

NEW PARKS ERA: A COLLECTIVE VISION FOR OPEN SPACE IN NEW YORK CITY



WHO WE ARE

The New Parks Era is a coalition of public space stewards that participated in City Parks Foundation's NYC Green Relief and Recovery Fund's Systems Change Grant:

Bronx River Alliance

New Yorkers for Parks

Gowanus Canal Conservancy

Newtown Creek Alliance

North Brooklyn Neighbors

North Brooklyn Park Alliance

Historic House Trust

South Bronx Unite

The HOPE Program

Trust for Public Land

Municipal Art Society

Washington Square Park Conservancy

Natural Areas Conservancy

Waterfront Alliance

This report was composed by Central Park Conservancy's Institute of Urban Parks in close partnership with City Parks Foundation. It contains recommendations by the above organizations and over 65 participating organizations at the 2022 NYC Green Fund Convening, an outgrowth of the Parks & Open Space Partners Coalition.

About City Parks Foundation

At City Parks Foundation, we are dedicated to invigorating and transforming parks into dynamic, vibrant centers of urban life through sports, arts, community building, and education programs for all New Yorkers. Our programs—located in hundreds of parks, recreation centers, and public schools across New York City—reach thousands of people each year. Our ethos is simple: Thriving parks mean thriving communities.

About the Institute for Urban Parks

The Institute for Urban Parks, an initiative of the Central Park Conservancy founded in 2013, offers programs designed to support urban park and open space organizations by sharing the knowledge and tools necessary to plan, develop, and maintain great public spaces. The Institute leverages the resources and expertise of the Central Park Conservancy to strengthen organizations so that they can ensure communities receive the social, economic, environmental, and health benefits that parks and public spaces provide.

LETTER TO THE READER

What does the “public realm” mean?

It’s our green spaces, like the public parks, gardens, and tree canopy that double as the lungs of our city. It’s our blue spaces, like the waterfronts and waterways that line our shores. It’s our gray spaces, like the streets and sidewalks we traverse every day. And most importantly, it’s our public space—shared and open to all.

On a walk through New York City, the average person passes through different spaces all the time: a community garden, a public plaza, a ferry terminal. And perhaps without ever knowing that each one encounters a litany of city, state, or federal agencies; public or private bodies; or the countless organizations in charge of its stewardship. That is why when we talk about the “public realm,” the conversation cannot merely be about one space or another—it must include all spaces and the agencies and organizations who care for them, working together.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March 2020, the concept of space itself was upended. It became abundantly clear that people needed room to spread out, not only for their physical wellbeing, but for their mental wellbeing, too. **As in past pandemics, our urban parks and open spaces were thrust into the spotlight and presented with both hardships and opportunities.** Yet despite increased use, public and private dollars dedicated to these spaces dried up.

To address this potentially disastrous situation, an effort was made in New York City to tackle this challenge head-on. Representing over 65 groups, the Parks & Open Space Partners - NYC coalition (POSP-NYC), spearheaded by City Parks Foundation, was an unprecedented attempt to put stewards of all spaces—green, blue, and gray—in the same room, so they could collaborate and share best practices in a time of crisis.

From that effort was born the NYC Green Relief & Recovery Fund, a grantmaking program that helped a wide cross section of the city’s public realm stewards address both long-term issues and immediate shortfalls. The work of the grantees taking on systemic challenges came to be known as the New Parks Era.

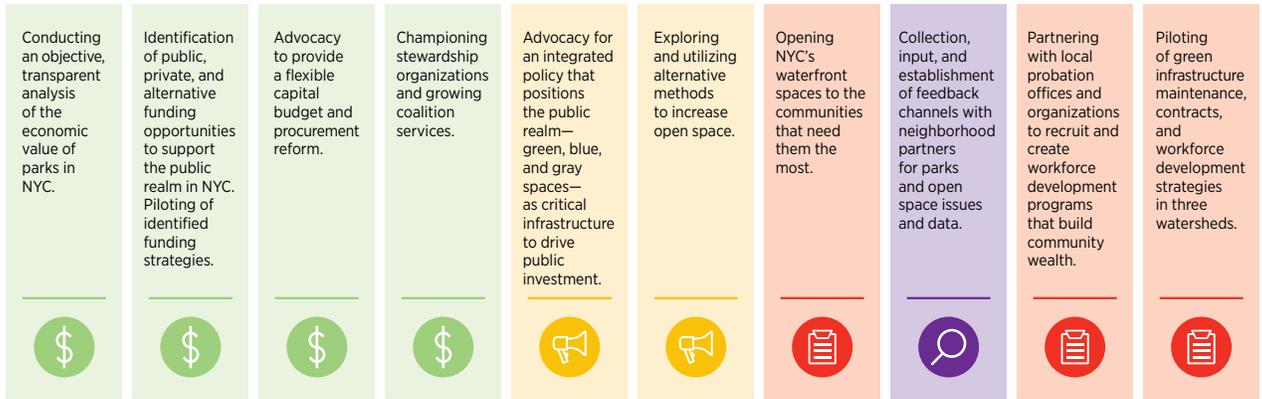
Over the last two years, groups citywide have met for bimonthly and yearly convenings, adding a much-needed intersectionality to issues like parks equity, environmental justice, and natural areas care. This publication offers a glimpse of those conversations—the highlights, successes, and pitfalls. It is organized by **five action items**, outlining the progress being made in their execution as well as the gaps that remain. And it details some of the stories of the grantees making a difference.

