Expanding and Improving the NYC Parks System Through *PlaNYC* Initiatives

Colleen Alderson, Emily Humes, Mary Alice Lee, Michael Marrella, Jesslyn Moser

Columbia Climate School

Research Program on Sustainability Policy & Management: 20th Anniversary of *PlaNYC*

Rohit T. Aggarwala Adjunct Professor of International and Public Affairs, Adam Freed Adjunct Professor of Sustainability, and Steven Cohen Professor in the Practice of Public Affairs Director

October 2026

DRAFT

DRAFT – FOR DISCUSSION PURPOSES ONLY
Do not cite, distribute, or quote without permission of the authors.
Prepared for PlaNYC at 20: A Retrospective on 20 Years of Sustainability Planning in NYC, December 2026

Parks are New Yorkers' backyards. An integral part of the fabric of New York City, they form a key part of the city's infrastructure that enables residents to recreate, rest, and enjoy nature – critical activities for the health and wellbeing of a densely populated city. At the start of New York City (NYC) Mayor Michael Bloomberg's term in 2002, the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation (NYC Parks) oversaw over 28,000 acres of parkland. They maintained, operated, built, and programmed city parks and cared for hundreds of thousands of trees in the public realm. This paper aims to explain the open space efforts and context prior to the release of *PlaNYC: A Greener Greater New York* (*PlaNYC*) by Mayor Bloomberg on Earth Day in 2007, the strategies used in *PlaNYC* to achieve a boost in public open space resources, and how NYC Parks continues to address open space needs as critical infrastructure for all its residents. Here we describe the development and implementation of open space acquisition and development strategies, and the evolution and prominence of the "Walk to a Park" metric in particular.

PlaNYC created a comprehensive roadmap for the expected population growth of New York City, anticipated to be one million new residents by the year 2030. Mayor Michael Bloomberg and his administration were keenly focused on the imperative for comprehensive planning to make the city more livable, healthy, and sustainable. The impact of parks and open space had tremendous potential and would be an important factor in a thriving city. Stemming from this plan, NYC Parks worked with partners, civic leaders, and community residents to improve and expand the City's public open space resources, recognizing that certain areas of the city needed more public open space.

DRAFT

DRAFT – FOR DISCUSSION PURPOSES ONLY
Do not cite, distribute, or quote without permission of the authors.
Prepared for PlaNYC at 20: A Retrospective on 20 Years of Sustainability Planning in NYC, December 2026

Bloomberg Administration: 2002-2006

During the first term of the Bloomberg administration, NYC Parks successfully expanded its portfolio by 292 acres. These additions to NYC Parks' real estate portfolio required years of effort, including obtaining capital funds, securing the required City land use approvals, completing the acquisition process, and coordination with other City and some cases New York State agencies to facilitate the transfer of government property to NYC Parks. Major initiatives and priorities leading up to *PlaNYC* included greening and beautification programs, the expansion of the City's waterfront for public-access and recreation, expanding the City's greenway network, sustaining, creating and developing public private partnerships for the NYC Parks system, programming for fitness, a recreation focus for the health and well-being of youth, natural areas restoration, and the transformation of brownfield sites into parks and community gardens.[1] These new public open spaces and historic properties expanded access for underserved areas, but more was needed and in a relatively short timeframe to expand the City's open space resources by 2030. Great strides have been achieved through the *PlaNYC* efforts to close the gap in open space access across the city.

This paper was written by current City employees at NYC Parks working in various capacities to grow and sustain the vast existing NYC park system. Colleen Alderson, Chief of Parklands and Real Estate, Emily Humes, Director of Environmental Planning and Program Delivery, and Jesslyn Moser, Project Administrator, all currently work in the Planning Unit at NYC Parks while Michael Marrella works at the Department of City Planning as Director of

[1] NYC Parks, *2002-2003 Biennial Report: Eight Seasons of Progress, Biennial Report 2004 to 2005, and Biennial Report for 2006 to 2007*, online at https://www.nycgovparks.org/news/archive (visited April 10, 2026).

DRAFT – FOR DISCUSSION PURPOSES ONLY
Do not cite, distribute, or quote without permission of the authors.
Prepared for PlaNYC at 20: A Retrospective on 20 Years of Sustainability Planning in NYC, December 2026

Climate and Sustainability Planning. Mary Alice Lee is a Director at the Trust for Public Land (TPL) and has worked on *PlaNYC* initiatives since its implementation and continues to work in partnership with open space advocates and in partnership with the City to advance these initiatives today.

Pre-*PlaNYC* Open Space Initiatives/Expansion and Context

Before *PlaNYC*, there were several periods of change to the park system as administrations and advocates responded to the changing needs of the city. In the 19th century, city limits expanded to include the Bronx, Staten Island, and Queens, bringing many iconic parks and parkways into the portfolio, such as Van Cortlandt Park and Pelham Bay Park. The Manhattan Street grid plan has been adopted in 1811, leading to the development of Union Square, Tompkins Square Park, and Madison Square Park. This period also saw the introduction of municipal greenways and public golf courses and the opening of Central Park.

The early 20th century brought a focus on recreation by elected officials and advocacy by citizens as playgrounds were improved, new recreation facilities were developed in parks, and the Parks Department started its own recreation programs. The post-World War One era saw a population boom and the creation of more parks and playgrounds across the city, encompassing approximately 2,000 acres of new parkland between 1910 and 1920.

Robert Moses, Parks Commissioner from 1934 to 1960, tripled the size of the park system. When Robert Moses began his tenure, there were 14,827 acres (including 928 acres underwater). When Robert Moses retired, park acreage had expanded to 35,760 acres with 9,670 acres of land underwater and 2,970 acres in the parkway system, in total encompassing 17.5 percent of the City's total area. Playgrounds went from 119 at his start to 861 by 1964. The means by which Robert Moses added more than 20,000 acres of new parkland are briefly

DRAFT – FOR DISCUSSION PURPOSES ONLY
Do not cite, distribute, or quote without permission of the authors.
Prepared for PlaNYC at 20: A Retrospective on 20 Years of Sustainability Planning in NYC, December 2026

summarized in a parkland acquisitions report prepared for internal use by the Parks Department, "A Brief History of New York City Park Acquisitions Since Robert Moses." This historical report, prepared by Jane Cleaver, former Chief of Parklands who worked 38 years for New York Parks beginning in 1968, completed a review of park acquisitions since Robert Moses and also encapsulated the strategies and historical context of the expansion of the park system that predated *PlaNYC*. This report also details how Robert Moses was able to expand the park system to the extent he did. She delineates five broad categories of park acquisitions over this span: natural areas, historic sites, neighborhood playgrounds, waterfront parks, and community gardens. We can expand these categories to include greenways, Privately Opened Public Spaces (POPs), and waterfront public access areas, established in 1993 through new waterfront zoning regulations. While these public open space resources did not add to the NYC Parks inventory, they did provide new public open space for such densely populated areas as Midtown and Lower Manhattan and new space for the public to experience along the waterfront in all five boroughs.

