Case Study

Maintaining New York City's Parks in the Face of Budget Cuts

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Columbia University, Updated August 2013

I. Background: NYC's Parks: A Brief History and Description of Resources

One of the most important municipal services delivered directly to the public is parks and recreation. As our metropolitan areas become more densely settled, the need for public spaces has increased. Local parks serve two critical functions: recreation and land preservation. These are interrelated functions since the most frequent form of recreation is walking and viewing, and the most frequent use of parks is walking and enjoying nature.

In the tight fiscal environment of the last several decades, parks have fared poorly in the competition for scarce municipal resources. In New York City, the Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) lost over half of its staff during the 1990s due to budget reductions. Now, following Mayor Bloomberg's years of increased funding for capital projects, the department is still suffering to keep up with the growth. Before the fiscal crisis of the 1970s, New York City's parks were more than geographic locations: they were operating facilities. They were staffed with maintenance workers, a parks superintendent and recreation personnel. The elimination of these positions has left parks as "places" rather than "facilities" and left them vulnerable to vandalism, litter, misconduct and crime.

The reason that parks have done so poorly in New York City's budget competition is the perception that parks are not essential services. Unlike budget cuts to sanitation, water supply, police force, fire response and education, the impacts of cutbacks on parks have not been life threatening and have been largely gradual. Nevertheless, parks are essential resources for people living in cities and have a significant impact on quality of life. For most New Yorkers, parks provide their main source of access to outside spaces—they are everyone's backyards. For families with children, parks are essential sources of child development— offering intellectual, physical and social stimulation. For adults, the quality of parks and recreation facilities is directly related to perceptions of wellbeing.

Where there is a gap in providing services, the private sector steps in to profit on the demand for recreation. One indicator of the importance of recreational

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resources is the development of private, indoor playgrounds by companies such as Discovery Zone and by the addition of playground equipment to fast-food franchises such as McDonald's. Similarly, private health clubs, gyms, tennis centers and golf clubs have all seen substantial growth over the past several decades. Within cities, privately owned public spaces are popping up in the lobbies, rooftops or courtyards of giant office buildings such as Trump Towers, large banks and hotels (NYC Department of City Planning, 2013). Another indicator of the importance of parks has been the creation and growth of non-profit, community-based organizations that raise funds for neighborhood parks and contribute volunteer labor for park upkeep.

The story of the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation is one of the more interesting and instructive sagas in the history of municipal administration in the United States. The first major expansion of public park space occurred in the late nineteenth century when Frederick Law Olmstead and Calvert Vaux designed Central Park in Manhattan (in 1858) and Prospect Park in the then-separate city of Brooklyn (1865). In 1872, Olmstead designed Riverside Park and shortly thereafter the city acquired 3,495 acres of parkland, including St. Mary's, Claremont, Crotona, Bronx, Van Cortlandt and Pelham Bay Parks.

During the early twentieth century, the city focused on enhancing existing parks with playgrounds and recreational opportunities for children. During the 1920s and early 1930s, the parks suffered under the dual burdens of the Great Depression and the corrupt Tammany Hall political machine. Robert Caro described the city's park system in the early 1930s as "the city's legacy from reformers who had fought against long odds for their creation; under Tammany they had become fiefs administered for private gain...scabs on the face of the city" (Caro, 1974:331).

The city parks system experienced a complete turn around under the strong leadership of Robert Moses, who served as parks commissioner from 1934 to 1960. During the Moses years, the area devoted to parks more than doubled, beaches were renovated and hundreds of new recreational facilities were constructed. This pattern of growth came to an abrupt halt with the onset of the New York City fiscal crisis of the mid-1970s.

Parks suffered under severe budgetary constraints throughout the 1970s and into the early 1980s. A new era of restoration and growth began slowly in the 1980s, first under the leadership of Gordon Davis and then during Henry Stern's first term as Parks Commissioner. But from 1989 to 1993 severe fiscal constraints and staff reductions again affected parks management during the

administration of Mayor David Dinkins and his Parks Commissioner Betsy Gotbaum.