While not all public realm stewards are represented here, the authors hope the goals and strategies included serve as a suitable representation of the city, and that this synthesis can be a tool for empowerment and advocacy in creating a better, more equitable public realm in New York. **Ultimately, it should serve as a living document that reflects upon the last two years and builds a stronger future from it.**

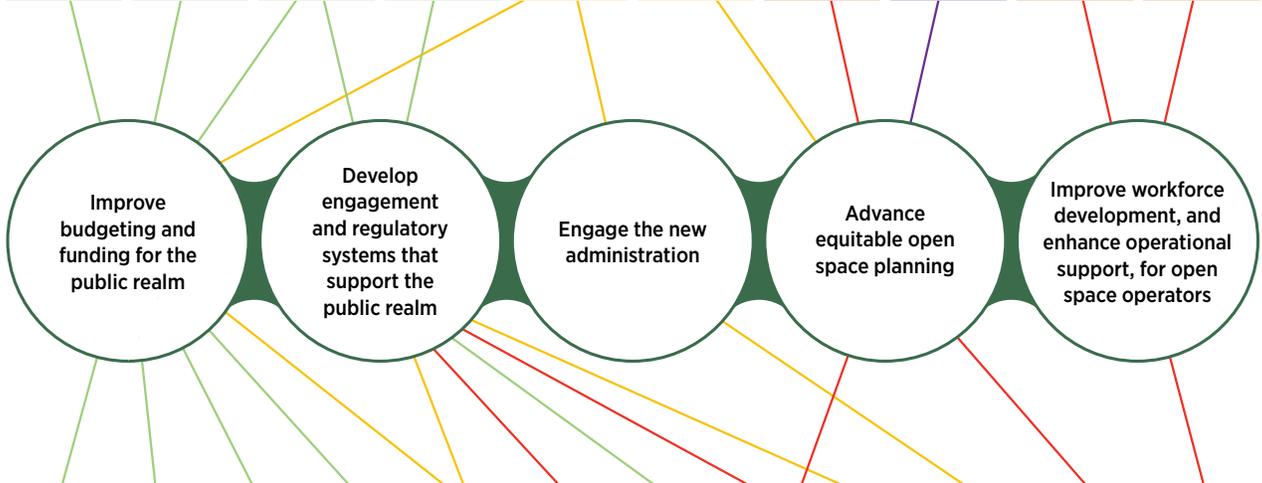
Priorities for Equitable Open Space in NYC

NYC Green Fund: New Parks Era Cohort

WHAT'S HAPPENING NOW



OBJECTIVES



WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN NEXT



Guiding Principles: As a community of open space practitioners and advocates, we are committed to enacting an equitable, open space plan for NYC. This requires ongoing coordination among our organizations, an understanding of the intersectionality of our work, and a clear plan of action for advancing our common cause.



PRIORITIES FOR EQUITABLE OPEN SPACE IN NYC

IMPROVE budgeting and funding for the public realm.

DEVELOP engagement and regulatory systems that support the public realm.

ENGAGE the new administration.

ADVANCE equitable open space planning.

IMPROVE workforce development, and enhance operational support, for open space operators.

IMPROVE BUDGETING AND FUNDING FOR THE PUBLIC REALM

The way the public realm in New York City is planned, funded, developed, and managed is in desperate need of change. Often with competing interests, City Hall and its budget team, along with agencies and elected officials, allocate taxpayer dollars to local projects; open space nonprofits and community-based organizations (CBOs) big and small contend for private philanthropy or grants; and volunteer groups then maintain what they can outside of all that. The result is an inherently inequitable system badly in need of long-term, sustainable planning.

