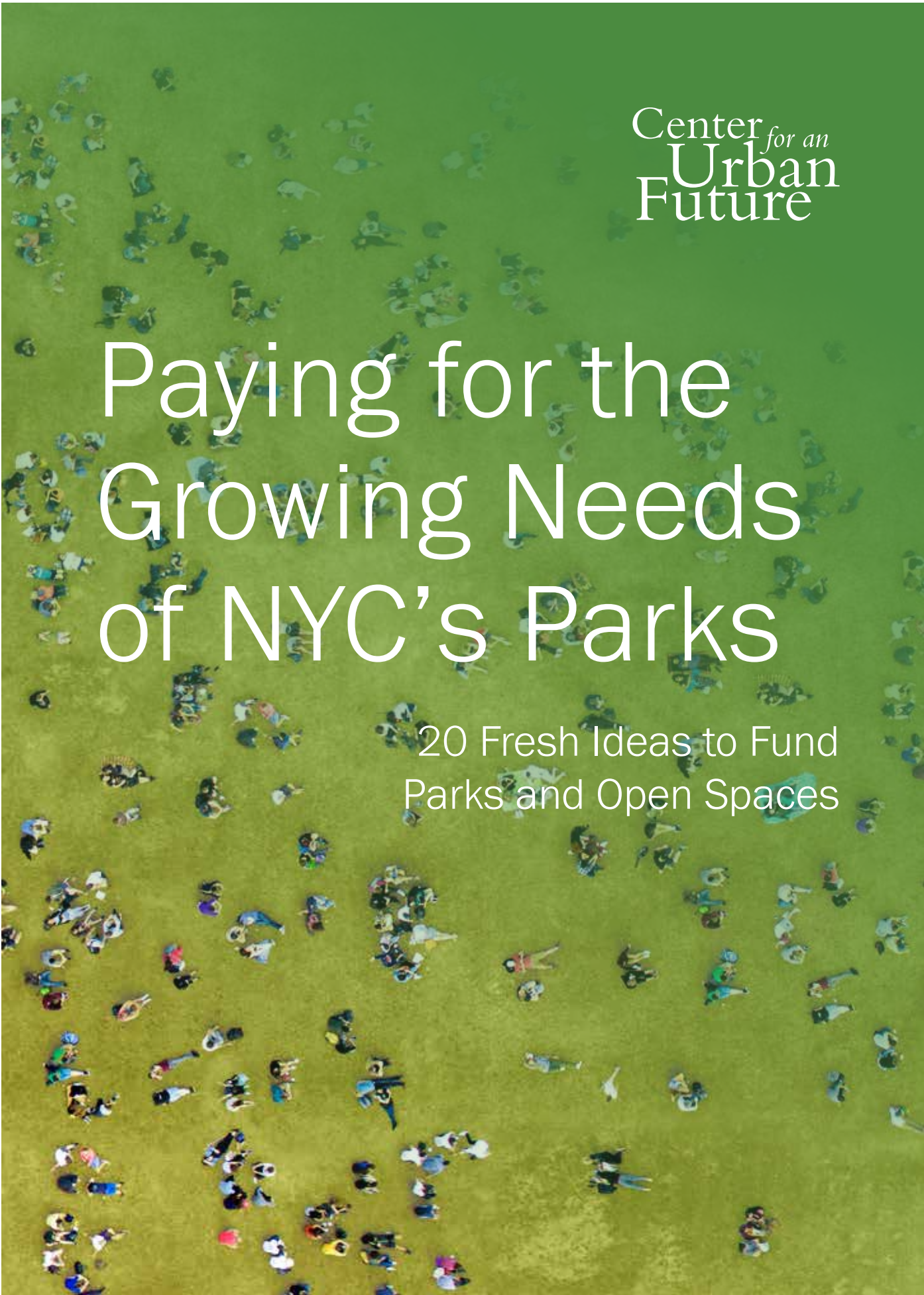


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Center *for an*
Urban
Future

Paying for the Growing Needs of NYC's Parks

20 Fresh Ideas to Fund
Parks and Open Spaces



Center *for an* Urban Future

Paying for the Growing Needs of NYC's Parks is a publication of the Center for an Urban Future. Researched and written by John Surico and Eli Dvorkin. Edited by Jonathan Bowles and Dorian Block. Additional research by Frances Macalimbon Hamed, Hannah Joseph, and Anna Shumskiy. Designed by Stislow Design.

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Paying for NYC's Growing Parks Needs

NEW YORK CITY IS AT THE PRECIPICE OF A PUBLIC space renaissance. The COVID-19 pandemic ushered in record levels of usership to parks and plazas, which have not receded since. Central Park once again welcomed over 42 million visitors in 2022.¹ Attendance at Riverbank State Park, in upper Manhattan, nearly doubled from 1.9 million in 2021 to over 3 million in 2022.² New public space programs, like Open Streets and Dining Out NYC, have reimagined the city's streets and commercial corridors, while providing a vital economic boost. And the lasting shift toward hybrid work is bringing more residents outdoors closer to home.

The cities that will prosper in the years ahead are those that boast an exceptional quality of life, and great open spaces are essential to that goal. Yet despite this widespread consensus, there is virtually no agreement on perhaps the most pressing question facing New York City's parks and open space today: how to pay for their growing maintenance and infrastructure needs, while investing in critically important new parks and open spaces in the places they're needed the most.

Keeping pace with the needs of the city's 30,000 acres of parks and natural areas has proven to be a thorny long-term challenge. The Department of Parks and Recreation's headcount has fallen 38 percent since the mid-1970s, leading to chronic shortages of dedicated maintenance workers, including gardeners, plumbers, masons, and electricians.³ Budget cuts enacted in 2020 led parks conditions to deteriorate to the worst levels in 20 years.⁴ While conditions have rebounded since then, new cuts of 5 percent in November 2023, followed by the potential for two more 5 percent cuts in 2024, are raising fears that this cycle is poised to continue. Last year, the system's major maintenance needs topped \$58.9 million, with just 16 percent of those needs being met.⁵

New York City's parks maintenance challenges compound deeper infrastructure issues that have only grown over time. The parks system faces at least \$685 million in capital needs just to bring existing infrastructure up to a state of good repair, with just 30 percent of those needs either underway or planned over the next

three years.⁶ Even as some of the most concerning needs are largely invisible until they fail completely—from deteriorated retaining walls and bulkheads to damaged drainage systems—other challenges are evident in parks across the city. Too many parks and playgrounds experience flooding during an ordinary rainfall, water fountains and bathrooms fall into disrepair, trees go years without inspection and pruning, and invasive species outcompete native plants. Meanwhile, despite laudable efforts at improvement in recent years, many of the city's recreation centers, field houses, and community centers are in a state of disrepair, the result of decades of underinvestment.

In addition to these pervasive maintenance and infrastructure needs, New York City also has work to do to expand access to parks and open space in the first place. While the city has made important progress since 2021, more than 16 percent of New York City residents do not live within a quarter-mile walk of a small park or half-mile of a large park. Neighborhoods furthest from any park include parts of South Richmond Hill, Maspeth, and Rosedale in Queens; Wakefield in the Bronx; and Flatbush in Brooklyn.⁷

Earlier this year, Mayor Eric Adams took an important step toward addressing the city's growing open space needs when he committed \$375 million in new parks and plazas, widened sidewalks, safer intersections, and expanded bike lanes.⁸ The mayor also appointed New York's first-ever "chief public realm officer" to helm the interagency effort to support open spaces across the five boroughs.⁹ But considerably more dedicated funding will be needed in the years ahead to keep pace with their plethora of needs. During his campaign in 2021, Mayor Adams admirably pledged to devote at least one percent of the city's budget to parks. (Currently, it's about 0.65 percent.)¹⁰ But with the city confronting billions of dollars in emergency expenses from the recent migrant influx while seeing revenue growth slow, it's far from certain that the parks budget will reach this level of funding in the foreseeable future.



The time is long overdue for city leaders to get creative and seek out new sustainable sources of funding for parks. This report puts forth 20 concrete and achievable ideas to pay for the city’s growing park needs, as New York charts a post-pandemic future, combats the climate crisis, and continues to build a more equitable city. This report includes the following high-priority ideas:

Create new, dedicated revenue streams for parks. Even as New York City generates more than \$79 billion in revenue annually, there is currently no stream of revenue solely dedicated to parks. This report proposes several new mechanisms for generating revenue—including a small surcharge on all stadium and arena tickets, the creation of new fees on gas-powered landscaping and stormwater management, new programs to monetize

organic waste including fallen trees, and a voluntary contribution from hotel guests—that would help the parks system catch up on maintenance while providing greater predictability around budget planning.

