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**Testimony of State Senator Daniel Squadron to New York City Council Committee on
Parks and Recreation on the Fiscal 2015 Preliminary Budget
March 27, 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 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 on parks funding.

Let me begin by saying that the conversation today is incomplete. It focuses on only one piece of the overall spending on our City's parks. This budget does not include the allocation of the millions of dollars that conservancies will raise and spend in parks around the City this year. Nor does it include the individual allotments and grants that community members lobby elected officials to spend from their so-called discretionary funds.

Introduction 154, sponsored by Council Members Lander and Levine, would bring increased openness and transparency to parks funding by requiring the Parks Commissioner to identify each source of funding for parks maintenance and capital projects, among other things.

Today's patchwork model for funding our city's parks, which are as vital to our civic infrastructure as oxygen is to our lungs, is wholly and completely inadequate for three reasons: underfunding by the City; lack of a dedicated capital budget; and the unintended consequences of conservancies.

For New Yorkers who are fortunate enough to live near one of our marquee parks—such as Central Park, Prospect Park, or Brooklyn Bridge Park in my district—it's probably not obvious that the Parks budget is inadequate. Those parks are doing better than ever, and it would be easy to believe that the Parks budget has increased based on these parks alone. But a visit to St. Mary's Park in Mott Haven, or Flushing Meadows Park, or Sara Roosevelt Park in my district exposes the vast divide in Parks upkeep around our city.

In 1986, the Parks Department represented .86 percent of the city's overall spending. During the 2001 election season, parks advocates organized a major campaign to push for one percent of the city's budget to be dedicated to parks. We never got there and the campaign dissipated. Today, the Parks Department receives a paltry .52 percent of the city's \$73.7 billion budget. That percentage has been stagnant for years.



The fact is that because our marquee parks are doing so well, the momentum for doing something about the lack of funding for other parks around the city dried up. Fourteen years ago there was greater outcry about a Parks budget that is identical as a fraction of the city's budget to what it is 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.

Until every park, playground, and plaza in the five boroughs is maintained to a state of good repair, this budget will continue to be inadequate.

The fact that the Parks Department has no discretionary capital budget of its own is a gaping hole in the funding structure. Without a capital program, Parks is left to grovel for member items and philanthropic donations to meet what should be considered basic needs. Instead of a system-wide evaluation, individual elected officials and philanthropists are left to make disconnected decisions about their neighborhood or their parks. New Yorkers for Parks has said the lack of capital budget creates inefficiencies, and I could not agree more.

In order to create more equitable funding within parks and change the current budget dynamic, I have put forward a proposal to create a Neighborhood Parks Alliance that would form partnerships between well-financed conservancies and parks that are most in need. A contributing park would commit a portion of its conservancy's budget to a member park, defined as City parks rated as unacceptable in the prior two years. 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.

A Neighborhood Parks Alliance certainly would not supplant the need for additional City and State support for parks. Those of us with budgetary responsibilities at the City and State must never forget that.

In fact, I believe a NPA would change the game for parks funding. The success of conservancies has inadvertently contributed to the problem. Let me be clear: conservancies have arisen to fill a gap in public funding of our parks, and it is true that they do tremendously good work.

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. This year, we have finally turned the conversation toward the role of conservancies, and that is a good thing. Private donations have become an integral part of financing our parks. We should continue to encourage these philanthropic donations.

The fact that we are having an active discussion about the role of conservancies means we are making progress. But this conversation must actually lead to two things that will fundamentally change the game for parks all across the city: a greater connection between all the parks in the system and more funding. This is a goal we all share.

We are one city. We all want and need great parks. We need a budget that will create access to great parks for all New Yorkers and remedy the vast disparity between the jewels in our parks system and those in desperate need of repair. A Neighborhood Parks Alliance cannot erase those disparities overnight, or even in a year, but it will cause us to dramatically rethink the funding for

such a large public good. Its creation is an important step in reducing a major source of inequality in our city.

Again, I thank you very much for the opportunity to testify this afternoon.