PARK EQUITY PLAN
for NEW YORK CITY

THE TRUST FOR PUBLIC LAND

PUT PARKS IN NYC WHERE THEY MATTER MOST
New York City has been hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic, job losses, and the associated widening of longstanding inequities, with so many New Yorkers suffering the effects of the economic crisis and others discovering they can live and work outside of the city. Now is the moment to reinvest in improving quality of life for all—residents who stuck through the pandemic, workers and businesses we want to return, new strivers, and the tourists who will stay in our hotels, eat at our restaurants, and attend our shows, preserving our economy along with millions of jobs.

Recovery starts with our most visible and public infrastructure: parks. Great cities have great parks that give residents space to exercise, play, socialize, and stay cool during hot summers. Innovative green spaces revitalize and connect neighborhoods and attract visitors who sustain our tourism industry. And by investing in parks, we can leverage federal funding and create much-needed construction and maintenance jobs.

The Trust for Public Land is calling on our elected leaders and candidates for office to commit to a targeted expansion of the park system to give all New Yorkers access to high-quality outdoor space. Today, New York City’s park system lags behind other cities in terms of acres per person, park amenities, and the equitable distribution of open space, as shown by The Trust for Public Land’s ParkScore® index.

But with a strong mayoral commitment, New York City can lead with parks to come back better than ever. By identifying new locations for public parkland—such as asphalt-covered schoolyards, underused outdoor space in public housing campuses, and roads and other infrastructure that can be repurposed—New York City could put every resident within a 10-minute walk of a park. And by “park,” we do not mean any meager open space, but one that becomes the pride of the community for its abundant nature, recreational opportunities, and smart design.

Here are three steps to improve New York City and its park system:

1. **Achieve 100 percent of residents living within a 10-minute walk of a park**

   New Yorkers may think of our city as a best-in-class place to live, work, play, and visit. And yet, when it comes to park access, Boston and San Francisco have a 100 percent of their residents living within a 10-minute walk of open space, outperforming the Big Apple. With 99 percent access, New York City is almost in that top tier, and now is the time to close the gap for 75,000 New Yorkers who still do not enjoy the benefits of a park within 10 minutes of where they live.
Let’s get this done. By strategically targeting the creation of 70 new parks in the Bronx, Queens, South Brooklyn, and Staten Island—most in neighborhoods that have suffered from a prolonged history of environmental injustices—New York City can get to 100 percent park access. Doing so would provide all residents the opportunity for the many health and wellness benefits associated with spending time outdoors, from reduced stress and lowered blood pressure to increased fitness and better sleep. And improving access to parks will also make our city more resilient, both for the impending climate crisis and the health crises to come.

In the summer of 2020, COVID-19 forced the closure of playgrounds, ball courts, and other specialized open spaces, meaning that more than 1.1 million New Yorkers lost park access just when they needed it most. Smart planning now will prevent the loss of park access in the future.

We recognize that in a city as densely developed as New York, it will be challenging to identify space for 70 new parks. But the city has creatively repurposed abandoned railways and dilapidated piers in wealthy neighborhoods in Manhattan and along the East River waterfront in Brooklyn and Queens, and should apply that same out-of-the-box thinking for high-need communities throughout the five boroughs.

Transform asphalt schoolyards into 100 new vibrant green community playgrounds open to the community

New York City’s park system averages only 2.1 playgrounds per 10,000 people, a ratio that lags behind 68 of the 100 most populous cities. Moreover, too many students spend recess on asphalt schoolyards that look more like parking lots than playgrounds (and some of these spaces are, in fact, used for parking). Students at these schools are deprived of a place for safe outdoor learning and exercise and are subject to severe heat and sun exposure. The City has long recognized this problem and, more than a decade ago, committed to rehabilitating 290 schoolyards and opening them to the public during non-school hours. But it has fallen short of this goal.
The good news is that we have a proven model: a public-private partnership between The Trust for Public Land and the New York City Department of Education that has successfully converted over 200 asphalt properties into vibrant green schoolyards, available to the entire community after school and on weekends. By committing to renovating 100 more schoolyards that will be open to the public, New York City can close its playground gap while creating jobs and rehabilitating neighborhoods.

**3 Close the park equity gap in high-need, underserved neighborhoods**

New York City’s legacy park system of numerous small parks — many not much more than a sitting area with a few benches — is neither spacious nor robust enough to meet the needs of the present population. In fact, New York City has fewer acres of green space per person than almost any other major U.S. city, the result of park construction not keeping pace with residential growth. Moreover, our most crowded parks are not equitably distributed. The Trust for Public Land’s research finds that in New York City:

- communities of color have 33.5 percent less park space per person within a 10-minute walk compared to white communities, and
- low-income communities have 21.2 percent less park space per person within a 10-minute walk compared to high-income communities.

This inequity has real consequences, from park overcrowding to making it difficult for residents to find cooling shade on hot days. Smaller parks also have fewer features than larger parks, and so it’s no surprise that New York City falls behind other large cities in terms of park amenities.
If the past year has shown us anything, it is that marginalized communities in New York City have suffered far more during the pandemic than their more affluent neighbors. Many low- and middle-income residents are essential workers who have put their lives at risk by keeping the city afloat: operating the transit system, delivering food, collecting garbage, and responding to 911 calls. Unlike wealthy New Yorkers who can decamp to weekend houses to avoid the strictures imposed by COVID-19, many residents rely on local parks to exercise, socialize, or simply clear their heads.