Launch a modest expansion of restaurants, cafes, and other concessions in parks that enhance the visitor experience while generating funding for parks citywide.

There are surprisingly few restaurants, cafes, ice cream shops, and other concessions in parks across the five boroughs. Where these concessions do exist, like the Shake Shack in Madison Square Park, the Breads Bakery in Bryant Park, the Le Pain Quotidien next to Sheep’s Meadow in Central Park and the seasonal Fornino pizza restaurant on Pier 6 in Brooklyn Bridge Park, they invariably enhance the experience of parkgoers.

Restaurants and cafes are also a fixture of many of the most adored parks in Paris, London, and numerous other cities. For instance, Water Works Park in Minneapolis is home to Owamni, an award-winning restaurant serving indigenous cuisine by Sioux chef Sean Sherman. A modest expansion of these uses—and creative new ones, like year-round spas in existing pool houses—could make New York’s parks even more appealing while providing much-needed revenues for parks. Indeed, while concessions are NYC Parks’ largest source of revenue, concessions revenue has flatlined just above \$42 million for more than a decade—and has declined 25 percent since 2012, after adjusting for inflation.¹¹

Establish an 80-20 split for all future revenue from new parks concessions. The larger share (80 percent) would remain with the park hosting the new concession and the remainder (20 percent) allocated to a fund to support parks with the greatest needs, in particular those in less affluent communities that may not otherwise be able to support revenue-generating concessions. While we recommend a measured expansion of concessions in city parks, the revenues from these new concessions should stay with parks—and not get funneled into the city’s general fund, as the lion’s share of existing parks concessions do right now. This can be accomplished by leveraging the existing conservancy model, in which concessionaires enter a contract with a nonprofit intermediary that retains a significant share of the revenues.

Develop new opportunities for individual New Yorkers and companies to support parks. The pandemic unleashed a powerful desire among New Yorkers to get involved with their local green spaces, but it’s often difficult for individuals and companies to contribute beyond occasional volunteer hours—especially in support of parks without existing conservancies or alliances. Launching new and expanded revenue-generating initiatives, like thoughtful corporate sponsorship of parks assets, expanded private support for fundraising initiatives focused on equity like the NYC Green Fund, and a supercharged citywide street tree conservancy, would

enable the city to better tap into New Yorkers’ generosity toward their public parks and support green spaces across all five boroughs.

Tap state funding for city parks to a greater extent than has been the case and take full advantage of the recently passed Environmental Bond Act. It’s not the city’s responsibility alone to address the ever-increasing needs of its parks and playgrounds. New York City accounts for roughly 40 percent of the state’s population, but too often fails to receive its fair share of funding from Albany for parks and open spaces. In addition to maximizing funding from the state’s Environmental Protection Fund and the Regional Economic Development Councils (REDCs), city officials should work closely with the city’s Albany delegation to go after resources from the \$4.2 billion Environmental Bond Act to support parks and greenways.

Take full advantage of the Inflation Reduction Act and the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. Taken together, these two recently enacted laws comprise the largest federal investment in urban green spaces in decades. City leaders should pull out all the stops to ensure New York City gets a significant piece of this multi-billion-dollar effort, and leverage city capital dollars to achieve the maximum benefit.

This report, made possible with a grant from the NYC Green Fund, presents a menu of fiscal options to policymakers looking to generate sustainable and sufficient funding to address the full scope of parks’ needs across New York City. It was informed by interviews with over 50 fiscal and budget experts and parks advocates; roundtable discussions with the city’s leading conservancies, volunteer park groups, and park organizations across the country, in conjunction with The High Line Network; and extensive data research. While feasibility and projected earnings may vary, the ideas in this report present policymakers with practical and effective options for funding the city’s parks and open spaces now and for years to come.



Generate New Revenue Streams for Parks Infrastructure and Maintenance

1. Attach a 50 cent or \$1 surcharge on arena and stadium events to support parks maintenance.

ALMOST EVERY NIGHT IN NEW YORK CITY, THOUSANDS of fans attend events at venues sited on parkland: Yankee Stadium, Citi Field, Arthur Ashe Stadium, and more. Several casinos may arrive soon in the city, too, and several of the existing bids are for land designated for park usage. These venues have negotiated contracts with the city—for example, in FY 22, Citi Field paid \$1.5 million dollars to NYC Parks in rental fees¹². Yet outside of those mostly trivial sums, NYC Parks sees no revenue from the millions of dollars in commercial activity each year generated on what is technically parks property.

It's unlikely that these contractual fees are set to change anytime soon. But the city does have an opportunity to capture some additional revenue from the popularity of these venues, and others sited on public property. It can do so by attaching a small surcharge on all tickets sold to help fund parks maintenance and programming. This surcharge would be a very modest addition—perhaps as little as 50 cents or one dollar per ticket—to the total price tag of increasingly costly event tickets. But the impact could be significant.

Take Citi Field, for example. A 50-cent surcharge for a single sold-out event there would generate \$20,900. Based on 2023 attendance figures, that surcharge would total \$1.29 million annually from Mets home games alone.¹³ If that surcharge were upped to \$1, each season would generate more than \$2.5 million for parks—enough to hire more than 50 full-time

gardeners. And that's just one stadium and with a modest fee that would amount to less than 1 percent of the average price of a concert ticket in 2023.

“A sold-out show at [Madison Square] Garden probably has 18,000 tickets. Why not tell Ticketmaster to give \$1 for every ticket sold to parks? You could brand it as a ‘Clean Air’ or ‘Parks Fund.’ At events hosted on parkland, it could be something small, like 25 or 50 cents. And something could be done where ticket holders under \$50 wouldn't have to pay,” says Lynn Bodnar Kelly, executive director of New York Restoration Project, a citywide environmental justice nonprofit that stewards parks and gardens in all five boroughs.

New York City wouldn't be the first to do this. Columbus, Ohio, enacted a similar charge beginning in 2019 to seed two new funds designed to support its cultural and performing arts community, including the upkeep of aging cultural buildings.¹⁴ The first, dubbed the Creation, Innovation, and Inclusion Fund, is supported by a 5 percent fee on tickets to performances and sporting events at venues with over 400 seats and ticket prices over \$10, with expected annual revenue of \$6 million. The second, called the Facility Stabilization Fund, is generated specifically from the same 5 percent surcharge on tickets sold at Nationwide Arena, the city's largest indoor venue, with an estimated \$3 million in annual revenue. In 2022, annual revenue was on track to meet the predicted total of \$6 to \$9 million.

2. Implement a stormwater fee and allocate a portion of the revenue to parks.

DURING ANY RAINFALL, THE ABSORBENT LANDSCAPES of parks and green spaces, which make up 14 percent of the city's landmass, help divert water and waste from our waterways. Street trees alone intercept over one billion gallons of stormwater every year, according to the city's own figures.¹⁵ This equates to massive financial benefits for the city: the Trust for Public Land found that up to \$2.43 billion is saved annually in avoided

stormwater treatment costs and nitrogen filtration.¹⁶ Yet NYC Parks do not receive any dollars for stewarding the landscape that plays this environmentally and economically vital role.

To help pay for building and maintaining the parks system's crucial role in mitigating stormwater runoff, the city should consider implementing a new stormwater management fee—supported by state legislation that



would authorize the city’s Water Board to do so. This small fee would be added directly to property owners’ water and sewer bills and generate new revenue that should be allocated to support the city’s green infrastructure.

Other cities have already taken the lead in enacting stormwater management fees. In Philadelphia, residential and commercial buildings pay a relatively small monthly charge—just a few dollars per month for a typical home—based on the amount of impervious surface onsite, which is included in the property owner’s monthly water bill.¹⁷

The city offers free rain barrels to help capture stormwater and provides incentives and subsidies for landscape improvements, like permeable pavement and rain gardens, for both residential and commercial property owners. Some new development projects are also eligible for zoning bonuses and grants by implementing additional stormwater management features beyond those required by current regulations. Commercial

properties, which generate significantly more stormwater runoff and therefore incur higher fees, can also earn “stormwater credits” for installing water conservation measures on-site, which lowers their fees and incentivizes greener buildings and landscapes. The revenue garnered from the mechanism funds green infrastructure projects, which are often sited in parks and open spaces¹⁸.

