



Ensuring the Short and Long Term Preservation of the City's Natural Forest

New York City Council Committee on Parks and Recreation Hearing

Testimony by Lynda Tower, Vice President of Operations at the Riverside Park Conservancy

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Good afternoon Chair Grodenchik, my name is Lynda Tower and I am the Vice President of Park Operations at Riverside Park Conservancy. We are a non-profit organization that provides about half of the operating budget for Riverside Park each year. We work alongside the NYC Parks Department and community volunteers to maintain nearly 400 acres of waterfront parkland in one of the densest urban environments in the world. Our mission is to help restore, maintain, and improve Riverside Park and parts of Ft Washington Park, in partnership with the City of New York, for the enjoyment and benefit of all New Yorkers.

We view Riverside Park – and all urban green spaces – as essential New York City infrastructure. Providing adequate, ongoing care helps ensure the ecological and social health of not only our local community, but also of the city as a whole. I am here today to explain what the Conservancy is doing in Riverside Park specifically, and how that fits in a larger framework of forest management in New York City. I then have three suggestions for how the local government can take real, tangible steps to better support the City's forested areas.

Riverside Park is almost entirely a built environment, thus the natural areas occurring there face unique pressures. Our park is unique in its history, topography, and diversity. Spanning six miles along the Hudson River waterfront, the 400 acres of park land contain large sweeps of natural habitat, and includes 60 of the 7,300 acres of forested natural areas in New York City.

Our restoration goals focus on establishing essential forest functions such as supporting water quality, adding habitat value, and educating our community to be active stewards of the park. The Conservancy team has evaluated the best opportunities for forest and habitat restoration in Riverside Park, and has created a set of goals that guide our work:

1. **Support water quality of the Hudson River** by addressing erosion, revegetating denuded slopes, and strategically planting areas to more efficiently capture runoff from city streets and park paths.
2. **Improve habitat for migratory birds** traveling along the Hudson River by creating and sustaining needed forage and cover at appropriate times of year.
3. **Increase ecological diversity** by controlling and replacing invasive plant species with plant material that can support regional forest health.
4. **Educating and enabling our community** to be active stewards of natural areas by providing experiential learning opportunities for school groups, youth internship programs such as our Teen Corps Program, and through more than 40,000 hours of hands-on volunteer involvement for people of all ages and backgrounds every year.

The Riverside Park Conservancy considers the ongoing restoration and maintenance of Riverside Park's natural areas to be one of the organization's top priorities. This past year, the Conservancy hired a full-time Woodland Caretaker who is tasked with improving the overall health of this precious natural area. In tandem with these on-the-ground improvements, the Conservancy facilitates direct involvement with the community. Volunteers take part in large-scale projects like invasive removal and planting.

We are always returning to the bigger picture context of our work. NYC's forested areas are at a critical tipping point, constantly threatened by invasive plants, garbage dumping, and environmental pollution. There are hundreds of underutilized, neglected acres -- even including overlooked spaces along exit ramps or near train tracks -- that should be improved and utilized to create valuable connections between fragmented habitats and neighborhoods. There is great potential for all urban green spaces to function as an interconnected network of different natural habitats that will support one another in vital ways. Riverside Park's 60 acres of forested area is just one piece of this puzzle.

It is widely accepted that there are tangible social benefits resulting from equitable, safe access to forested areas for passive recreation. We strongly support the Natural Areas Conservancy's *Forest Management Framework for NYC*, released this year, which concludes that time spent in natural areas improves cognitive and emotional well-being, reduces crime, and fortifies social cohesion.

As noted in the report, 25% of NYC's parkland is insufficiently managed due to a lack of funding; year after year, the NYC Parks Department's operating budget is less than one half of 1% of the City's total annual budget. That means all of the parkland throughout all five boroughs must share less than 1% of the overall budget; and that is insufficient to protect all our natural areas. With greater support, much of the unmanaged areas could be transformed into functioning habitat and valuable public oases for passive recreation, fostering a more sustainable, equitable, and ultimately resilient City.

I conclude by asking three things of our local government. First, I ask the City Council to recognize our forests for the essential functions they provide to New York City while understanding that they are not self-perpetuating systems. Given the harsh urban conditions they exist in – compounded by the reality of climate change – urban forests need to be re-conceptualized as a crucial investment in terms of both 21st Century infrastructure and public health.

Second, in order to provide the long term preservation desired, the City Council needs to provide ongoing support for other organizations positioned to provide long-term stewardship of restored forests.

The third necessary step for the City Council to take is to actively prioritize implementation of the Natural Areas Conservancy's *Forest Management Framework for NYC* by providing funding and additional outreach support for NYC Parks and its partners. To facilitate the success of this strategy, a comprehensive and equitable funding plan for the ongoing management of all our City's forests must be established sooner rather than later.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and I am happy to answer any questions.