Emergence of Key *PlaNYC* Park-Centered Initiatives

PlaNYC defined actionable efforts to create a sustainable city and provide the open space needs for projected population growth. Data and metrics were key to measure success and provide accountability to ensure the City would meet *PlaNYC* goals. As part of the City's Long Term Strategic Planning effort leading up to *PlaNYC*, then Parks Commissioner Adrian Benepe shared in late 2005 several metrics to demonstrate what actions would be needed to meet the open space and recreational demands of a growing city:

- 2.5 acres of open space per 1,000 people
- 1 playground per 1,250 children
- Residents located within 1/4 mile of a park with active recreation

DRAFT – FOR DISCUSSION PURPOSES ONLY
Do not cite, distribute, or quote without permission of the authors.
Prepared for PlaNYC at 20: A Retrospective on 20 Years of Sustainability Planning in NYC, December 2026

These benchmarks were developed in consideration of National Recreation and Park Association's review of open space standards and recommendations for various types of park facilities, service areas, and quantity, based on population density, as well as goals set forth in the City's *Environmental Review Technical Manual*. The idea of a minimum distance to access public open space had been used in prior citywide open space analyses performed by the Department of City Planning as a result of the Open Space Task Force efforts in the 1980s and provided a clear idea to the public of delivering a basic City service.[2] *PlaNYC* adopted the ten-minute Walk to a Park metric as a cornerstone goal, aiming to give all New Yorkers walkable access to public open space to recreate, rest, and experience nature.

Estimates at the time projected that by 2030, over two million people would be living more than a quarter of a mile from a park with active recreation. Adhering to these standards and recommendations would mean the City would need to acquire 2,500 acres of additional parkland to close the quarter of a mile gap and develop 320 additional playgrounds to provide at least one playground per 1,250 children citywide. Constraints on establishing new parkland were understood to be limited available land for acquisition and competing demands for high-quality open space, high land and expected remediation costs, and the lengthy and cumbersome public review and approval process for City acquisitions. In light of this, best practices were put forward that would achieve the open space recommendation for the number of playgrounds by opening up schoolyard playgrounds - originally set forth as a suggested $320 million investment for 320 sites across the city over a 25-year period. An additional best practice to meet the need

[2] New York City. Office of the Mayor. "Open Space Task Force." Press Release, June 1982. New York City Municipal Archives; New York City Department of City Planning, "Recreation and Open Space in New York City: Community Districts with Lowest Parkland/Open Space Ratios,"1992. New York City Municipal Archives, Appendix page 94.

DRAFT – FOR DISCUSSION PURPOSES ONLY
Do not cite, distribute, or quote without permission of the authors.
Prepared for PlaNYC at 20: A Retrospective on 20 Years of Sustainability Planning in NYC, December 2026

for new recreation was to reprogram undeveloped and underdeveloped existing parkland. In addition to the focus on making playgrounds available for community use, existing regional-scale parks with opportunities for expanded recreational amenities and renewal were another way to provide expanded open space opportunities for communities. A critical step in bringing these two initiatives and other open space initiatives set forth in *PlaNYC* such as the planting of an additional million trees, the addition of field lighting and the retrofit of fields into synthetic turf for expanded play was the hiring of Susan Donoghue as NYC Parks Director of Open Space Initiatives. She began in June 2007 and worked in a small team to keep the agency on target to complete the initiatives with outside partners and in close coordination with Commissioner Benepe and other agency leadership. Donoghue would later become the Assistant Commissioner for Sustainability Initiatives at NYC Parks and was appointed the NYC Park Commissioner in 2022.

Playgrounds

Playgrounds emerged as a priority amenity to help close the ten-minute Walk to a Park gap for many New Yorkers, especially youth and families. NYC Parks conducted a playground analysis examining neighborhoods across the city, comparing the current and expected future population of children 14 years and under with the locations of existing playgrounds. The results of the analysis quantified the need for more playgrounds in 2010 and 2030 to meet the playground metric. Creating this expanded public open space in a relatively quick, achievable way could be carried out by opening schoolyard gates outside of school hours on weekdays and on the weekends. As existing City-controlled assets, schoolyards could be immediately improved or programmed for new and expanded community use, especially in underserved communities.

DRAFT – FOR DISCUSSION PURPOSES ONLY
Do not cite, distribute, or quote without permission of the authors.
Prepared for PlaNYC at 20: A Retrospective on 20 Years of Sustainability Planning in NYC, December 2026

This idea was presented as a best practice before the City's Long Term Strategic Planning Group in late 2005, led by then Deputy Mayor Daniel Doctoroff.

Precedent for larger community use of schoolyards was set through the City's Jointly Operated Playground program, begun decades prior.[3] In New York City, community use of schoolyards outside of school hours existed with over 250 "jointly operated playgrounds" in operation by 2007, yet hundreds more schoolyards at the time were not open outside school hours. Site selection, funding, design, construction, maintenance, and operation of schoolyard spaces were undertaken jointly between NYC Parks and New York City Public Schools (NYCPS) -formally called the Department of Education and previously the City's public education being led by the Board of Education- to provide students with the outdoor spaces needed while also becoming usable spaces for neighborhood residents after-school hours and on the weekends.

In addition, The Trust for Public Land (TPL) had an established partnership with the NYCPS and the New York City School Construction Authority (SCA) to turn empty asphalt lots into amenity-rich schoolyards through a participatory design program with school and community input. SCA is an independent public-benefit corporation of New York State created in the 1980s to carry out the planning, design, and construction of public schools, including outdoor schoolyard space after the cessation of the Board of Education in 2002. TPL identified high-need schools that had an existing Community Based Organization (CBO) that could take on the role of "community sponsor," to engage in light maintenance of the playground (emptying

[3] New York City Department of Parks and Board of Education, *Jointly Operated Playgrounds* (New York: Department of Parks, 1956.

DRAFT – FOR DISCUSSION PURPOSES ONLY
Do not cite, distribute, or quote without permission of the authors.
Prepared for PlaNYC at 20: A Retrospective on 20 Years of Sustainability Planning in NYC, December 2026

trash, gardening) and run supervised programming on-site. At the time of *PlaNYC,* TPL had already designed and built 17 playgrounds as part of this partnership.

Implementation of Schoolyards and Regional Parks Initiatives

In 2007 when *PlaNYC* was first published, the plan was for 290 schoolyard sites to be opened to communities outside of school hours, with 69 turnkey sites (meaning they were deemed to be in good enough condition to be opened immediately) and 221 sites requiring renovation. These sites were named "Schoolyards to Playgrounds" and distinct from the Jointly Operated Program, primarily due to the maintenance strategy relying solely upon school custodial staff, rather than NYC Parks staff and NYCPS to jointly maintain and operate the spaces. The selected sites were divided into three separate tiers. Tier 1 were the 69 "turnkey" schoolyards that had existing amenities. By July 2007, these 69 schoolyards had opened, already equipped for public use with an estimated expansion of 100,000 children now within a walking distance to a public open space.[4] Tier 2 were sites that needed-moderate improvements. Each of the 161 of Tier 2 sites received $400,000 for design and construction in City funding. Tier 2 sites had a series of three design sessions: an initial site meeting to discuss how the yard was used and what stakeholders would like to see in the renovation, a design day/charrette, which included stakeholders from the school (administration, teachers, students) and community members (parents, neighbors, local organizations that served the school) and a design presentation day, where schools and community members would review a schematic of the final design and make

[4] City of New York Department of Parks and Recreation, "Schoolyards to Playgrounds Initiative Is Launched", The Daily Plant, July 19, 2007 online at https://www.nycgovparks.org/news/archive (visited April 10, 2026); Trust for Public Land Media Advisory "NYC Launches "Schoolyard to Playground" Initiative, July 2, 2007.