In New York City, water and sewage fees go directly to the New York City Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), which manages the city’s sewers and water supply. But given the outsized role of the city’s public parks in managing stormwater, any new stormwater management fee should be allocated to support green infrastructure maintenance and split evenly between DEP and NYC Parks. This fee would generate a consistent new revenue stream for green infrastructure maintenance while further incentivizing property owners to improve stormwater management on their properties.

3. Create new mechanisms for private developers to support parks maintenance and creation.

NEW YORK CITY IS ALREADY HOME TO SEVERAL projects where a portion of the value created through private real estate development is captured to bolster parks, given that the parks have an outsized impact on property prices. In Brooklyn Bridge Park, for example, a steady stream of revenue from development sites located on 10 percent of the land pays for 90 percent of the park's operating budget through a special city-state agreement.¹⁹ The creation and ongoing maintenance of Williamsburg's popular Domino Park stems from a community benefits agreement with Two Trees Management for developing the Domino Sugar Factory and nearby waterfront²⁰. And recent rezonings in NoHo/SoHo and Gowanus guarantee new parks in these green space-starved neighborhoods.

But while these examples highlight the opportunity to leverage new development to bolster the city's public parks, they are the exception, not the rule. Rezoning that permit greater density or use changes generally do not require the allocation of new parkland or park maintenance funding, and community benefits agreements—typically structured as private contracts between developers and community groups—have proven highly challenging to enforce. What's needed is a clear mechanism for ensuring that new private development yields direct, sustained funding for public parks citywide.

Other cities offer up ideas of how it could work. In Austin, a “parkland dedication” ordinance requires developers that are building a certain number of residential units to either set aside land and pay a park development fee or contribute to a citywide fund for more park space, so Austin can keep up with its rapidly growing population.²¹ The amount of land required and

fees are based on density, and sites in the city's developing urban core are capped. Toronto has put a similar system in place.²² Both residential and commercial developments of a certain size must dedicate land for public park or recreational use—a demand that can be met by adding new space to a nearby park or building an entirely new one. The Canadian city has designated ‘priority areas’ where developers adhere to stricter density rules and are asked to contribute to a citywide fund for park expansion and upgrades.

Given New York City's significantly greater density, which makes new park development more challenging than in many other cities, developers in designated “NYC Parks Improvement Districts” could be offered a menu of options during land use review to support parks. That could include “adopting” a nearby park, playground, or sports court by making guaranteed maintenance payments. Developers could create a new park or open space on the development site, as is the case in Austin and Toronto. Or the city could require a payment-in-lieu of land, with a revenue split focused on parks maintenance and infrastructure: 80 percent of the fee could go toward the upkeep of local parks, and 20 percent to a fund that supports parks in underserved communities where the underlying economics might not otherwise support a development fee.

The city could offer additional benefits in exchange for greater investment, mirroring Elevate Transit: the new zoning amendment allows developers to build higher if they install and maintain new elevators and other accessibility features at subway stations.²³ The city should consider a similar zoning amendment for parks, offering a multitude of benefits for New Yorkers while harnessing the city's growth to support its parks.

4. Add a community parks surcharge to the real property transfer tax.

THE REAL PROPERTY TRANSFER TAX (RPTT), APPLIED to sales of residential and commercial properties in the five boroughs, brings in over \$1.5 billion to the city’s general fund annually, with another \$400 million flowing to New York City Transit.²⁴ Set at between 1 percent and 2.625 percent of the sales price depending on the property type and value, this relatively modest tax nevertheless delivers substantial revenue to the city. The city and state should consider adding a “community parks surcharge” to the RPTT of just 0.25 percent and allocate that additional revenue to support the city’s parks.

There is precedence for modestly increasing the RPTT to support public infrastructure. In 1982, New York State authorized a 1 percent surcharge on the RPTT to support New York City Transit²⁵, which is currently applied only to commercial real estate transactions over \$500,000. Similarly, in 2020, the state implemented the so-called “Mansion Tax,” which added a graduated surcharge on residential property sales in New York City of \$2 million or more.²⁶

A new surcharge of just 0.25 percent on all real property transactions in New York City would generate an additional \$268 million annually, based on 2022

taxable sales of \$107.3 billion.²⁷ Even a more narrowly targeted surcharge applied only to transactions over \$5 million would generate millions of dollars in new revenues annually.

Other places have already implemented transfer taxes or surcharges to support parks and open space. In the 1980s, the State of Arkansas created a real estate transfer tax (RETT) specifically for natural and cultural heritage care, when it appeared that federal funds were drying up.²⁸ Portions of the revenue are dedicated to the stewardship of outdoor space for recreation and the Parks and Tourism Fund Account, which then offers grants to local municipalities. Now, the state spends \$28 to \$32 per capita on conservation due to the RETT, a rate much higher than the national average.

This model already exists at the state level in New York: the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) was created in 1993 as a way to put a portion of the state’s RETT toward environmental projects statewide.²⁹ It now collects about \$400 million a year.³⁰ A new ‘community parks surcharge’ added to the city’s RPTT could provide the city with a comparable mechanism designed to support public parks maintenance—a public good that also has a substantial impact on property values.

5. Scale up the infrastructure necessary to monetize the reuse of organic waste.

THE CITY’S PARKS CREATE MASSIVE AMOUNTS OF organic waste, like dry leaf and wood chips, from both maintenance and emergency response. NYC Parks recycles a fraction of this stream, like at its popular Mulch Fest for holiday trees, but the limited capacity and infrastructure to do this work at a much greater scale means that most of the city parks’ organic waste is sent to a landfill. These operations are not only costly and environmentally damaging, but also a wasted opportunity to turn waste into revenue.

In 2019, the U.S. Forest Service released a white paper detailing how much cities were undervaluing their urban tree waste.³¹ For New York State, the range

of potential value from dry-weight biomass, or urban waste wood, was between \$4.3 million and \$37.5 million per year. For dry leaf litter, it was about \$32 million. “Though some cities utilize urban waste wood,” the paper reads, “the potential nationally is largely untapped.”

According to a study conducted by Cambium Carbon, which works with cities to reuse trees and other organic waste, NYC Parks removes an average of 12,512 trees each year, and spent over \$3 million from 2014 to 2020 for their disposal.³² One major storm alone can cost the city upwards of \$1.5 million in downed tree removal. The proper reuse of those materials would lessen this financial burden and hold the potential to



make money. The study found that lumber can capture \$1,200 a ton for the city, while wood processing by-products, like sawdust and shavings, could catch \$150 a ton. Stumps, which can be converted to firewood, have a value of \$80 a ton, and branches or leaves for compost, chips, or mulch are lower, at \$30 a ton.

There is a growing set of examples nationwide of the variety of ways in which cities are turning organic waste into dollars. In Cincinnati, the Board of Park Commissioners are working to scale production of a form of wood debris that, when cooked with oxygen, creates a special charcoal called biochar. The \$1.1 million project, funded through grants and agency dollars, is meant to become financially self-sustaining by harnessing carbon credit sales.³³ A new “reforestation hub” pilot in Philadelphia is recycling wood from parks to then sell to organizations in need, with at least 15 percent of proceeds going back to TreePhilly’s planting and maintenance of the urban tree canopy.³⁴ And in Baltimore, the Parks Department’s astry Division teamed up with its Office of Sustainability to create Camp Small, a five-acre wood waste collection yard, where residents and businesses can shop for products and other recycled goods.³⁵ Starting with compost, the yard now sells furniture, lumber and play spaces. It launched a workforce development program to train residents for circular economy jobs. Last year, the yard raised over \$90,000 in direct revenue for the forestry management team there.³⁶

In addition to revenue generation, experts say that smarter organic waste utilization could also save money elsewhere in the system. A potential pilot in Eugene, Oregon, looks to reuse lumber for tree stakes used for planting, and new parks in San Francisco are using salvaged wood for “nature play” in parks and playgrounds, as well as retaining walls and dams.³⁷ There are

examples of what this could look like, even within New York City: Brooklyn Bridge Park has salvaged granite from bridge construction, recycled fill material from the MTA, and reused wood in its operations.³⁸

As worsening storms down more trees, a strategy to recycle organic waste would enable NYC Parks to maximize revenue and cut costs, offer green job training opportunities, and help foster more environmentally sound and useful operations. The Cambium Carbon study outlined four different potential scenarios for wood waste collection—with centralized sorting yards based in Brooklyn and Queens, where most trees are collected—the future revenue potential over ten years for such a project is more than \$7 million, with the project breaking even in two years. This value doesn’t include avoided costs in disposal either. The city could implement either a revenue split, as seen in Philadelphia, so that a certain portion of proceeds is returned to NYC Parks, along with materials for public giveaway, like mulch, compost, and biochar for gardening. It could manage it directly, like Baltimore, so costs and revenues are directly returning to NYC Parks.