Over the next four years, the City should build new parks in those communities that fall short of open space standards and have high park needs, as demonstrated by public health statistics, the Heat Vulnerability Index, and other socio-economic indices such as New York City’s Environmental Justice map. The City can and should add open streets that are big enough to accommodate park-like amenities; open more green schoolyards to the public after school hours; rehabilitate the New York City Housing Authority’s open spaces to provide them with well-maintained amenities; and creatively repurpose street ends, traffic islands, rail infrastructure, and waterfront areas. Building The QueensWay, for example, would turn a vacant, abandoned former rail right-of-way that is owned by the City into a new 47-acre, 3.5-mile linear park in Central Queens, giving park-deprived communities like Ozone Park, Woodhaven, and Rego Park an exciting new park destination.

How we pay for equitable parks

These improvements will require an increase in capital and operational spending. But such an investment will pay back the city many times over in immediate and long-term jobs as well as health care savings, revitalized communities and businesses, new tax revenue, reductions in extreme heat and stormwater, and greater resiliency. New York City can also stretch its budget by building faster, more economically, and smarter; we need to reform a capital delivery culture where park projects are notoriously over budget and take too long.

We are calling for:

- Faster and more efficient park construction coupled with an increase in capital funding for parks of $1 billion over four years, which can be from:
  - $400 million in additional federal funding;
  - $100 million in additional state funding;
  - $150 million in new city funding for parks;
  - $100 million in other city agency funding that can help parks;
  - $50 million in funding from the health industry;
  - $100 million in time-value of money and process savings from process streamlining;
  - $100 million in efficiency savings through procurement reform and design-build.
- An increase in the parks baseline operating budget to 1 percent of the city budget, up from 0.6 percent currently, so that existing and new parks are better staffed, maintained, and programmed.

Now is the time

For New York to make a full and robust recovery, we need to build those public spaces that show we believe in our city and in equity for all. A mayoral commitment to provide close-to-home parkland for every New Yorker would acknowledge the fact that parks are critical public health infrastructure for everyone.

For nearly 50 years, The Trust for Public Land, the nation’s leading conservation organization, has protected land and created parks in more than 5,000 locations across the United States. We are committed to ensuring that all communities can reap the health, social, economic, and environmental benefits of parks, and we work hand-in-hand with local and state governments to realize that goal.
Our methodology was to measure the total park area within a 10-minute walk of compact census block groups of around 1,200 people, for neighborhoods of color (defined as the quintile of census block groups with the highest concentrations of residents self-identifying as non-white), majority-white neighborhoods (the quintile of census block groups with the highest concentration of residents identifying as white), low-income neighborhoods (top quintile of census block groups with the highest concentration of households where the median income is less than 75 percent of the metropolitan area Median Household Income (MHI)), and high-income neighborhoods (top quintile of census block groups with the highest concentration of households where the median income is greater than 125 percent of the MHI). Our findings are the median neighborhood of color has access to 28.8 acres of parkland per 1,000 people within a 10 minute walk, compared to 44.8 acres per 1,000 people within walking distance of the median majority-white neighborhood. Similarly, we found the median low-income neighborhood has access to 35.3 acres of parkland per 1,000 people within a 10-minute walk, compared to 44.8 acres per 1,000 people within walking distance of the typical high income neighborhood.

The New York City Department of Parks and Recreation has current capital budget of $4.3 billion in Fiscal 2020-2024 (City and Non-City funds) is about five percent of the City's total $85.5 billion Preliminary Capital Commitment Plan for Fiscal 2020-2024. E.g., from such programs as the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) and the carve-out for urban programs under the Outdoor Recreation Legacy Leadership Program (ORLP), the HUD/EPA/DOT Sustainable Communities Fund, and various estuary and ecological rehabilitation programs. There are also proposals for a one-time, $500 million investment in local parks as proposed in the Parks, Jobs, and Equity Act of 2021. New York City's population is about 2.5 percent of the U.S.; over half the states have a smaller population than New York City.

E.g., from such programs as the New York State Environmental Protection Fund ($300 million per year), stateside allocations under the LWCF, green infrastructure grants under the state Clean Water Revolving Fund, and stateside allocations under the federal Transportation Alternatives Program. New York City’s population is 43 percent of New York State’s population.

Together with other capital funding, this can provide the match to leverage state and federal funds.

E.g., green infrastructure funds from the New York City Department of Environmental Protection for projects that manage stormwater.

Spending for proactive health measures such as infrastructure that increases physical activity can satisfy requirements for IRS community benefit agreements, Affordable Care Act community health needs assessments, and NYSDOH community service plans.

E.g., adopting best practices from other agencies and private partners as well as project delivery through public private partnerships, which can undertake projects at half the time and with 20-40 percent cost savings. Currently, New York City pays a premium on capital projects because of project and payment delays.

Many New York City agencies recently obtained authority to use design-build procurements in which services are bundled services in one contract, which shifts risks of delay from the City to contractors, eliminate years of red tape, and can save 20 percent of total project costs.
The Trust for Public Land creates parks and protects land for people, ensuring healthy, livable communities for generations to come.

PHOTOS: COVER-BOTTOM, ANDREW FEDERMAN

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