Compared to parks programs in other major cities in the United States, New York City's program is extensive, highly utilized and minimally funded. Since 2007, city parks have gotten more attention under Mayor Michael Bloomberg's PlaNYC, a sustainability plan to prepare the city for one million more residents by 2030 (City of New York a, 2013). Under PlaNYC, the administration set the goal that all New Yorkers will be within a ten minute walk from a park. "Since the mayor took office in January 2002, the city has committed almost $4.5 billion to improve parks and playgrounds, plant an unprecedented number of trees and increase the city's parkland by almost 750 acres, according to the department" (Saul 2013). However, budgets are still tight and in the last few years, this lack of staff has resulted in increased crime in parks, the highest in the last 5 years (Saul, 2013.)

New York City's park system is large and the city's Parks Department is responsible for over 5,000 properties throughout the city's five boroughs, accounting for 29,000 acres of land. In 2013, this included over 800 athletic fields, 1,000 playgrounds, 550 tennis courts, 1,200 monuments, 23 historic houses, 66 swimming pools, 48 recreation centers, 14 miles of beaches, 13 golf courses, 2 million park trees and 650,000 street trees (City of New York Parks & Recreation a, 2013).

Amongst other highly populated and dense cities, New York ranks the highest in park acres as percentage of land area at 19.5%, but low on the list of park acres per capita, at 4.5 acres per resident (Trust for Public Land, 2011). In terms of spending and services, New York ranks 12th in the nation on spending per resident, spending a total of $1.3 billion in 2009, which is only $158 per resident. Park employees per 10,000 residents ranked very low for New York in 2010, coming in at about 6.9 (Trust for Public Land 2011).

The issue of park employees is a particularly contentious one, since many critics believe that the NYC Parks system is understaffed. In 2013, New York City funded the Parks Department to hire "207 workers to assist in park maintenance and operations, with the goal of making parks cleaner; 96 maintenance and trades workers, technicians and analysts to maintain play equipment, boilers, fences and lighting systems; 30 tree climbers and pruners to preserve the city's investment in trees," (Saul 2013). This investment is slated to cost $23 million for the 414 new employees added to the 3,286 full-time workers and 3,128 seasonal and part-time employees (Saul, 2013). Holly Leicht, executive director of New

Yorkers for Parks, an advocacy group, noted the recent uptick in crime rate in these public spaces and said "Quite simply, New York's park system can't be maintained at the high level we've come to expect over the past two decades unless the Parks Department has sufficient staffing," (Saul 2013).

II. The Current Situation: Parks Budgets in 2013

Mayor Michael Bloomberg took office in 2002 with a plan to revitalize the city. Shortly after coming into office, Bloomberg appointed Adrian Benepe as the Parks Department Commissioner. Benepe was a long-time parks veteran who had served in the Parks Department or other New York-based public interest organizations throughout his professional career. Benepe succeeded a long-line of resourceful and innovative commissioners, including the legendary Robert Moses, Gordon Davis under Mayor Ed Koch, Betsy Gotbaum under Mayor David Dinkins and Henry Stern under Mayors Ed Koch and Rudolph Giuliani. These commissioners are credited with orchestrating a tremendous turnaround for the parks system and for the quality of life of New York City residents.

Benepe followed in previous commissioners' footsteps, and up until his exit in 2012 for the non-profit, Trust for Public Land, executed, "a major expansion of New York City's parks system, with over 730 acres of new park and 2,000 more acres at Fresh Kills Park on Staten Island are still to be added. Over his tenure, the Bloomberg administration budgeted $4.5 billion for building new parks and renovating existing parks, $3 billion of which has already been spent" (City of New York, 2012). Bloomberg appointed Veronica White to succeed Benepe in Fall 2012, giving her a little over a year to make an impression before Bloomberg ends his tenure as mayor at the end of 2013. White has worked in public service since Mayor Edward Koch's administration, and is trained as an environmental lawyer with experience in the Department of Housing Preservation and Development and the Center for Economic Opportunity (Foderaro, 2012). So far, she has seen though Bloomberg's PlaNYC proposals for revitalization of McCarren Pool Park and construction of Soundview Park in the Bronx (Foderaro, 2012).

Parks leadership has had to be creative and disciplined to ensure adequate funding. Commissioners have done this by implementing innovative management strategies, such as Total Quality Management (TQM) under Gotbaum to allow the agency to do more with less; privatization under Stern, and an era of increased public-private partnership under Benepe.