An ongoing pilot program between NYC Parks, Green Wood Cemetery, and Tri-Lox, a wood salvage company, is showing potential. The partners are hoping to recycle trees into park furniture and other uses. Liz Zink, a creative director at Tri-Lox, says that while the logistical challenges are steep, including everything from storage and processing to resale, the city has a real chance to lead here. “New York could be a center for innovation on organic processing,” says Zink. “But that’ll take moving away from infrastructure that has negative value—both in the cost of disposal and the waste itself—and shifting our mindset and budget towards more circular processes.”

6. Solicit contribution during hotel stays for a new NYC Parks and Cultural Fund

WHETHER IT'S A VISIT TO WOLLMAN RINK IN CENTRAL Park, a stroll along The High Line, a walk in Prospect Park after the Brooklyn Museum or a beach day at the Rockaways, parks are a crucial asset to the city's increasingly important tourism sector. A recent report from Trust for Public Land showed that New York City's parks generate \$17.9 billion in tourism spending each year.³⁹ But even as the city's parks serve as a potent magnet for visitors—with ripple effects across the city's economy—parks see little direct benefit from their role in attracting visitors and improving their experience of the city. A voluntary contribution solicited from visitors who stay overnight could help.

Each year, upward of 30 million people—half of whom are international tourists—stay overnight in New York City.⁴⁰ If just half of those visitors contributed \$2 during their stay, or the price of a small coffee, that would generate at least \$30 million each year for the city's parks and cultural institutions. In Whitefish, Montana—which sees about a million tourists each

year—a voluntary 1 percent fee added to lodging, food, and transportation receipts at participating businesses raised over \$750,000 in revenue for its Community Sustainability Fund last year.⁴¹

The city should solicit voluntary contributions from overnight hotel stays specifically for parks and cultural institutions. Visitors would be offered the option of checking a box to add \$2 or \$2 per day to a new "NYC Parks and Cultural Fund"—or the optional contribution could be included by default, which could lead to higher overall revenues. The resulting fund could be split between NYC Parks and the Department of Cultural Affairs, or even disbursed through a competitive grant-making process managed by a nonprofit intermediary. This small, voluntary contribution would have virtually no effect on visitation in a city where the average hotel room rate is about \$270 per night but could generate an important new revenue stream for parks that reflects their crucial role in the city's tourism economy.



7. Charge for gas-powered landscaping and use revenue to fund composting.

EACH DAY, NEW YORKERS EXPERIENCE THE EXCESSIVE sound and exhaust of gas-powered landscaping, whether it's leaf-blowers, lawn mowers, or tractors. The tools, while essential for work, are environmentally damaging, emitting outsized levels of air and noise pollution. In response, a growing number of cities and states are enacting regulations on their usage, if not outright bans.⁴² Larchmont, just north of the city, is one of the latest to join the pack. But instead of banning the devices, the city should consider generating new revenue for parks and incentivize greener landscaping practices by introducing new fees on gas-powered landscaping.

The first potential way to do this is through a new business license for landscaping companies. The Department of Consumer and Worker Protection (DCWP) issues licenses for more than 40 industries, including everything from sightseeing guides to tow trucks. But no such license exists for landscaping companies. A typical New York City business license, such as the home improvement contractor's license, is a nominal fee of about \$100 a year. With over 8,500 landscaping businesses in the five boroughs and nearby areas, a new business license for landscaping companies could generate up to \$850,000 every two years.

Another mechanism could be a tax surcharge on the sale of gas-powered leaf blowers in New York City, or related items. A popular gas-powered leaf blower sells for \$379 at major retailers. A 15 percent excise tax would then generate \$56.85 per sale. If 5,000 units are sold in New York City each year, that could generate almost \$290,000 annually. These types of taxes are not without precedent: New York City and State collect excise taxes on items like cigarettes and alcohol to deter usage, and the state's gas tax funds road maintenance and mass transit. In this case, new revenues generated from the license and excise tax could fund community composting efforts in the city's parks.

Both mechanisms would not only raise new streams of revenue, but also incentivize greener landscaping practices. The business license fee for landscaping companies could be waived or discounted if the company deploys all-electric tools, which are quieter and cleaner. An excise tax on gas-powered landscaping could nudge consumers and companies to instead consider electric alternatives, which wouldn't be subject to the tax.

Boost Concession Revenues **While** **Ensuring** **Parks Benefit**

8. Open 10 more restaurants and 10 new destination concessions in parks by 2030.

MADISON SQUARE PARK'S SHAKE SHACK, THE FIRST outpost of the now world-renowned chain, generates more than \$1 million in annual revenue for the Madison Square Park Conservancy.⁴³ Meanwhile, in Hudson River Park, the concessions—including lease rents, occupancy permits and fees from its piers and shops, like the new Market 57 food hall—pay for almost the entirety of the maintenance budget for the four-mile greenspace. From 2004 to 2015, the total from ten concessions was \$187 million, or about \$17 million a year.⁴⁴

The same story cannot be said for the properties overseen by NYC Parks. There are only 12 restaurants in city parks, three of which are in golf courses.

For example, Flushing Meadows Corona Park draws millions of visitors for recreation and to destinations like the Queens Museum, Queens Theater in the Park, and the Flushing Meadows Pitch and Putt, but there is currently not a single restaurant or café in the central portion of the park. The park does have one “snack bar” and two large catering halls on the outer edges of the park: Queens Terrace on the Park and the World’s Fair Marina Restaurant. At Pelham Bay Park, there are two snack bars, but no restaurants or cafés. In Brooklyn, the Prospect Park Alliance recently brought in a bakery (WINNER in the Park) and café (Lark by the Park) to the borough’s best-known park, but there are arguably still untapped concession opportunities that would enhance the park experience. Too many of the city’s green spaces lack any real options for food or beverages outside of a snack cart, and those that do operate yield little monetary benefit for parks.

This is a missed opportunity. So many cities have figured out how to have parks concessions that help create a unique experience that so many visitors enjoy each year while also benefiting the spaces themselves. In Paris, there are multiple sit-down restaurants in both the Bois de Boulogne (including two that are Michelin-starred) and in the much smaller Tuileries Garden. Similarly, London’s Hyde Park is home to two restaurants, a coffee house, and a seasonal beer garden. Minneapolis, which is often referred to as one of America’s best park systems, is another telling example. The parks host highly competitive bids for concessions, which pay 12 percent of their annual gross revenue directly to the city’s Parks and Recreation

Board instead of monthly rent.⁴⁵ For Sea Salt, one of the most famous restaurants in Minnehaha Regional Park, that meant \$415,462 in 2017.⁴⁶ The restaurant still must pay for site costs, but the earned revenue of \$3.4 million in 2022 alone helps justify the \$600,000 in investments made by the restaurant.

New York City has a significant opportunity to boost concessions revenues while making parks more attractive places to visit. Home to some of the best dining options in the world, the city’s parks should be reflective of that—and right now, they aren’t. But innovative models exist here. The boardwalk along Rockaway Beach, managed by NYC Parks, is an inspiring example: the concessions are home to popular home-grown restaurants, like Caracas Arepa Bar and Rippers burger joint, and they’re run by Rockaway Beach Bazaar, an experienced operator. Each summer, the concessions see throngs of lines from beachgoers and locals alike.

In addition to adding ten new restaurants, the city should set a goal of opening an additional ten destination concessions—revenue-generating attractions that would draw visitors from the city, the region, and even abroad. Examples might include opening a year-round spa and sauna in an existing bathhouse structure, bringing a major annual art fair into a city park, using existing parks amphitheaters for ticketed performances, creating a new pop-up food festival like Smorgasburg or Queens Night Market, or creating an indoor playground with separate areas for children, teens, and adults.

“Concessions are usually the last place that anything ever changes, but I would argue that rethinking it would be a big thing,” says Charlie McCabe, a leading park consultant. “If they were seasonal and subject for renewal, especially for food, you could have parks keep up with the changing tastes of the city and benefit from them.”

Recent successes, like Parkhouse in Brooklyn’s McCarren Park, show the agency’s potential to attract popular new businesses, but there remains significant untapped potential. The agency should set a target of opening 10 more restaurants and 10 new destination-worthy concessions in parks by 2030 and create a new entity to facilitate the leasing of these ventures, allowing NYC Parks to move more quickly and hold on to more revenue.