DRAFT
DRAFT – FOR DISCUSSION PURPOSES ONLY
Do not cite, distribute, or quote without permission of the authors.
Prepared for PlaNYC at 20: A Retrospective on 20 Years of Sustainability Planning in NYC, December 2026

any needed changes. Tier 3 were larger, more complex sites with $1.3 million in City funds allocated for design and construction.

Because of their existing partnership with DOE and SCA, Trust for Public Land (TPL) became the City's nonprofit partner for the Schoolyards to Playgrounds initiative. TPL worked closely with Parks staff in finalizing site selection of non-JOP sites, with Parks playing the key role in analyzing data at the neighborhood scale to determine which areas to target for the program. TPL led the community engagement component (from introducing schools to the initiative to final concept approval) and helped connect NYC Parks and the School Construction Authority (SCA) at monthly meetings so that the program could run smoothly across both jurisdictions. As part of the program, TPL also built 25 playgrounds and raised $14M in private funds to cover the cost of community outreach, participatory design, and post-opening stewardship support.

Tier 3 sites in particular benefitted from TPL's intensive three-month participatory design program which allowed the entire school community to be involved in the design. Students, teachers, parents and neighbors conducted site research, voted on priorities, and laid out draft designs for the space. This participatory design process ensured the users of the park were the designers of the park, instilling a sense of ownership and cultivating the next generation of park stewards. TPL also created seasonal Stewardship Workshops for both Tier 2 and Tier 3 sites, as they opened. At the well-attended workshops, school leaders and custodial staff could meet to share successes and problems and learn from each other and experts. The *PlaNYC* program benefitted from there being flexibility to move money from one site to another if there was a particular problem to address at a site. This budget flexibility was an essential tool made possible by the strong working relationship between TPL and the SCA.

DRAFT

DRAFT – FOR DISCUSSION PURPOSES ONLY
Do not cite, distribute, or quote without permission of the authors.
Prepared for PlaNYC at 20: A Retrospective on 20 Years of Sustainability Planning in NYC, December 2026

Between 2009 and 2014, periods of budget adjustments and unexpected conditions led to some program disruptions. Budget cuts in 2009 and 2011 delayed and paused several projects. Costs increased based on unplanned and unexpected site conditions, and closures by NYCPS due to safety and other reasons that led to a reduction in total sites. There were also some schools that opted out of the program due to fears about noise or crime. Out of the 290 sites identified in 2007, 234 sites were completed by 2014.

Since its involvement in *PlaNYC*, TPL has continued to grow and build its community playgrounds program. In 2013 they welcomed a new agency partner, the NYC Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). DEP is the primary agency which funds green infrastructure improvements at these playgrounds, whose collaboration helped the program earn support from the Mayor's Office of Climate and Environmental Justice. Each of TPL's green infrastructure playgrounds capture an average of one million gallons of stormwater each year. Additional schoolyards have since been funded through public and private funds and opened, including some with capital improvements to achieve the goal of neighborhood use outside of school hours, bringing the total of existing schoolyards in the program to 300 in 2026.

Mayoral administrations since Mayor Bloomberg have continued the effort to achieve nearly 300 sites in the program today. Mayor Eric Adams' administration saw through an additional 11 turnkey sites open to communities in July 2025 through the allocation of expense funds for added custodial maintenance and operational requirements and the coordination between NYC Parks and NYCPS to identify suitable sites in areas of greatest need. These eleven additional sites resulted in access to public open space for 20,000 New Yorkers previously not in walking distance to a park.

DRAFT – FOR DISCUSSION PURPOSES ONLY
Do not cite, distribute, or quote without permission of the authors.
Prepared for PlaNYC at 20: A Retrospective on 20 Years of Sustainability Planning in NYC, December 2026

One of the most helpful aspects of the program was the idea that these yards should be open to the public, seven days/week from 8:00 a.m. to dusk, during non-school hours. In order to accomplish this, an agreement was made with the custodial staff that they would receive additional funding to open and close the yards and to perform light maintenance. Some of the funding could also be used to purchase cleaning equipment and tools. The idea was that a custodial staff person would need two extra hours on a weekday and four extra hours on a weekend to accomplish this additional work. This program continues to this day as sites in the program receive additional expense funds for the expanded hours and larger community use. In fact, this led to Councilmember Gale Brewer creating Local Law 99, which went into effect in July 2025, which requires the City to fund the custodial funding for 15 new playgrounds,

DRAFT

DRAFT – FOR DISCUSSION PURPOSES ONLY
Do not cite, distribute, or quote without permission of the authors.
Prepared for PlaNYC at 20: A Retrospective on 20 Years of Sustainability Planning in NYC, December 2026

designed by Parks and TPL, each year.



Students engaging in participatory design Led by Akila Shenoy, TPL, at PS 126, Astoria, Queens, September 2008
photo credit: Trust for Public Land)

DRAFT



Students working on templates to design their playground at "Tier 3" site, PS 164, Kensington, Brooklyn, January 2011
photo credit: Trust for Public Land)

DRAFT – FOR DISCUSSION PURPOSES ONLY
Do not cite, distribute, or quote without permission of the authors.
Prepared for PlaNYC at 20: A Retrospective on 20 Years of Sustainability Planning in NYC, December 2026



Participatory Design led by TPL at PS 109 Queens Village, Queens, NY May 2009
Photo credit: Trust for Public Land

DRAFT



Parents and students working together on design of the playground on a "Tier 2" site, PS 107, Queens, NY, February 2008
Photo credit: Trust for Public Land

DRAFT



"After" renovation photo of Central Park East, East Harlem, New York, September 2008
Photo credit: Trust for Public Land



Playground Opening Ceremony Public School 205 in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, NY June 2009 (L-R Dominique Elie, TPL, Michael Bloomberg, Mayor and Mary Alice Lee, TPL)
Photo credit: Trust for Public Land

DRAFT – FOR DISCUSSION PURPOSES ONLY
Do not cite, distribute, or quote without permission of the authors.
Prepared for PlaNYC at 20: A Retrospective on 20 Years of Sustainability Planning in NYC, December 2026



"Before" Renovation of PS 7 Kingsbridge, Bronx February 2010
Photo credit Trust for Public Land



