cause us to dramatically rethink the funding model for such a large public good. As I've said, I believe a NPA would change the game for parks funding. The success of conservancies has inadvertently contributed to the funding problem. Because we know that conservancies will raise the funds to keep our major parks in a state of good repair, the City does not dedicate the funds necessary to maintain its parks. Instead, the polished jewels sparkle while around them, the system falls into disrepair.

In addition, a Neighborhood Parks Alliance would, itself, make a big difference for parks who need it. Some have said that between \$10 million and \$15 million annually to share among the smaller conservancies is pointless, but when you look at the scale of neighborhood conservancies around the city, it can be meaningful. For comparison, the City Parks Foundation's citywide program, Partnership for Parks, had contributions well less than \$3 million in 2012.

The Van Cortland Park Conservancy's entire budget is around \$200,000. That's the third largest park in the city. New Yorkers For Parks has proposed spending \$2 million for 50 full-time

workers to staff playgrounds with comfort stations and \$1.5 million for 25 skilled full-time gardeners to help maintain midsized neighborhood parks. A Neighborhood Parks Alliance could pay for that.

In other words, a Neighborhood Parks Alliance can lead to a greater push for increased city funding and more funding for those that most need it.

3. Outside support must be more equitably distributed, and should be encouraged.

Assemblymember Brian Kavanagh and I introduced the Neighborhood Parks Alliance in the Legislature last year. At its core, the proposal is simple: A contributing park would commit a portion of its conservancy's budget to a member park in need. Those parks would become members by establishing their own conservancy group and receiving commitments from the Parks Department and local Council Members to at least maintain current government funding levels.

At this point, let's take a moment to consider what conservancies are. There are those who have claimed that conservancies are private charities which would be "tithed" in an unprecedented way by my proposal. That is simply not true. Conservancies are special organizations, having unique relationships with their partner park, and contractual relationships with the City. They cannot be confused with fully independent non-profits, supporting a private cause. The largest among them, including the Central Park Conservancy, Friends of the High Line, and the Prospect Park Alliance, provide all or significant portions of the partner park's operating expenses and are responsible for the day-to-day upkeep of their respective parks.

This relationship is one reason the claim that somehow donations to conservancies will dry up if the conservancies are required to participate in the system more broadly is false. Conservancies have been successful because people with significant resources are committed to preventing their parks from falling into disrepair and becoming blighted. It is not credible that adding conditions to the conservancies' contractual relationships with their respective parks will mean that, all of a sudden, the supporters of these parks will cease to feel the urgent need to prevent them from falling apart. In fact, the opposite could very well turn out to be true: if money is well spent and making a difference for those who most need it, as well as for the conservancy itself, that will provide a powerful additional incentive for new donors to give.

Of course, if the shared resources are spent poorly, politically, or opaquely, or become bogged down in bureaucratic red tape, that would be damaging to the conservancy and the park in need. I absolutely agree that must be avoided.

I will come back to the nature of the city-conservancy relationship later.

4. Community engagement strategies and best practices should be shared.

Central Park has taken a positive step in this direction recently, with its decision to send staff members to regularly visit five parks around the city to help with training and turf management. This is exactly the type of critical institutional knowledge that large, well-funded parks have. Central Park's decision to do this is commendable. Five parks around the city is a step in the right direction. To put this into perspective: there are more than 1,700 parks, playgrounds, and

recreational facilities across the five boroughs, though not all of them require services of this type.

There is no question that more must be done, but it is not Central Park's responsibility alone to share its institutional knowledge. The other large, well-funded conservancies also have a shared responsibility to follow Central Park's lead. And, it would be great to go beyond turf management and staff training, to include community engagement strategies, development, and other facets of improving a park.

In an ideal world, arrangements like this would be an ongoing, formalized part of a conservancy's agreement with the city. It should cost next to nothing to share information.

Again, it matters that the money and time is spent well. Poorly spent resources serve little purpose. I want to say it again: we should continue to encourage this philanthropic activity, whether it is gifts of money, time, or expertise. All are urgently needed.

5. The parks system, including recreation centers, pools, and other facilities, is a single unified network and should be strengthened.

The final point is that it is the City's responsibility to ensure greater equity through its public budget, but also through the terms of its public-private partnerships and other contractual agreements. Conservancies have a role in parks equity precisely because they serve parks that are part of a broader public network, and because they are not independent not-for-profits, but enjoy unique contracts with the city. There are privately held, privately funded, privately controlled parks in the City, and those parks are not part of this conversation. The conservancies that are part of the Neighborhood Parks Alliance are in public-private partnerships with the City's Parks Department.

Much ink has been spilled about the radical notion that conservancies have an obligation to the broader network. I would argue the contrary is true: it is, in fact, both regular and common for strings to be attached to the relationships that groups enter into with the City. The City has passed laws that require private-sector workers in City projects to be paid a certain wage. When the City asks for providers for healthcare, social services or Universal Pre-K, there are an endless number of requirements, including on service areas and those served. Business Improvement Districts operate under significant regulation, including requiring city approval for their assessments and City Council approval of their boundaries.

At its core, this idea is in that exact same vein. The City has an obligation to consider its broader values and goals as it pursues partnerships with conservancies. The role of the conservancy in its partner park is an important factor, but must not be the only one the City considers. As this hearing highlights, there is also a glaring equity crisis in our city's parks. Kids and families who most need great open space are least likely to have it in their neighborhood.

Everyone who has a role in City parks, starting with the elected officials and policymakers, but also including conservancies, advocates and philanthropists, must be asked to be part of solving that equity crisis.