9. Work with the private sector to activate underutilized properties for concessions.

NEW YORK CITY'S PARKS BOAST AN IMPRESSIVE array of attractive buildings and properties. The Arsenal, a former munitions depot, serves as a medieval agency headquarters in Central Park. Greenpoint's WNYC Transmitter Park derives its name from the former transmitter house on site. The beach house at Orchard Beach helped inspire the nickname "The Bronx Riviera." Then there are the countless pool halls and recreation centers sprinkled throughout the five boroughs.

But it's nearly impossible for private entities to open concessions in these spaces. The city's current request for proposals process for concessions is notoriously slow, demanding high upfront costs and capital that many entities say they simply do not have. That then makes it more difficult for NYC Parks to attract and retain high-quality options, thereby discouraging

the agency from looking holistically at their properties for revenue potential. "We have a carousel that is a popular attraction for families, but it only operates from May to October," says one park administrator. "We've tried to get funding to encase it in glass, like Brooklyn Bridge Park. That way, it could run year-round, and we could raise revenue throughout. But we haven't been successful in convincing the agency that it's worth it."

As private operators, parks conservancies often work around this process, enabling them to partner with companies to introduce attractive concessions in parks. But these models are currently few and far between. The city should explore options for partnering with the private sector to help redevelop existing parks assets—taking on more risk and injecting much-needed capital, in exchange for a share of future revenues. This

would better utilize parks properties while inviting a far more diverse set of entrepreneurs to operate. Jacob Riis Beach offers a promising model: the National Parks Service and the concessions group there have partnered with a private developer for a \$50 million restoration of

the famed bathhouse, which has sat vacant for decades. The project will bring 28 hotel rooms, a rooftop restaurant, a catering hall, and other amenities to the buzzing destination by the summer of 2024.⁴⁷

10. Levy a fee on for-profit events in parks dedicated to parks maintenance.

EACH YEAR, NEW YORK CITY'S PARK SPACE IS USED for countless commercial activities, both big and small. The Queens Night Market invites countless vendors to sell their wares several weekends in Flushing Meadows-Corona Park. Greenmarkets, like in Union Square and Jackson Heights' Travers Park, allow New Yorkers to shop local. Groups like New York Road Runners charge tickets for races in parks. And at a more granular level, individuals and groups often use the city's parks for private purposes, be it for vending; hosting classes; or participating in membership leagues and lessons.

NYC Parks sees minimal revenue from these events, even if they're often left with the cleanup. For example, Governors Ball, a three-day music festival that saw 150,000 people in Flushing Meadows-Corona Park, didn't add a dollar to the park's bottom line, even though it cost \$130 for a single-day ticket. Volunteer groups and conservancies interviewed for this report say that for-profit activities occurred in their parks often, but they saw little benefit from them. In the FY 2023 adopted budget, parks recreational facility permits, which include the use of athletic field and tennis court use by private entities, were expected to generate over \$5.6 million.⁴⁸ Meanwhile, in Seattle—a city with less than an one-eighth of New York's population—the parks agency there took in over \$12.5 million in “recreation activities fees” in 2019.⁴⁹

Other cities have been more effective at growing events revenue for their parks—and more intentional about keeping that revenue in the parks system. “Urban park and recreation departments are increasingly relying

on earned income from concessions, special events, and program fees and sponsorships to meet their operating budgets,” says Catherine Nagel, executive director of City Parks Alliance, a national urban parks advocacy organization. “For example, earned income makes up slightly less than one-third of San Francisco's Recreation and Parks budget—it's a very important part of their funding mix.”

Chicago is another example of a major urban parks system that generates significant annual revenue from for-profit events. In 2022, a total of 2,000 permits brought in over \$20 million in revenue for the Chicago Park District, a sum that also helps subsidize programming and recreation fees for residents.⁵⁰ Lollapalooza, the famous music festival, alone garnered close to \$3 million in revenue for Chicago Parks District in recent years.⁵¹ Meanwhile, NYC Parks, covering over 1,700 parks, only made \$2.5 million from event fees in FY 2022⁵², and \$4.4 million in FY 2023.⁵³

Adrian Benepe, the former NYC Parks commissioner under Mayor Michael Bloomberg, says the city is “leaving millions of dollars on the table” by not charging for-profit programming for park usage—money, he says, that could go to funding gardeners, service workers and tradespeople. “When I was commissioner, we had two vendors in Central Park, near The Metropolitan Museum of Art, who were generating \$800,000 in revenue just between the two of them,” says Benepe, who is now the president and CEO of the Brooklyn Botanic Garden. “The city needs to place an appropriate value on using public space for private profit.”

11. Attach a new surcharge to city marinas and golf courses for parks infrastructure.

AS ONE OF THE AGENCIES RESPONSIBLE FOR THE city's vast waterfront, NYC Parks oversees several marinas in the city, including World's Fair Marina, the 79th Street Boat Basin, and the Sheepshead Bay Piers, which see long waiting lists in the summer. Additionally, several of the city's parks—including Van Cortlandt Park, Kissena Park, Forest Park, and Silver Lake Park—are home to golf courses. These marinas and golf courses are meant to offer a public option for otherwise costly forms of recreation. However, in recent years, the city's fees for these amenities have fallen behind prevailing market rates, leaving NYC Parks with less revenue from these sources than other major public parks systems. To help boost revenues that can be allocated to support

NYC Parks' waterfront infrastructure and recreation facilities, the city should add a new surcharge on marina dockage fees and golf course greens fees, which would simply bring these changes in line with costs in other areas.

The public marinas administered by NYC Parks generated about \$1.3 million in revenue in FY 2023—a relatively modest sum for marinas located along some of the most valuable shoreline in the country.⁵⁴ The city's golf courses, which are run as concessions by private operators, also return relatively little revenue to the city. In 2023, Pelham Bay Park's golf course in the Bronx, which was operated by American Golf until recently, brought in about \$6.5 million in 2018 and



2019, with \$1 million going to the city's general fund. Alley Pond Park's golf course in Douglaston generated over \$2 million in gross receipts in 2018, with the city's general fund receiving about half of that total.⁵⁵

By comparison, in FY 2022, the City of Los Angeles' Department of Recreation and Parks made \$9 million in golf course revenue, and \$7 million from their harbor department.⁵⁶

Below-market dockage fees are a key reason why the revenues generated by the city's marinas and golf courses haven't kept pace with revenue growth in other cities. For instance, NYC Parks' marinas charge summer dockage fees of around \$120 to \$170 per linear foot. By comparison, nearby privately operated marinas charge in the range of \$185 to \$295 or more.

Likewise, greens fees at the city's public golf courses are notably below comparable market rates. For instance, rates at the Forest Park Golf Course range from \$35 to \$55 for 18 holes, depending on the day of the week and time of day. By comparison, similar public courses in Nassau County charge between \$40 and \$70, with the lowest rates requiring the purchase of a \$36 annual leisure pass.

In New York, the city should consider a small surcharge to use these public facilities, which could be allocated toward the repair and maintenance of waterfront parks infrastructure or invested in recreation programs.

12. Ensure that NYC Parks holds onto more new revenues earned in parks.

NEW YORK CITY HAS ONE OF THE FEW PARKS SYSTEMS in the country where the agency responsible for its upkeep doesn't directly dedicate the revenue generated by parks in parks. Instead, like fines and fees, that money ends up in the city's general fund, which is then doled out to agencies during budget negotiations—a lasting remnant of the 1970s fiscal crisis. A wide-ranging set of sources say that this structure has a “chilling effect” on NYC Parks, offering little incentive to innovate with new revenue ideas or concession opportunities.

For parks to prosper, the agency should be given more power in what it can do. The city should consider a “70x30” or “80x20” split for NYC Parks, where the agency would hold onto a share of the revenue it generates while still ensuring that most money returns to the city's general fund at a time of fiscal restraint. This would encourage the agency to grow revenue, thus resulting in more available dollars for both NYC Parks and City Hall.