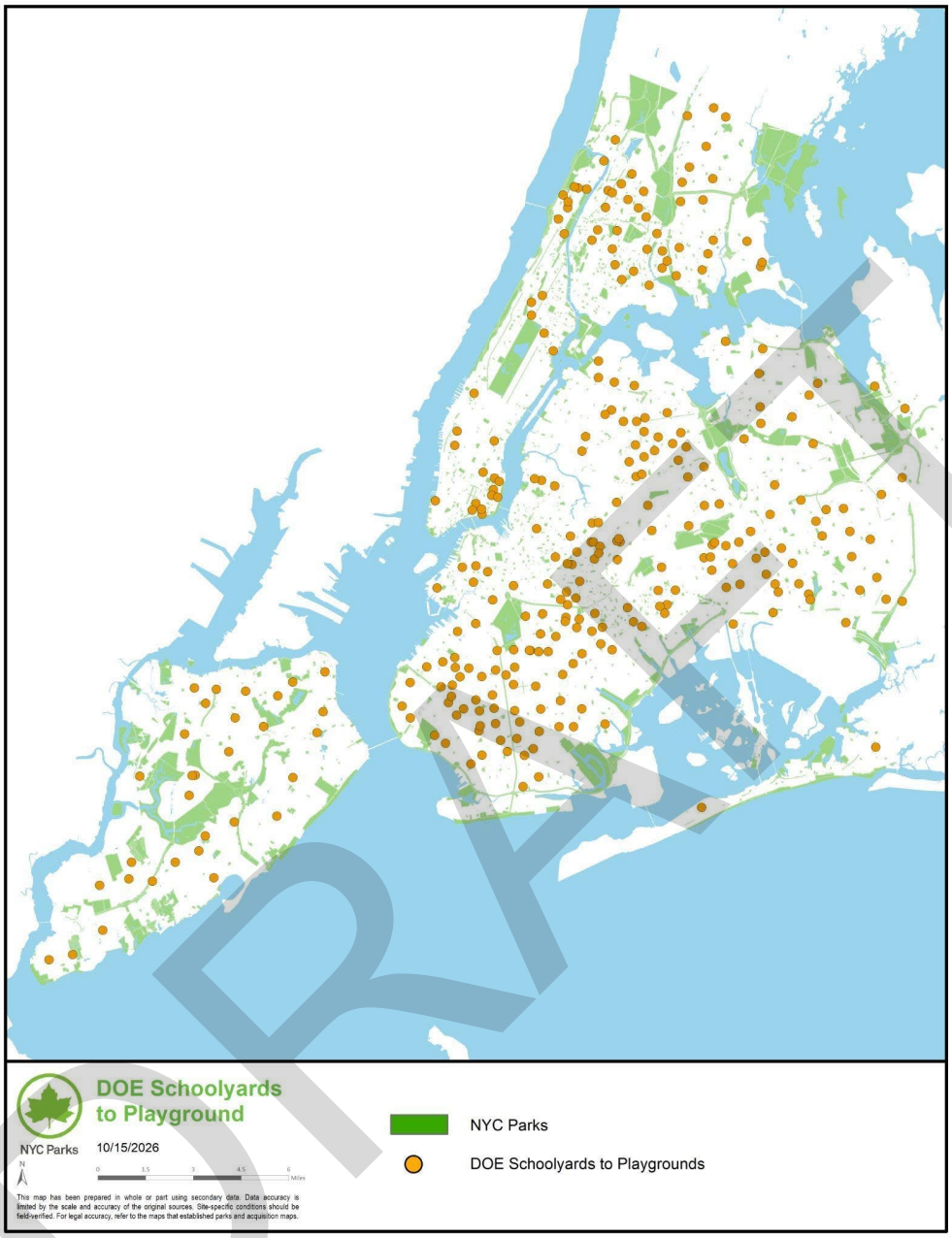
"After" Renovation PS 7 Kingsbridge, The Bronx September 2010
Photo credit: Trust for Public Land

DRAFT – FOR DISCUSSION PURPOSES ONLY
Do not cite, distribute, or quote without permission of the authors.
Prepared for PlaNYC at 20: A Retrospective on 20 Years of Sustainability Planning in NYC, December 2026



Joan Keener, TPL, leading a Playground Stewardship Workshop to help schools learn about how to successfully open their schoolyards to the public. November 2011 at PS 107 Flushing, Queens
Photo credit: Trust for Public Land

DRAFT



Map of current Schoolyard to Playground sites, prepared by NYC Parks

DRAFT

Undeveloped and Underdeveloped Existing Parkland

In addition to the schoolyards effort, seven regional parks, including the restoration of the High Bridge linking the Bronx and Upper Manhattan, were included as a specific initiative of *PlaNYC.* These existing assets were viewed as opportunities to enhance and improve expansive open space areas to serve large segments of the city's residents. According to the recollection of NYC Parks First Deputy Commissioner at the time. Liam Kavanagh, one of the best things about *PlaNYC* was that City Hall gave a lot of latitude for NYC Parks to determine which specific regional parks presented the best opportunity for transformation on a scale that hadn't existed since Robert Moses' heyday. Although there were other parks considered for the program that did not make it into the plan, such as Astoria Park and its pool, this park improvement initiative was a tremendous boon to the many thousands of residents that recreate and enjoy these open spaces on a regular basis.[5]

These large regional parks were selected because they served a wider audience and drew users from multiple neighborhoods - New Yorkers would travel to get to these parks. They were underutilized and had high potential for transformation. Eight park sites were selected across all five boroughs: Highland, Rockaway, Soundview, Dreier-Offerman, McCarren, Fort Washington, Highbridge, and Ocean Breeze Parks. Nearly $400 million was to be invested to design and build improvements to these parks. By 2012, while the budget was reduced to nearly $300 million, designs for the eight project sites were completed and the City had broken ground on five of the eight sites. The following is an overview of these eight targeted open space assets and how

[5] Liam Kavanagh, email message to author, October 6, 2026

DRAFT – FOR DISCUSSION PURPOSES ONLY
Do not cite, distribute, or quote without permission of the authors.
Prepared for PlaNYC at 20: A Retrospective on 20 Years of Sustainability Planning in NYC, December 2026

PlaNYC efforts and resources were advanced to enable many acres of expanded and enhanced recreational amenities to be provided at a regional scale.

Rockaway Beach and Boardwalk
Completed in 2012, $30M

Thirty million dollars were spent to improve the boardwalk and adjacent parkland at Far Rockaway Beach, specifically between Beach 9th and 31st Streets covering a mile expanse of parkland encompassing 27 acres. Responding to a community input process, the project was undertaken to meet the needs of both current and future residents and included various new amenities: a 15,700-square-foot skateboard park, handball and basketball courts, playgrounds, climbing wall, performance space, water play area, synthetic turf field, and accessible public bathroom.[6] Nearly half of the area improved was undeveloped and covered ten acres of flat sandy areas with sparse vegetation and some secondary dunes and pines, as well as an abandoned asphalt parking lot of 2.5 acres. The eastern portion of the site between Beach 17th Street and Beach 9th Street was dominated by an underutilized 500-space parking lot at 3.6 acres and a concrete paved picnic area, handball and basketball courts. A former building in which a concession operated was transformed to provide public bathrooms and a center for lifeguard and maintenance operations. The redeveloped park was designed with permeable surfaces to improve storm water collection, while natural habitats and coastal dunes were protected and enhanced. The large parking lot was transformed into a rolling lawn for passive recreation and a new performance venue. The project also included extensive tree plantings to provide shaded park areas.

[6] City of New York Department of Parks and Recreation, "Mayor Bloomberg Opens Rockaway Parks After $30 Million *PlaNYC* Renovation", The Daily Plant, August 7, 2012 online at https://www.nycgovparks.org/news/archive (visited April 10, 2026).