The “budget dance” is notorious among open space operators and advocates; each year brings a new fight to determine what gets included in the city budget. Furthermore, any shock to the system—like the COVID-19 crisis

Figuring out ways to streamline fundraising strategies with more sustained sources of revenue is of utmost priority to the wellbeing of New York City’s public realm.

or the Great Recession—can disrupt availability of private funding, making it difficult to project and plan into the future. Figuring out ways to streamline fundraising strategies with more sustained sources of revenue is of utmost priority to the wellbeing of New York City’s public realm.

WHAT’S HAPPENING NOW

- Identification of public, private, and alternative funding opportunities to support the public realm in NYC. Piloting of identified funding strategies
- Advocacy to provide a flexible capital budget and procurement reform.
- Championing stewardship organizations and growing coalition services.
- Advocacy for an integrated policy that positions the public realm—green, blue, and gray spaces—as critical infrastructure to drive public investment.
- Conducting an objective, transparent analysis of the economic value of parks in NYC.

CALL TO ACTION

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN NEXT

-  **Streamline and standardize grant and funding applications to reduce workload on CBOs.**
Extend the lifespan of funding to alleviate the administrative burden on CBOs.
-  **Pursue increased funding for maintenance of existing open spaces.**
Report on the true costs of deferred maintenance.
-  **Examine the role of private fundraising in stewarding NYC’s open spaces.**
-  **Identify new opportunities to pilot, evaluate, and scale up private fundraising strategies.**
 - Collect, streamline, and establish metrics for critical data, including the economic value of federal/state open spaces to make a better case for funding.
 - Conduct open space use studies citywide.
-  **Broaden government support for capital reform campaign.**

SPOTLIGHT: Natural Areas Conservancy



Photo Credit: Natural Areas Conservancy

MISSION Finding Innovative Funding Models for Natural Areas Care

About 14 percent of New York City is parkland, and about a third of that is natural areas: wetlands, marshes, forests, and the like. In terms of stewardship, advocacy, and planning, the Natural Areas Conservancy (NAC) is their defender. Projects like the Forest Management Framework, a joint project with NYC Parks, have propelled NAC to the forefront of this work. The goal is to increase funding for natural areas care—be it maintenance, planning, or grassroots support—through both the public and private sectors. Having this sustained commitment is crucial to contend with threats like climate change, which require both short-term investment and long-term vision.

“Only one percent of the parks budget goes to natural areas care,” said Clara Pregitzer, the deputy director of conservation science at NAC. “So that’s a third of the parks system, but it’s only receiving one percent of the parks budget, which is already half of one percent of the total city budget. We’re really interested in using that hook to advocate for increasing the money that goes to natural areas care, but also partnering with other conservancies that have crews that could manage natural areas.”

“Only one percent of the parks budget goes to natural areas care. So that’s a third of the parks system, but it’s only receiving one percent of the parks budget, which is already half of one percent of the total city budget...” —Clara Pregitzer

SPOTLIGHT: Trust for Public Land



Photo Credit: Timothy Schenck

MISSION

Establishing the Economic Benefits of Parks in New York City

As a national leading advocate for green space, Trust for Public Land (TPL) has been a consistent resource for research into the multiplying benefits of parkland, be it city, state, or federal. Its annual ParkScore index, which grades cities on their parks systems, has become a highly influential advocacy tool for policymakers and park groups alike. And in New York City, TPL has helped lead campaigns for better regional and city planning around new and existing parkland. Its latest report, “The Economic Benefits of Parks in New York City,” is one of the first-ever data surveys on the effect of parks on property value, tourism, and recreational spending in New York City. With it, the organization hopes that the numbers will stand out to lawmakers and funders.

“Close-to-home parks that are accessible by walking, cycling, or transit are used frequently, and our survey shows that NYC residents visit parks in the city 527 million times per year, which is much more than the

federal and state systems combined,” said Carter Strickland, vice president of the Mid-Atlantic Region and New York state director for Trust for Public Land. “That translates to benefits for a wide range of people, and our report found that parks provide recreational value to resident adults and children worth \$9.1 billion annually, \$1.14 billion in avoided health care cost savings, and up to \$2.43 billion in avoided stormwater treatment costs through runoff absorbed by green infrastructure.”

“... and our report found that parks provide recreational value to resident adults and children worth **\$9.1 billion** annually...”