This is the model for most of the city's private park conservancies. For example, the Central Park Conservancy is expected to raise at least \$7 million each year for maintenance and operations. To do this, the Conservancy is paid an amount equivalent to 50 percent of all concessions and special events revenue garnered in Central Park.⁵⁷ By holding onto this revenue, the

Conservancy can provide high-quality care for the world's most visited urban park, while city residents reap the immense benefits that come with that. The Conservancy ended 2022 with almost \$25 million more in net assets from the previous year, allowing it to invest in initiatives like the Five Borough Program, where it lends technical assistance to underserved parks and communities.⁵⁸

The city can leverage existing nonprofit organizations and public-private partnerships to accelerate and expand this work—including the current alliances and conservancies, the City Parks Foundation, and the NYC Green Fund. City Parks Foundation already plays this role in several key areas, such utilizing rental fees from SummerStage in Central Park to support SummerStage's free programs and a portion of ticket sales at the Swedish Cottage to help offset costs of the PuppetMobile, which presents free performances and workshops in parks and schools across the city. Policymakers can help by harmonizing its approach to key issues like indemnification and insurance, contract review, and revenue-sharing agreements across all nonprofit partner organizations and enable existing intermediaries to provide revenue-generating benefits to parks without conservancies or alliances across all five boroughs.

Enable New Yorkers to Directly Support Their Parks



13. Allow NYC Parks to fundraise through membership programs and special events.

FOR SIX SEASONS AND COUNTING, PHILADELPHIA Parks and Recreation has teamed up with FCM Hospitality for Parks on Tap, a roving beer garden that sets up in various city parks all summer long. FCM Hospitality operates the program at no cost to the city, aside from the seasonal help needed for cleanup. A portion of all beer and food sales goes directly to the city's parks, funding everything from trail maintenance and outdoor movies to tree plantings and wayfinding.⁵⁹ In 2019, the program raised \$250,000 for Philadelphia's parks.⁶⁰

Beyond volunteerism, it can be difficult for New Yorkers to financially contribute to parks in the same way. As a city agency, NYC Parks is unable to host fundraising events, like benefits and galas, unlike private park conservancies. The Taste of Summer raised \$8 million for Central Park Conservancy in 2022, while the JP Morgan Chase Corporate Challenge results in a donation of up to \$1 million.⁶¹ Friends of the High Line made \$7.6 million from such events, including its Spring Benefit and Art Dinner.⁶²

Other city institutions, like public libraries and museums, use membership programs to fill that gap. In FY 2022, the membership program at The Metropolitan Museum of Art garnered \$26 million in revenue.⁶³ At

the American Museum of Natural History, the membership program raised over \$30 million in revenue last year⁶⁴, and the Museum of Modern Art raised \$13 million in membership fees in that same period.⁶⁵ But NYC Parks has no such program.

The Friends of the Library program at New York Public Library uses a tiered approach, which could be adapted for public parks.⁶⁶ At \$25 a year, members could get a special card with discounts on NYC Parks merchandise or concessions. An annual contribution of \$50 or \$100 could earn members early access to special events or programming guides; \$500 could grant behind-the-scenes access to some of the agency's ongoing projects; and beyond that could afford benefactors commendations or greater recognition in public displays or murals.

The agency would have to take special precaution to ensure that fundraising drives and membership programs do not interfere with public access, but they shouldn't be limited in their ability to fundraise dollars on their own. These new initiatives could generate substantial new revenues while enabling NYC Parks to deepen the connections that so many New Yorkers have with their parks.

14. Make it easier for private entities to care for, maintain, and fund parks.

IN RECENT YEARS, PRIVATE ENTITIES HAVE SHOWN an increased appetite to invest in the city's parks and public spaces. A growing set of conservancies are now an incredibly important tool for parks to receive special care. Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) have found themselves at the forefront of the city's latest pedestrian plazas and parklets, to boost foot traffic in the wake of the pandemic. Private institutions, like universities and hospital systems, are getting involved in programming around research and public health. And nonprofits, like volunteer organizations, continue to fundraise to host cleanups and activities.

But the city hasn't made it easy. In interviews, these groups say that their efforts consistently encounter bureaucratic roadblocks. Conservancies reported that the ability to generate revenue greatly varies park to park due to different memorandums of agreements and relationships with NYC Parks. One conservancy, for example, can display "adopt-a-bench" signs for five years, while another might have to take them down after just a year. One park might be allowed to host one or two special events a year; another might be able to do five to ten. "Friends of" groups in parks say they're often given mixed messages as to what can be funded with outside money. And the work of many nonprofit custodians of

public space—including BIDs and “friends of” groups—is further complicated by insurance: due to liability concerns, the city doesn’t indemnify the organizations that government partners wish to steward these spaces, imposing a hefty burden onto private fundraising.

“If you go to Betsy Head Park right now, it’s beautiful, but the field lines are gone because of the usage, and the city doesn’t have a plan for maintenance and upkeep. So, the community that utilizes the park calls on us locally for help,” says Duane Kinnon, the chairman of Friends of Brownsville Parks. After a \$30 million “anchor park renovation,” the organization created the National Sports Zone Foundation, which collaborates with local schools and companies to raise money for better recreational opportunities. “This is a city-owned park, and that’s what we must do, unfortunately. When they designed the park, they didn’t have a plan for how it would last. We have been proactive in our request to fundraise in partnership with the city for preventative maintenance and program operations. But there has never been a response. We hope that this is possible in the future.”

If private entities want to fill in gaps of capital spending and maintenance, the city should lower the barriers in doing so. City Hall, under the work of the newly appointed chief public realm officer, should explore avenues to standardize processes for permitting and insurance, while creating new mechanisms for the private and public sectors to work together. An “open space collaborative fund,” like the Memphis Medical District Collaborative or Cleveland’s University Circle, both of which raise millions of dollars by corralling anchor institutions to beautify surrounding communities, could allow private entities like Columbia University or Mount Sinai to further contribute to parks and public space.

The city has only scratched the surface of corporate sponsorships for sustained investment in its parks. What exists now is largely limited to private conservancies, and for individual assets rather than categorical care.

The Lefrak Center Ice Rink in Prospect Park, for example, was partially funded through a \$10 million donation from the Lefrak family, which afforded its name and continued maintenance for surrounding acreage.⁶⁷ At The High Line, the Tiffany Overlook generated \$6.3 million in grants from the jewelry company.⁶⁸ The Bank of America Winter Village at Bryant Park, a popular Midtown destination during the holidays, brought in \$3.4 million in sponsorship revenue in 2022.⁶⁹

The city should work with its robust corporate and philanthropic sectors to support parks in new ways. Major outdoor retailers, like REI or Patagonia, could contribute to trail creation and management in the parks’ natural areas. Home improvement chains, like Home Depot or Lowe’s, could sponsor public restrooms or drinking fountains in exchange for continued inspection or repair. Sports facilities or organizations, like U.S. Soccer or Major League Baseball, could offer turf care and programming at fields, pools, and beaches, while companies with corporate headquarters or major retail presences in the city could be invited to join an adopt-a-park program at local sites.

Steps could be put in place to deter corporate overreach and ensure accountability. In the County of San Diego Parks and Recreation, there is a period of public comment, inviting residents to weigh in before the sale of a name is finalized.

Christopher Rizzo, the former chairman of the Friends of Van Cortlandt Park, says it’s time to take a fresh look at corporate sponsorship for the long-term benefit of the city’s parks. “The Van Cortlandt family donated the land to the city in the late 1800s but did not provide any endowment. Does Mr. Van Cortlandt get the park named after him in perpetuity for that?” Rizzo asks. “It sounds sacrilegious to say, but I was looking at a park that was totally under-maintained. I am not suggesting we rename Van Cortlandt Park. But I am suggesting we need to think outside the box to raise private money for parks and public open spaces.”

15. Revamp the merchandise strategy for NYC Parks.

IN 2015, THE CITY OF NEW YORK SOLD BRANDING rights to Only NY, a New York-based streetwear company, for an undisclosed amount. The company now sells accessories using logos from NYC Parks, the Sanitation Department, and other governmental entities through a partnership with NYC Tourism and Conventions, the city's tourism promotion arm. As a result, Only NY has popularized the NYC Parks logo—of a London plane tree leaf—to a new degree, selling lifeguard shirts, tank tops and hats, both online and at its brick-and-mortar stores, with seasonal collections that often sell out.

NYC Parks sees none of that revenue. Instead, 12 percent of the royalties generated from sales returns to the city's general fund.⁷⁰ It's unclear how much revenue the merchandise brings in each year, but in a 2017 memo from the city's Franchise and Concession Review Committee, a pilot was shown to wildly exceed expectations, collecting almost \$13,000 in royalties. "Only NY received an extremely positive response from consumers and sales soared," it reads.