For the 2013 fiscal year, the Bloomberg administration announced that they targeted increases of more than $28 million to Parks' budget[1], including $9.6 million for summer seasonal services, "which includes $1.4 million for pools, $1.0 million for playground associates, and $7.2 million for other seasonal needs, including seasonal aides and park workers." (New Yorkers for Parks 2012). The advocacy group announced that such seasonal improvements will keep pools open for regular hours the full season. The Executive Director of New Yorkers for Parks commended, "the Council and Administration not only for restoring seasonal funds, but also for saving nearly 850 maintenance jobs and bolstering essential funding for tree pruning. In recent years, there has been a disconnect between the robust capital investments being put into new and existing flagship parks and the depletion of the maintenance budget," (New Yorkers for Parks 2012). However, they added that these improvements, while noteworthy, do not completely solve the Park's Department's chronic budgetary shortfall.

For fiscal year 2014, the budget was passed with a decrease in funding from 2013. The city has estimated operating expenses of $351.9 million for fiscal year 2014. This represents a net decrease of $98.2 million from the previous year's budget, which was higher because it included federal funding associated with rebuilding after Hurricane Sandy (Bloomberg and Page, 2013). The 2014 Budget also details the Department's 2014-2023 Ten-Year Capital Strategy, totaling $1.03 billion, the majority of which will be spent in the first four years. The most notable components of the Capital Strategy are long-term reconstruction of beaches damaged by Sandy (estimated at $258.9 million) and long-term reconstruction of parks and playgrounds damaged by Sandy (estimated at $94 million, up from $24.9 million the previous year). The city is expecting decreased revenue between 2013 and 2014.

Public Private Partnerships

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[1] The NYC budget starts in the fall when the various City agencies consult with the 59 Community Boards and submit their budget requests to Office of Management and Budget (OMB). Around January 16, the Mayor releases the Preliminary Budget and Four Year Financial Plan for the ensuing years. This is followed by a period of public comment during which the 59 Community Boards, the five Borough Boards and the City Council make recommendations on the budget to the Mayor. The Mayor then submits the Executive Budget to the City Council on or about April 26. All parties make formal responses, the horse-trading begins, and finally, a consensus is reached on or before June 30th (City of New York b, 2013).

New York City has seen a lot of benefit in forming partnerships with private enterprises to fund and manage parks, the most famous being Central Park and Bryant Park. Though this brings in money for parks, it is criticized because it reduces parks as a priority in the budgeting process: "Instead of upping the Parks Department budget, the Mayor only seeks out more private money. The result is that public city parks are being handed off to the highest bidder, as commercial opportunities for private companies with virtually no public input, transparency or control" (Swan, 2013). The Central Park Conservancy has partnered with the City of New York since 1980 working to reverse the decline in upkeep during the 1970s. The Conservancy provides 90% of the operations staff and $58.3 million of the budget on an annual basis, while the City of New York picks up the rest of the tab (Central Park Conservancy 2010). Bryant Park, another public-private partnership, is maintained jointly by Bryant Park Corporation and the 34th Street Partnership. It was restored in the 1980s as a historic site and by the 1990s, the lunchtime headcount would reach 4,000, with crime reduced by 92% (Bryant Park Corporation, 2013).

These parks, and newer additions such as the Chelsea Highline and Brooklyn Bridge Park, are among the city's most beautiful public spaces. They have also generated a lot of revenue and seem to be self-sustaining. Self-sufficiency for some other projects, such as Governor's Island and Hudson River Park, remains to be demonstrated (Kusisto, 2013). These partnerships are not always welcomed due to the perception that they may create disparity amongst less desirable locations that are more dependent on city funding. New Yorkers for Parks claim, "Scores of neighborhood parks have not benefited from the huge influx of capital dollars that has flowed into the handful of large parks targeted by the administration for upgrades," (Foderaro, 2013). Additionally, many parks rely on their elected representatives to bring in money for capital projects and New Yorkers for Parks have argues that this, "creates an inefficient, inequitable and potentially politicized process," (Foderaro, 2013).