DRAFT – FOR DISCUSSION PURPOSES ONLY
Do not cite, distribute, or quote without permission of the authors.
Prepared for PlaNYC at 20: A Retrospective on 20 Years of Sustainability Planning in NYC, December 2026

Soundview Park
Completed in 2017, $15M

In 2012 work commenced on more than $15 million in new amenities following a community input process and the development of a master plan. The plan called for the reconstruction of an existing track with a rubberized surface along with a new pathway to an existing park entrance, bleacher seating, lighting fixtures, and an outdoor adult fitness center with a misting station. The plan also included the transformation of the existing soccer field with synthetic turf to allow for year-round play, the reconstruction of an existing playground, a new public bathroom, and a natural amphitheater with a performance lawn. By 2015 the track and the amphitheater were opened and the soccer field was improved for expanded use along with the ancillary features. The new public bathroom opened in 2016 and in 2017 the playground reconstruction was completed with a spray shower, lawn, and basketball and handball courts, planting, and lighting. Some funds were also provided through the New York City Council.[7]

High Bridge
Completed in 2015, $61.7M

The High Bridge, a pedestrian bridge linking the Bronx and Manhattan that formerly carried the Old Croton Aqueduct bringing water to Manhattan, was reopened June 10, 2015, after being closed for forty-five years. After community advocacy to reopen the bridge and through the *PlaNYC* initiative, $47.85 million in funding was allocated, complemented by additional funding provided by former Congressman José E. Serrano in an earlier effort, to complete the $61.7 million project. The bridge provides a link to numerous recreational facilities in

[7] City of New York Department of Parks and Recreation, Soundview Park News and Capital Projects page Soundview Park News : NYC Parks and Soundview Park Capital Projects : NYC Parks visited April 10, 2026.

DRAFT – FOR DISCUSSION PURPOSES ONLY
Do not cite, distribute, or quote without permission of the authors.
Prepared for PlaNYC at 20: A Retrospective on 20 Years of Sustainability Planning in NYC, December 2026

Highbridge Park for Bronx residents, including a pool, recreation center, and hiking trails. For Manhattan residents, the pedestrian bridge provides a link to historic parks such as Rev. T. Wendell Park and Macombs Dam Park as well as Yankee Stadium to the south.

Ocean Breeze Track and Field Complex
Completed in 2015, $112M

The development of the new track and field complex on Staten Island commenced in 2010 and was completed in 2015. The $70M investment through *PlaNYC* along with additional funding provided by local elected officials resulted in the development of a ten-acre parcel of land within Ocean Breeze Park. The project also was enabled by a transfer of state parkland to the City in 2009. The facility is the only certified indoor track and field facility in the United States, with certification by the International Association of Athletics Federation (IAAF). The facility is LEED Gold certified by the U.S. Green Building Council by virtue of various sustainability features to conserve energy and water. Sustainable features include geothermal heating and cooling, displacement ventilation, harvesting of storm water to recharge surrounding wetlands, a "cool" roof, the use of recycled materials, natural ventilation for the majority of the year, the use of natural daylight for much of the year through skylights, windows, light shelves and clerestories.[8]

Ridgewood Reservoir at Highland Park
Completed in 2013, $7M

The Ridgewood Reservoir is located in Highland Park, a regional park on the Brooklyn and Queens border. The 50-acre Ridgewood Reservoir (Reservoir) was selected as a *PlaNYC*

[8] City of New York Department of Parks and Recreation, "New State of the Art Ocean Breeze Track and Field Athletic Complex Opens Doors to Public at Opening Ceremony on Staten Island", Press Release online at https://oceanbreezenyc.org/news/2015/11/24/GRL_1124152733.aspx, visited April 10, 2026.

DRAFT – FOR DISCUSSION PURPOSES ONLY
Do not cite, distribute, or quote without permission of the authors.
Prepared for PlaNYC at 20: A Retrospective on 20 Years of Sustainability Planning in NYC, December 2026

improvement site for its potential to add new recreational amenities considering the three expansive basins that formed part of the Reservoir. The Reservoir supplied water for Brooklyn from 1858 to 1959. As new aqueducts were built bringing water from north of the city, two of the three basins were drained in 1959. One basin was used as a backup water supply for Brooklyn and Queens up until 1989 and in 1990 DEP decommissioned the site. In 2004, the Reservoir was transferred to Parks from DEP.

Forty-six million dollars were originally allocated through *PlaNYC* to reconstruct the former Reservoir and potential improvements were anticipated to include a pedestrian network, new and enhanced active and passive recreation areas, new playgrounds, concessions and improved park structures utilizing the reservoir infrastructure and basins. However, public feedback led NYC Parks in a different direction due to a desire by many constituents and community members to preserve the existing basin environs, which had evolved into a natural state. Prior to advancement of site analysis and design work, Commissioner Adrian Benepe provided testimony in June 2008 before the New York City Council Committee on Parks and Recreation detailing the reservoir's unique environment, specifically the three basins. At that time and to inform the detailed design process, NYC Parks had conducted two listening sessions, five tours with electeds officials, community representatives such as Save the Ridgewood Reservoir coalition and the Brooklyn Clergy and held six meetings with elected officials.[9]

In 2013, the first phase of a reduced scope of improvements were completed at a cost of seven million dollars and included the construction of new fencing, lighting, repaving of pathways and the addition of a handicap-accessible ramp. No active recreation facilities were

[9] NYC Parks, Testimony before the New York City Council, Parks and Recreation Committee by Adrian Benepe, Highland Park and Ridgewood Reservoir: A Discussion on the Restoration and Enhancement of a Community Resource, June 19, 2008

DRAFT – FOR DISCUSSION PURPOSES ONLY
Do not cite, distribute, or quote without permission of the authors.
Prepared for PlaNYC at 20: A Retrospective on 20 Years of Sustainability Planning in NYC, December 2026

implemented in the basins as part of the *PlaNYC* funded improvements in 2013. Three concepts with varying additional improvements were shared with the community but were not advanced. In 2017 the dam at the reservoir was reclassified to a Class A Low Hazard rating by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC) criteria, eliminating the need to create any breaches in the dam, thereby preserving it as a natural treasure. Additionally, in 2019 the reservoir was determined by NYC Parks to meet the criteria for a Critical Environmental Area (CEA), a designation of sites throughout New York State, listed and inventoried by NYSDEC. The CEA designation was based on the transition of the reservoir into a naturalized area and serving as an important ecological, historic, and public recreational resource for the City.

Calvert Vaux Park News - Dreier Offerman Park Design Is Unveiled : NYC Parks
Completed in 2013, $30M

Once named Dreier Offerman Park and renamed in 1998 as Calvert Vaux Park, the design for improvements to the park was unveiled in summer 2007. The master plan included kayak launches, a central lawn, nature trails, an amphitheater, a playground, recreation center, and pavilion. While originally to be a forty million dollar investment, more than thirty million dollars was ultimately invested to carry out improvements in 2013 which included the construction of two artificial turf fields plus perimeter landscaping, a new bathroom and maintenance facility, and a 3.5-acre natural habitat area was constructed within the park limits. In 2013 two soccer fields were constructed in the park.