The popularity of NYC Parks merchandise should come as no surprise. The NYC Parks "leaf" logo has become a widely recognized brand; the leaf dots handball courts, visitor signs and park amenities across the city. It has buying power, but NYC Parks has not been able to capture it like other park groups or municipalities. With its famous arches as its logo, The High Line's merchandise sales brought in \$470,000 for the operator in 2019.⁷¹ Merchandise for Central Park, emblazoned

with the "Central to the Park" slogan, brought \$1.2 million to the Conservancy in 2020 and \$304,000 in 2021.⁷² In Seattle, Parks and Recreation brought in \$162,195 in 2019 from its branding.⁷³ In 2020, The City of Los Angeles' Department of Recreation and Parks generated close to \$450,000 in merchandise sales from its golf division alone.⁷⁴

The City of New York's agreement with Only NY doesn't prevent the city from allocating the royalties generated toward parks' needs—or preclude NYC Parks from selling its own merchandise. But what the agency does offer is underwhelming. The products are unique but limited—it includes tote bags, bow ties, and dog collars—and they can only be purchased at the NYC Parks Store in the Arsenal, the agency headquarters in Central Park, weekdays from 10am-4pm. There is no online store or mobile access, let alone a physical presence in the outer boroughs. To better harness the potential of its brand, NYC Parks should explore a more extensive marketing strategy, with additional locations, improved access, and resources to expand its product line.

"The parks logo has equity, but it's more than just general merchandise," says Andrew Topkins, a partner at Brandgenuity, a licensing and marketing firm based in New York City. "What about gift shops where you can customize shirts, like 'I love Van Cortlandt Park'? Or digital copies of Frederick Law Olmstead's plans for Central Park? Maybe there's even a metaverse component ... You can use it to educate people, and you'd be introducing parks to a whole new generation of users."



16. Expand and empower the city's conservancy for street trees.

GROWING THE CITY'S TREE CANOPY IS CRITICAL TO the city's climate strategy, as trees help lower temperatures, retain stormwater and reduce carbon emissions. The Bloomberg administration's Million Trees Initiative greatly expanded the number of trees on streets and in parks. NYC Parks hit a record high of tree-planting in the 2023 fiscal year, with over 13,000 trees planted.⁷⁵ But the agency does not have the resources to care for them all, relying on volunteers and 'citizen pruners' to fill the gaps. The average tree can take over a year to plant and cost \$3,500. A systemic lack of maintenance dollars—which results in delays to tree pruning and removal—leaves countless trees dead within a few years, and, in the worst cases, lawsuit settlements that cost the city more than the tree maintenance budget itself.⁷⁶ The city needs a better solution for reducing the overhead costs for street trees while also ensuring that they survive for longer.

In 1994, NYC Parks worked with City Parks Foundation to create Tree Time, a program that fosters public-private partnerships to enhance tree planting and maintenance, lowering overhead and installation costs. The staff recently worked with the office of New York City Council Member Lincoln Restler in its

formation of the District 33 Street Tree Fund, a private entity that allows residents in the district spanning from Greenpoint to Downtown Brooklyn to directly donate to tree planting and maintenance in their neighborhood rather than through the typical city procurement process.⁷⁷ The money donated is then transferred to Tree Time, with North Brooklyn Parks Alliance as a fiscal sponsor.

Ultimately, the Fund hopes to plant 3,400 new trees over the next four years, maxing out the district's capacity. According to the office, a tree planted through the Fund costs \$2,600 to plant, or almost \$1,000 less than the city average. But so far there has been no coordinated effort to expand this model to districts citywide.

At a greater scale, Tree Time could wield a much greater impact. Like the Central Park Conservancy, where donors can fund a tree endowment, the program could galvanize corporate entities to support tree planting and maintenance, through benefit events and sponsorships. Additionally, a strengthened and expanded Tree Time program would be able to work with elected officials to create neighborhood-specific mechanisms akin to the District 33 Street Tree Fund, while also undertaking outreach to local businesses and residents.

Leverage State Funding for NYC Parks and Open Spaces

17. Boost New York City’s share of state-level parks and open space funding.

EACH YEAR, NEW YORK STATE SPENDS MILLIONS OF dollars on parks and green space from Buffalo to Montauk, whether for renovation, trail maintenance, or resiliency efforts. But too little has gone towards parks and open space in New York City. For example, in 2022, only \$1.8 million in state Environmental Protection Fund grants—or less than 1 percent—went to projects in the five boroughs.⁷⁸ Queens, Brooklyn, and Staten Island received none.

Likewise, the state’s economic development mechanisms have too often missed opportunities to invest in New York City’s parks and open spaces. New York City’s Economic Development Corporation spends significantly on open space projects, like Hunter’s Point South Park in Long Island City and Stapleton Waterfront Park on Staten Island, given their value in economic

revitalization. But it’s a different story at the state level. Between 2017 to 2022, New York City parks-related projects received just \$8.3 million from the Regional Economic Development Council (REDC), which offers economic development grants to local municipalities, or less than \$2 million per year—a small fraction of the \$658.1 million awarded to New York City by the REDC over 11 funding rounds.⁷⁹ In that same period, Long Island’s parks and open space received \$10.6 million in REDC grants. The city’s Albany delegation should step up efforts to ensure that the city is taking home its fair share of dollars for green space—and city officials should look to the state’s economic development programs for a creative source of under-tapped dollars for parks and open space.

18. Harness the Environmental Bond Act and cap-and-invest program to build parks and open spaces in underserved NYC communities.

NEW YORK STATE’S AMBITIOUS CLIMATE LEADERSHIP and Community Protection Act has set a target of 40 percent of pre-1990 carbon emissions by 2030 and 85 percent by 2050. State lawmakers have introduced a series of new funding measures to meet those goals, a portion of which should go to creating new parks and green spaces to underserved communities impacted most by the climate crisis. In the months ahead, city leaders should make sure that the five boroughs receive their fair share of these new funds.

In 2022, a ballot referendum approved the \$4.2 billion Environmental Bond Act, which will fund climate-related projects across New York State. According to the measure, between 35 and 40 percent of spending must go towards “environmental justice” communities, or areas with a certain level of poverty and history of climate neglect. However, the state-adopted equity criteria prioritize areas outside of New York City and exclude significant areas of NYC Parks property located adjacent to environmental justice

communities.⁸⁰ New York City’s Albany delegation should pursue legislation in the upcoming session that will ensure that this monumental investment is accessible to NYC Parks—and, by extension, to disadvantaged communities across the five boroughs that deserve an equal shot at this historic pool of funding.

Additionally, the city stands to benefit from New York State’s coming “cap-and-invest” program but will need to launch a major new effort to ensure it is not overlooked. This first-in-the-nation program will set up a marketplace where polluters will be capped at certain levels of emissions, after which they must buy credits for allowances⁸¹. The funds from credit sales will then be held in a “climate action fund,” and at least two-thirds of that money—an expected \$1 billion—will go towards the state’s decarbonization efforts. Parks are a natural target for investment. Green spaces act as natural carbon “sinks”; they also lower temperatures during extreme heat events and retain stormwater during downpours, both of which will become more common in

the coming years. With an outsized portion of emissions deriving from New York City, parks in communities most impacted by rising tides and temperatures should be prioritized in the rulemaking process.

“I hope the money finds its way here, because communities like ours are starved of green space,” says Arif Ullah, executive director of South Bronx Unite, an

environmental justice nonprofit. The neighborhood has some of the nation’s worst asthma rates; during 2023’s wildfires, hazardous air quality landed more children there in the hospital.⁸² “When you consider how much money these companies stand to make, there’s an opportunity to direct some of the profits towards the areas impacted by the infrastructure being built.”