In addition to the parks themselves, partnerships such as Shape Up NYC are increasing use of parks while simultaneously furthering Bloomberg's agenda of combating obesity. The partnership includes NYC Service, Equinox Fitness, Empire Blue Cross Blue Shield, NYC Housing Authority, NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene and the NYC Department of Education. The program offers free fitness classes every week at locations across New York City (City of New York c, 2013).

On the Horizon

Additional public private partnerships are also being developed. Recently, the Downtown Brooklyn Partnership announced plans to partner with Willoughby Operating Company who plan to lease more than an acre on Willoughby for a 700-car underground garage beneath a new park (Satow, 2013). There is opposition to this project because it displaces residents in a building that will be demolished for the project (O'Neill 2012). The city obtained use of the property through eminent domain, the notion that the state may take private land for public use, as long as they compensate the individuals for their loss. So far, the majority of families have been moved successfully (Satow, 2013). The city plans to begin demolition in the summer of 2013 and completion of the project by 2016.

III. The Issue of Park Equity

The Parks Department has been able to raise substantial private funds to fill in gaps and expand programs despite city budget constraints. Former Commissioner Benepe has expressed optimism that donors will continue to give generously to support the parks.

New Yorkers have been generous with their time and money in support of some of the city's parks. Organizations that have been active in supporting New York's parks include the Partnerships for Parks, the Central Park Conservancy, Friends of the Highline, the City Parks Foundation, the Prospect Park Alliance, the Riverside Park Fund, Friends of Van Cortlandt Park, the Historic House Trust, and hundreds of neighborhood Friends of Parks groups.

Some of the city's best maintained parks, including Central, Bryant, the Highline and Prospect Parks, have been improved and maintained in large part by private conservancies who raise significant amounts of money, operate programs and hire staff (including maintenance staff) under contract to the Parks Department. The New York City Department of Parks and Recreation contributed only 40% of the operating costs for Prospect Park as of 2013. This also presents a problem for maintenance, as some Alliances grant permission to use the parks for events such as the Great Googa Mooga, but leave the park clean-up to the city's budget. Increasingly the city is requiring that these events pay for their own clean-up. Some parks that rely almost exclusively on city funds and lack community and financial involvement have fallen into disrepair.

This disparity has led some analysts to speculate on the development of a "two-tier" park system in the City of New York as a downside to the agency's

dependence on private support (Ibid, et.al.). As a part of this system, Manhattan's more prominent parks raise significant private resources while small, mostly outer-borough parks struggle for even the minimum levels of staff, service, cleanliness and safety. While these private groups may provide excellent examples for other parks across the city, not every public park has the financial and organizational resources available within its neighborhood to establish an organization with the resources of a Central Park Conservancy or a Prospect Park Alliance. Recent cuts in the Parks Department budget may threaten smaller and less prominent parks.

A July, 2005 New York Times article detailed the conditions of some of the most neglected parks and noted this growing disparity. In the article, Commissioner Benepe justified the conditions of some of the city's parks by saying that "just because something is in our inventory doesn't mean it's worth taking care of….This is a big system and you can't address every little problem." However, as the NY Times article noted, "problems", in the case of the 3.3-acre University Woods Park in the Bronx, included used condoms, hypodermic needles, heroin wrappers, and human and animal feces. Upper Manhattan's 119-acre Highbridge Park, hosted an extensive homeless shantytown.

Rowena Daly of the private advocacy group, New Yorkers for Parks, when considering the conditions of many small, neighborhood parks noted: "We're talking about broken drinking fountains, littered pathways, dead animals, graffiti and broken glass. I have literally seen little kids in the Bronx sitting on bits of glass and cigarette butts, and the park doesn't even have a broom" (William, Timothy, "Parks Even the Parks Dept. Won't Claim," July 6, 2005).

While the maintenance, cleanliness and security of many parks have improved thanks to the diligence of the Parks staff and private citizens, many parks have been left to fend for themselves. According to New Yorkers for Parks' 2013 annual "Report Card on Large Parks," of 43 large parks ranging in size from 20 to 500 acres, no Bronx or Brooklyn park received and A and no Bronx park scored at or above the citywide average.

The management challenge facing the Parks Department is to develop a method to fund and improve the city's neighborhood parks, particularly those in disrepair and those in less wealthy neighborhoods.

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