McCarren Pool
Completed 2012, $50M

McCarren Pool in McCarren Park in Brooklyn was reopened on July 3, 2012, following an investment of fifty million dollars through *PlaNYC.* Originally the site was one of the City's

DRAFT – FOR DISCUSSION PURPOSES ONLY
Do not cite, distribute, or quote without permission of the authors.
Prepared for PlaNYC at 20: A Retrospective on 20 Years of Sustainability Planning in NYC, December 2026

Works Progress Administration Pools and opened in 1936 with the pool bottom providing basketball and shuffleboard courts in the offseason. The pool was closed from 1984 to 2012 due to a state of great disrepair. Between 2005 and 2007 a series of experimental dance performances and concerts were held in the empty pool, which helped renew interest in the pool facility. The pool was designated an official New York City Landmark in 2007 and through the *PlaNYC* efforts the pool underwent an extensive and celebrated renovation. The pool reopened with a smaller footprint for swimming, but additional features in the pool complex area included a fitness center, community meeting room, and basketball court. [10]

Fort Washington Park
Completed in 2015, $30.4M

This regional park extends 184 acres along the Hudson River in the Washington Heights area of Manhattan. By 2012 design was complete for a variety of improvements and by the end of 2013 over $30.4 million in improvements were underway to expand recreational opportunities, provide for new waterfront access for the public, the addition of landscaping, pedestrian and greenway paths, accessibility enhancements as per the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and shoreline stabilization. The first two improvement projects completed in 2013 included a new playground, an upgraded section of the Hudson River greenway, new picnic areas, five volleyball courts, two redesigned baseball diamonds and a soccer field in a ten-block area. Two other projects were underway in 2013 and completed by 2015 further north in the park. One mile of formerly inaccessible waterfront was opened and a greenway link was provided at the park's northern end. Access improvements to the park's existing greenway were implemented through a

[10] City of New York Department of Parks and Recreation, McCarren Park Highlights online at McCarren Park Highlights - McCarren Pool : NYC Parks, (visited April 10, 2026).

DRAFT – FOR DISCUSSION PURPOSES ONLY
Do not cite, distribute, or quote without permission of the authors.
Prepared for PlaNYC at 20: A Retrospective on 20 Years of Sustainability Planning in NYC, December 2026

new ADA ramp connection between Riverside Drive at the park's eastern border and Dyckman Street at its northern end. An additional project involved the rehabilitation of a pedestrian bridge at 180th Street over an Amtrak line to provide access to the central part of the expansive linear park.[11]

The infusion of funding resources towards existing public assets through *PlaNYC* were transformative and in some cases were supplemented by capital funds secured through elected officials. Numerous acres of public parkland were revitalized and provided a boost to recreational facilities, both active and passive spaces, to help prepare for the City's newest residents and provide valuable improvements for existing City residents. Without the push and urgent focus of *PlaNYC* efforts, these projects would have likely taken several decades to achieve.

Evolution of NYC Parks' Methodology for Analyzing the Walk to a Park Metric

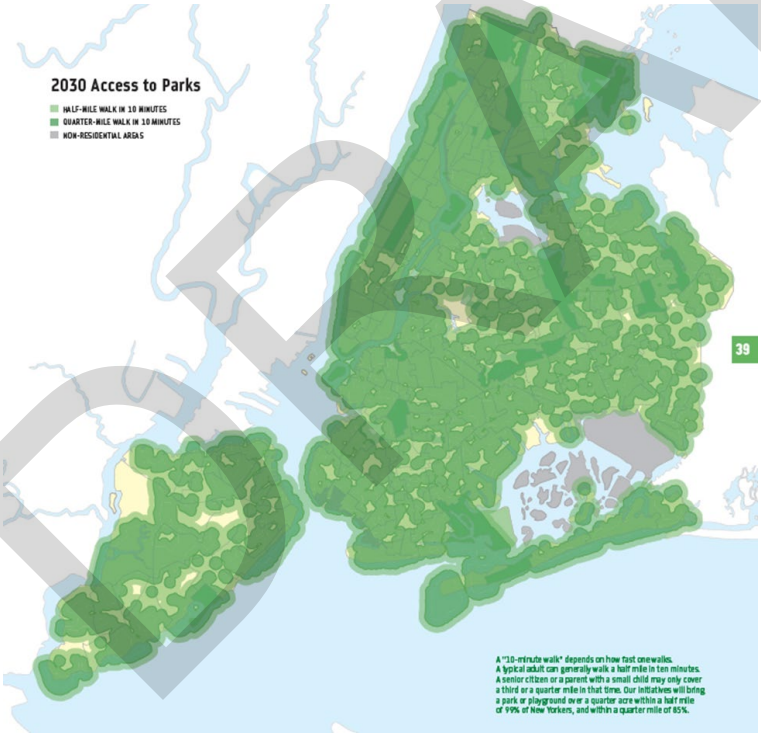
Prior to *PlaNYC*, NYC Parks was analyzing the served area for public open space with an "as the crow flies" approach. NYC Parks was not analyzing for population served by using an actual network analysis, meaning the actual public route a resident could practically use to connect with a park access point. "As the crow flies" is defined as the shortest distance between two points and thus does not consider any geographic elements: streets, buildings, or other impediments that may hinder a person's ability to walk directly to a point. By 2007 geospatial analyses tools and access to data for the City's public right of way (ROW) network allowed the

[11] City of New York Department of Parks and Recreation, "Fort Washington Park Welcomes New Amenities", The Daily Plant, December 31, 2013 (visited April 10, 2026) online at https://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/fort-washington-park/dailyplant/23063, visited online April 10, 2026.

DRAFT – FOR DISCUSSION PURPOSES ONLY
Do not cite, distribute, or quote without permission of the authors.
Prepared for PlaNYC at 20: A Retrospective on 20 Years of Sustainability Planning in NYC, December 2026

completion of a network analysis to capture residents walking distance to park access points. This is the approach still used today. It is the most conservative and realistic approach, as it considers a person's realistic walking route to a point.

Since the initial concept of Walk to a Park goal was presented in the 2007 *PlaNYC* report, the way NYC Parks analyzes a Walk to a Park has evolved. The methodology, as laid out in 2007, was to get 85% of New Yorkers within a ¼ mile "walk of a park" and 99% of New Yorkers within a ½ mile "walk of a park" -on the idea that a larger destination space indicates that residents would travel further to reach - with the goal that by 2030, "virtually every New Yorker across the city will live within a 10-minute walk of a park."



Map above from 2007 *PlaNYC* Report

The map noted that:

> "a '10-minute walk" depends on how fast one walks. A typical adult can generally walk a half-mile in ten minutes. A senior citizen or a parent with a small

DRAFT – FOR DISCUSSION PURPOSES ONLY
Do not cite, distribute, or quote without permission of the authors.
Prepared for PlaNYC at 20: A Retrospective on 20 Years of Sustainability Planning in NYC, December 2026

> child may only cover a third or a quarter mile in that time. Our initiatives will bring a park or playground over a quarter-acre within a half-mile or 99% of New Yorkers, and within a quarter mile of 85%.

At that time the analysis was considered a "10-minute walk," generally referring to the quarter-mile analysis. Since its inception, the walk analysis has always included schoolyard sites that are designated as Jointly Operated Playgrounds or the Schoolyard to Playgrounds sites within the methodology, and as a key component of achieving the Walk to a Park goal.

In *One New York: The Plan for a Strong and Just City,*[12] New York City's updated sustainability plan in 2015, the change in conducting the walk analysis accounting for a quarter-mile measure for smaller parks under six acres and a half-mile distance for larger parks over six acres while still targeting the 85% goal by 2030 was instituted. This shift stemmed from NYC Parks carrying out analyses of other cities' methodologies and discussions with then Parks Commissioner Mitchel Silver to arrive at a consensus that the "ten-minute" walk as a name for the walkability for a park should be reconsidered.

