

Play Fair for Parks Coalition Written Testimony

FY27 Preliminary Budget Hearing | New York City Council Parks Committee, Monday, 3/23

Chair Hankerson and members of the Parks Committee: **My name is Anne Saxon-Hersh, and I represent the Friends of Dag Hammarskjold Plaza.** I submit this written testimony as a member of the Play Fair for Parks Coalition to advocate for NYC's parks and open spaces. You have already heard the math from the Coalition so I will not repeat the chilling \$ figures provided by our leadership.

We all know that great cities provide great parks. The public ranks parks as a Number-One priority for quality of life, health, neighborhood property values, and climate resiliency, yet the beleaguered Parks agency continues to be the first on the chopping block to suffer budget cuts.

Groups like ours are encouraged to serve as stewards of the city's greenspaces, but we face an uphill battle, governed by an agency that has been reduced to skeleton staffing levels over a long period of disinvestment.

As a founder of this nonprofit 501c3 organization with more than 25 years of service, **I have yet to see the city allocate 1 percent of its annual operating budget to Parks, regardless of campaign promises and economic cycles.** While the city council does its best to negotiate on behalf of parks, we are left with the same system.

Mayor Mandami's Preliminary Budget not only fails to allocate 1% of the city budget to Parks, it eliminates 100 Parks staffing lines as a condition to end the agency's hiring freeze, adding to the 600 staffing lines cut since 2023 under the Adams Administration.

Hammarskjold Plaza accommodates numerous protests and cultural rallies as gateway to the United Nations. This 1.6 acre Plaza served as the epicenter of the 2017 Women's March, the largest in NYC history. In an area starved for parkland, this commons is the largest open space in east midtown Manhattan, providing an urban oasis for local residents and workers. Its Katharine Hepburn Garden appears in tourism and hotel guidebooks.

- While Hammarskjold Plaza stands to benefit from a \$4 million capital renovation, we witness first hand the overwhelming workload imposed on a skeleton staff, making it difficult to organize our own activities, inform the public and galvanize resources to fill a formidable maintenance and operations gap.
- As the largest urban forest in east midtown Manhattan, Hammarskjold Plaza requires professional pruning. Dead tree limbs continually put the public at risk in a park that accommodates huge crowds (capacity 8000).

- Further, we are informed by DPR that there is no replacement for the gardener who serviced the Plaza once weekly and used power equipment, including a chain saw to remove dead trees and limbs.
- Hammarck Plaza's SIX fountains require skilled plumbers and electricians to stay in good repair. While capital funding builds and restores fountains, there is no operational budget to maintain them.

We are exhausted! Flagship parks with licenses to operate multi-million dollar budgets are held up as models, but the formula does not fit most neighborhoods.

NYC's 30,000 acres of parkland are essential public infrastructure supporting public health, climate resilience, recreation, and quality of life in every neighborhood.

Our parks system is one of NYC's most important affordable resources, providing free programming and places for neighbors to exercise, play, and commune with nature.

We urge the Mayor and City Council to restore staffing, invest in park maintenance, and move toward dedicating 1% of the city budget to parks.

END