Maximize Funding from Washington for NYC Parks and Green Space

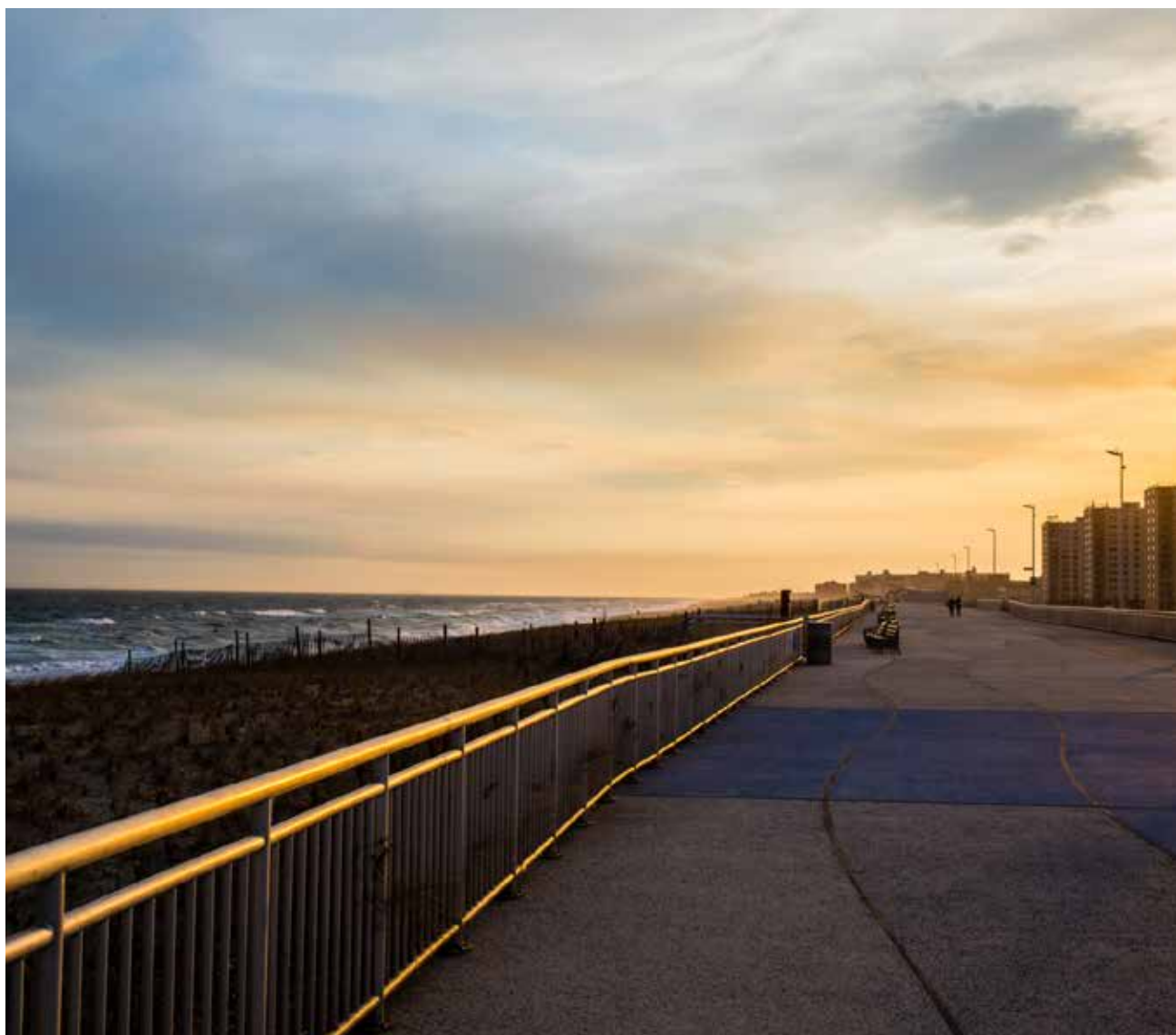


19. Create a matching fund for federal climate and infrastructure dollars.

THE INFLATION REDUCTION ACT (IRA) IS BEST KNOWN for electric vehicle subsidies and green energy credits but tucked away in the law are significant funds for urban forestry (\$1 billion) and coastal resilience (\$2.6 billion). In addition, the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law is primarily focused on roads and rails, but there are relevant programs that could be justified for park space, like Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality (CMAQ) and Transportation Alternative Program (TAP) grants, which have historically funded greenways and rails-to-trails initiatives.

To make the most of these generational federal investments for the city's public parks, city officials will need to double down on efforts to help NYC Parks and a range of community-based organizations develop the strongest possible applications for new funding. In addition, the city should consider options for working with private funders to develop a matching fund for parks-related climate and infrastructure projects that receive new federal funding.

There are some early signs of promise when it comes to drawing down federal funding for the city's



parcs—but much more needs to be done. Over the past five years, a little under \$1 million was awarded to NYC Parks in federal TAP and CMAQ grants, out of almost \$30 million in total. Among of the new federal infrastructure funds already allocated by the Adams administration, NYC Parks will receive \$47 million to bring on-site water infrastructure to 260 community gardens, and \$7.25 million to work with NYCDOT and NYCEDC on new greenways citywide.⁸³ In September, \$20 million in Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) grants were announced for New York City’s parks and open spaces, which will fund tree planting and environmental job training in underserved communities throughout the Bronx and Queens.⁸⁴ (Another \$1.5 billion worth in applications is currently being submitted.) To date, just under 7 percent of the \$1 billion in new federal infrastructure funds allocated so far have been allocated to projects in the city’s parks.

A coalition of groups, led by NYC Parks, are actively vying for IRA funds. If all applications are awarded, the

natural resources group of NYC Parks, responsible for the tree canopy and natural areas, could have sustainable funding for five years.

The city should be doing everything in its power to leverage this moment. One way to do that is by launching a matching fund, which could stitch together operating funds from public and private sources to complement the influx of federal dollars, which often go to capital projects. This would allow the city to multiply the impact of this massive local investment by ensuring that the projects are cared for in the years to come. Similar efforts have been hatched in Minnesota⁸⁵ and Vermont.⁸⁶ Bruce Katz, an urban policy expert at Drexel University, says that these types of creative approaches will help ensure the once-in-a-generation opportunity is put to good use. “Cities will have to do some jerry-rigging. The incentives can be monetized by anchor institutions and governments,” says Katz. “But this is [about] stretching everything.”

20. Tap innovative federal funding streams that can benefit NYC’s parks—but rarely do.

IN ADDITION TO MAJOR NEW INVESTMENTS IN CLIMATE and infrastructure projects, the federal government administers several long-running programs aimed at spurring local community development. But while New York City has benefited extensively from these programs over the years, to date there have been very few efforts to tap these financing mechanisms to support the development of new parks and open spaces. To help pay for the construction of new parks and open spaces in the years ahead, city officials should consider options for partnering with the private sector and community development organizations to leverage innovative federal financing tools for park creation.

One key opportunity is the New Market Tax Credit (NMTC) program, a federal financing mechanism in which tax credits are deployed to spur private capital investment in low-income communities. Typical uses of these community development dollars include mixed-use real estate projects, health centers, and charter schools. However, while the rules do not preclude funding from being allocated to build parks, this idea has yet to take root in New York City. Encouragingly, some recent projects build elsewhere in the country are tapping

NMTC financing to create open space—and New York City should follow suit.

The nonprofit behind the 11th Street Bridge Park in Washington, DC, which will connect two sides of the Anacostia River, crafted an equitable open space development plan early in the process, detailing how the park would complement housing, workforce development, small business creation, and arts and cultural efforts in the District. The project’s planners tapped an innovative mix of funding and financing sources, with half of the park’s construction budget coming from New Market Tax Credits, private developers, philanthropic funders, and additional federal grants.⁸⁷ Similarly, Destination Crenshaw, in Los Angeles, California, secured \$30 million in New Market Tax Credits for construction and operating expenses by demonstrating how the community-led redevelopment of this historic Black neighborhood, which will include new parks and plazas, could attract future investment.⁸⁸

Community development groups in New York State have received New Market Tax Credits, with a total of 281 investments and \$3.5 million in recent years. But

so far, none have tapped into this growing opportunity to intertwine community development and parks for potential funding.

Asima Jansveld, the chief program and engagement officer at Friends of the High Line, which consults on projects through its High Line Network, says that New York City is behind the curve here. “More and more projects we work with are going after programs like New Market Tax Credits for development,” says Jansveld. “It’s a bit more out of the box and people aren’t thinking about it but that’s what parks need to be doing right now. They can get a significant amount of money.”

New York City should also pursue federal funding for workforce development programs that can help NYC Parks with its most pressing staffing needs. For nearly thirty years, NYC Parks’ primary job training program has been the Parks Opportunity Program (POP), which hires and trains as many as 2,000 workers annually, largely focused on surface-level care, like litter cleanup.

This program was eliminated in November during the latest round of budget cuts, before being restored in January 2024.⁸⁹

However, even with funding for POP, NYC Parks has lacked the resources to transform its signature workforce program into a full-fledged career training initiative. As a result, only a fraction of POP participants receive higher-level training aligned with many of the system’s greatest staffing needs—like masonry, electrical work, pruning, and plumbing. Going forward, the Adams administration should pursue federal and state workforce development funding—including specific funding for apprenticeship programs—to help NYC Parks launch an enhanced green jobs training corps that will create pathways into high-need positions like skilled trades and training existing parks workers in flood mitigation, solar power installation, forest and natural areas care, gardening and horticulture, green infrastructure maintenance, and other areas of need.

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