While the metric was previously measured as the percentage of New Yorkers within a ten-minute or quarter mile walk of a park, the idea of a ten-minute walk equating to a ¼-mile walking distance was thought to be misplaced for the New York City context. A half mile is a 10-minute walk based on the average person's ability to walk a mile in 20 minutes. Indeed, most municipalities and park advocacy groups think of a 10-minute walk as a half mile, while the analyses considered a ¼-mile walking distance to parks. Further, we learned that many cities look to provide a small park or playground within a quarter mile walk of residents and larger park within a half mile walk, as opposed to just a park of any size within a quarter mile. NYC

[12] City of New York, *One New York: The Plan for a Strong and Just City*, (2015)

DRAFT

DRAFT – FOR DISCUSSION PURPOSES ONLY
Do not cite, distribute, or quote without permission of the authors.
Prepared for PlaNYC at 20: A Retrospective on 20 Years of Sustainability Planning in NYC, December 2026

Parks modified the analysis, which is now a benchmark metric of a quarter mile walking distance for parks and open spaces less than 6 acres and a half mile walk for parks and open spaces 6 acres and greater and parks with outdoor pools (regardless of their size) for the percentage of New Yorkers served. This update recognizes that larger parks can draw visitors from a greater distance than small parks and allows the agency to determine areas with the greatest need – those areas where New Yorkers are further than a quarter mile walk to a small park AND where they are also further than a half mile walk to a larger park. Additionally with the 2015 sustainability plan, NYC Parks added new park access points that were previously unintentionally left out, removed standalone recreation centers, and began including census blocks with a low population (<50 people), which were previously excluded from earlier analyses. With this updated 2015 sustainability plan, the idea of a "10-minute walk to a park" was dropped, as it no longer reflected the analysis and the metric was indicative of the percent of New Yorkers living within walking distance to a park. Many still refer to the analysis as "the 10-minute walk," but this no longer captures the target goals by NYC Parks for walkability to park sites.

In 2021 the analysis was updated again by NYC Parks to include the 2020 Census data, which resulted in an approximate increase of 700,000 new New Yorkers. Many of these New Yorkers were associated with areas that were considered already "served" by open space, and thus between late 2019 and 2021 the increase in population served by citywide parks went up by over 1 percentage point.

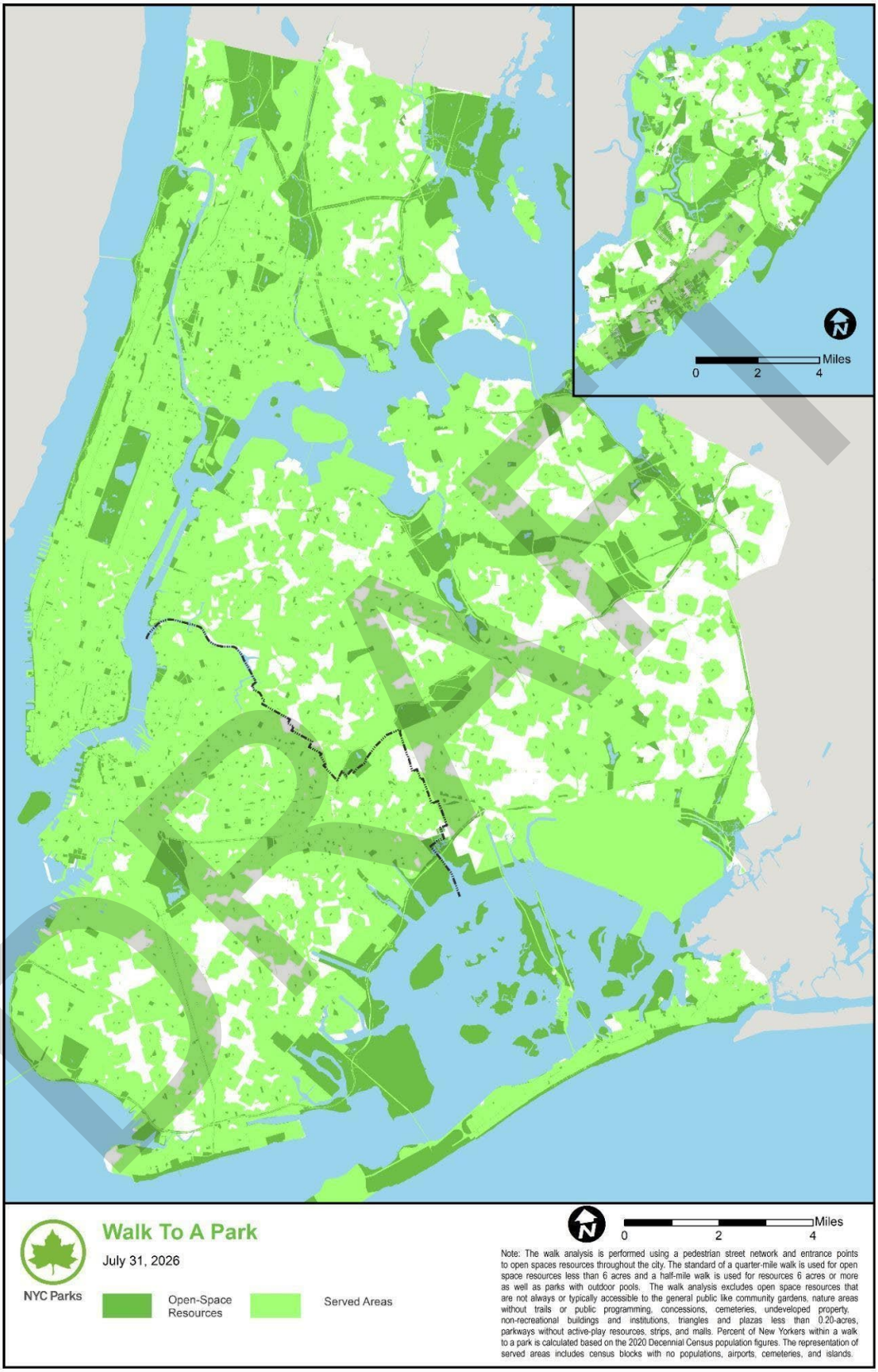
Today the methodology stands largely the same since 2015, with some minor tweaks. Any park open to the public that is six acres or more qualifies for the half-mile service area. This also includes State and Federal parkland as well as any park, regardless of size, with a pool and/or recreation center. Any park smaller than six acres qualifies for a quarter-mile service area.

DRAFT – FOR DISCUSSION PURPOSES ONLY
Do not cite, distribute, or quote without permission of the authors.
Prepared for PlaNYC at 20: A Retrospective on 20 Years of Sustainability Planning in NYC, December 2026

This also includes entrances to designated greenways in and outside of NYC Parks jurisdiction. Schoolyards to Playgrounds, publicly available private open space sites subject to a Restrictive Declaration (obligations which may include open space requirements tied to a specific land parcel following a land use approval action by the City) and Privately Operated Public Spaces (POPS) are included in the quarter-mile analysis as well. What are not included in the analysis are cemeteries, historic house parks, institutions such as university campuses, park strips of minimal width (i.e. one- to two-foot along arterials mapped as such in the Robert Moses era), malls such as the Park Avenue malls, Greenstreets (landscaped triangles within mapped streets with no seating or other park amenities), parking lots, community gardens, sites managed by concessionaires such as the Cyclone Rollercoaster in Coney Island, undeveloped sites, and triangles or outdoor POP sites less than 0.20-acres unless there is seating.

DRAFT

DRAFT – FOR DISCUSSION PURPOSES ONLY
Do not cite, distribute, or quote without permission of the authors.
Prepared for PlaNYC at 20: A Retrospective on 20 Years of Sustainability Planning in NYC, December 2026



DRAFT – FOR DISCUSSION PURPOSES ONLY
Do not cite, distribute, or quote without permission of the authors.
Prepared for PlaNYC at 20: A Retrospective on 20 Years of Sustainability Planning in NYC, December 2026

Map of current Walk to a Park service areas as tracked by NYC Parks

Implementation of Walk to Park Metric in NYC, New Strategies, and the Establishment of a National Standard for Park Access

As of July 2026, 84.4% of New Yorkers live within a walk to a park, an increase from 70% in 2007. The City is well on its way to achieving the goal of 85% of New Yorkers within walking distance to a park by 2030 but recognizes that this still leaves in excess of 1.4 million of the City's residents without ready access to a public open space. NYC Parks continues to explore all opportunities to enhance and expand available open space for public use.

Work continues at NYC Parks to expand the availability of schoolyards to the public outside of school hours as there are still numerous sites not within the program. Schoolyards to Playgrounds remain a key opportunity to expand the availability of open space to New Yorkers, where land is scarce. However, major challenges remain affecting the ability to open new sites, including gaining the support of individual school leadership, capital funding for major improvements and expense funding to provide the additional operational and maintenance obligations for maintaining a schoolyard open additional hours and expanded use, and general safety and vandalism concerns. NYC Parks remains diligent in maintaining partnerships with NYCPS and TPL where opportunities to open new sites become available, and hopes in the future all schoolyards can be open for the public when not in use by the school and created at the outset when possible as new schools are built by the SCA.

Since the inception of *PlaNYC* in 2007, the idea of City governmental agencies partnering to achieve the Walk to a Park goal was at the forefront. This was first seen through the inception of the Schoolyards to Playground program, but NYC Parks has since expanded our

DRAFT

DRAFT – FOR DISCUSSION PURPOSES ONLY
Do not cite, distribute, or quote without permission of the authors.
Prepared for PlaNYC at 20: A Retrospective on 20 Years of Sustainability Planning in NYC, December 2026

strategies to include partnering with entities such as the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) and DEP to open access to other public land as municipal park spaces and improve and expand its recreational resources for use by neighboring communities. Since 2018 NYC Parks has partnered with NYCHA to reconstruct existing playgrounds and open spaces on NYCHA property using NYC Parks funding. The selection of sites was strategic in prioritizing sites in neighborhoods where existing access to park resources was not in existence. Six NYCHA sites across the City have now been completed and are open to the public to date, totaling over $23 million in investment. In City led rezoning efforts by DCP, NYC Parks focuses on opportunities within a neighborhood to close the walk to park gap through such means as assessing and improving underutilized City property for new open space opportunities.

NYC Parks recognizes that there are underserved residents that schoolyards will not be able to address along with densely populated areas that have too few recreational and open space resources serving highly populated areas. NYC Parks continues to focus on examining the amount of public open space per resident at a neighborhood scale and the areas of the City that have a high number of residents not within walking distance to a park and strategies that provide opportunities for a connected and expanded park system. NYC Parks has initiated a change in the way it carries out acquisition approval for private land acquisitions to create efficiencies and opportunities to address underserved communities in terms of public open space across the City. Traditionally, a willing seller is identified and then an application for a single site is advanced through a land use application, a part of the City's Uniform Land Use Review Procedure (ULURP) process, for NYC Parks to obtain acquisition approval. Addressing underserved areas in the City, NYC Parks is advancing neighborhood scale applications through the City's land use review process to obtain acquisition approval for a set of suitable sites meeting specific criteria

DRAFT – FOR DISCUSSION PURPOSES ONLY
Do not cite, distribute, or quote without permission of the authors.
Prepared for PlaNYC at 20: A Retrospective on 20 Years of Sustainability Planning in NYC, December 2026

to enable opportunities for acquisition when sites become available rather than losing out on new park sites due to property owners not being typically amenable to waiting out the land use review process to receive an offer by the City.

Strategic acquisitions, particularly of wetlands and sites that connect to existing natural areas, also help increase access to nature for New Yorkers while helping protect habitat and strengthen NYC's environmental resiliency in the face of growing climate threats. These efforts can also help expand trail networks in natural areas, which has been a major focus as well, with 113.2 miles formalized and 164.49 miles improved between 2022 and 2025. The City's greenway network is also continuing to expand and be improved to create connections for residents to travel and recreate along dedicated corridors to aid in improved access to open space resources. In some cases, a tailored approach for a site is undertaken to consider its assets and determine the appropriate distance scale for the walk to park metric, but it's always still aligned with the idea that a walk to a park is a critical, basic need for all people.

TPL, as part of its annual Parkscore index of the country's 100 largest cities, includes the walk to park percentage as one measure in its rankings. A data driven analysis helps cities advocate and improve their park systems by assessing factors like access, equity, investment, acreage, and amenities. It serves as a tool for comparison, inspiration, and action, spurring friendly competition and guiding local decision-making for better parks. The prominence of *PlaNYC* as a sustainability plan for the nation's largest city and including parks as a key critical component of a healthy and thriving city and the walk to park goal along with TPL's focus on equity and the importance of open space to all has led to a national cause for many cities and

DRAFT – FOR DISCUSSION PURPOSES ONLY
Do not cite, distribute, or quote without permission of the authors.
Prepared for PlaNYC at 20: A Retrospective on 20 Years of Sustainability Planning in NYC, December 2026

localities across the United States.[13] In addition to TPL's annual Parkscore index, NYC Parks reports on the Walk to Park metric in the City's Charter mandated Mayor's Management Report, the NYC Parks website, and on the NYC Open Data portal to show the current service area. These publicly available sources and reporting are important to keep the focus on the effort and demonstrate a commitment to the provision of public open space for the City's residents.

NYC Parks continues to work together with civic leaders, park advocacy groups, and its fellow government agency partners and leadership to seek out and achieve expanded open space resources particularly for those areas in the City with less available open space resources. It is clear that *PlaNYC* advanced the cause of public open space as a critical component of a thriving City and set forth once again a renewed and expanded park system, a key part of the public realm enjoyed and benefitted by all.

DRAFT

[13] National Recreation and Park Association, "Nation's Mayors Launch Groundbreaking 10-Minute Walk to a Park Campaign." Press Release, October 10, 2017 https://www.nrpa.org/about-national-recreation-and-park-association/press-room/nations-mayors-launch-groundbreaking-10-minute-walk-to-a-park-campaign/.

Acknowledgement:

The authors would like to thank Mara Gittleman for her helpful assistance with editing support for this paper and Antonios Michelakis for the maps.

DRAFT

DRAFT – FOR DISCUSSION PURPOSES ONLY
Do not cite, distribute, or quote without permission of the authors.
Prepared for PlaNYC at 20: A Retrospective on 20 Years of Sustainability Planning in NYC, December 2026