—Carter Strickland

DEVELOP ENGAGEMENT AND REGULATORY SYSTEMS THAT SUPPORT THE PUBLIC REALM

The public realm of New York City is notoriously fragmented: Not only do different agencies from the city, state, and federal government have overlapping domains, but also, open space is stewarded by a hodgepodge of organizations, be it conservancies, trusts, initiatives, or volunteer groups. The effort to coordinate and advocate for the public realm can then be siloed, with several agencies or groups all working toward the same goal, but not in tandem with planning or communications.

Creation of the Parks & Open Space Partners - NYC coalition (POSP-NYC), as well as the NYC Green Relief & Recovery Fund convening, was rooted in the idea of fostering a collaborative network through which parks and open space groups could share best practices, identify hurdles, and form lasting partnerships to support and advance the public realm in New York City. The effort was one of the first of its kind, but more structures like these are essential in the years ahead.

WHAT'S HAPPENING NOW

- Advocacy to provide a flexible capital budget and procurement reform.
- Championing stewardship organizations and growing coalition services.

CALL TO ACTION

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN NEXT

 **Broaden government support for capital reform campaign.**

 **Identify and streamline regulatory impediments to nonprofits, including jurisdictional, safety, contracting, and legal issues.**

- Streamline the event permit process.
- Reform procurement processes.
- Increase transparency around city decisions.

 **Create a central position within city government to oversee the public realm and ensure collaboration with nonprofits and volunteers.**

Ensure accessibility is addressed in funding, resources, multiple-language materials, transparency to NYC Parks protocols, etc.

 **Expand and codify coalition and shared service models.**

- Fund organizing of the public realm.
- Build out a more diverse, broader coalition.
- Develop a matching and/or service sharing system to connect providers to service seekers.
- Support peer-to-peer mentorship programs.
- Facilitate support around contract negotiations.

 **Increase coordination on open space planning between agencies, communities, and organizations.**

- Engage communities lacking access to open space.
- Assess the policies that perpetuate unequal distribution of open space.

SPOTLIGHT: Brooklyn Greenway Initiative



Photo Credit: Brooklyn Greenway Initiative

MISSION

Creating a Coalition for NYC Greenways

The Brooklyn Greenway Initiative (BGI) has been advocating for a continuous 26-mile corridor for pedestrians and cyclists along the Brooklyn waterfront for over a decade. Nearing completion, the initiative has helped foster notable open space achievements, like the popular Shore Parkway Greenway Connector, a redesign of Flushing Avenue along the Brooklyn Navy Yard, and the Naval Cemetery Landscape. Part of that organizational effort has been the establishment of the NYC Greenways Coalition, gathering over 40 organizations that are focused on finishing a 400-mile citywide greenway network.

“We quickly learned that there’s a need for the agencies to talk to each other and think about greenways collaboratively... given that greenways touch multiple jurisdictions of city, state, and federal agencies within the five boroughs...” —Terri Carta

“There hasn’t been a whole lot of political will or support for the five-borough greenway network” said Terri Carta, the executive director of BGI. “So, we brought together a group of greenway partners

to send a letter to the congressional delegation, asking for greenway stimulus funding. We very quickly learned that there’s a need for the agencies to talk to each other and think about greenways collaboratively; and to work on a comprehensive approach, given that greenways touch multiple jurisdictions of city, state, and federal agencies within the five boroughs. We also learned that there’s an enormous benefit to our groups by working collaboratively on advocacy and community engagement for greenways; thus began the NYC Greenways Coalition.”

ENGAGE THE NEW ADMINISTRATION

With a budget of almost \$100 billion, City Hall holds an immense influence over how the public realm is shaped in New York City. The mayor’s office oversees a number of agencies—like NYC Parks, the Department of Transportation (DOT), and the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP)—each with its own stake or responsibility in stewarding open space. Open space stewards interact with these agencies on a regular basis, whether through advocacy, agreements around responsibilities and licensing, or programming and events.

But for years, open space was not perceived as a major electoral issue, resulting in a public realm with minimal support from the city. Parks, for example, make up 14 percent of the city’s landmass, or 30,000 acres, but receive close to 0.6 percent of the total budget. Even then, the majority of funds are directed to one-off capital work rather than sustained maintenance and operations, often requiring outside organizations, such as conservancies and foundations, to contribute to upkeep.

Momentum is shifting, though, as more New Yorkers view these spaces as urban necessities, especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis. So, it is essential that the plethora of public realm stewards have an effective and data-driven approach to engaging the powers that be.

WHAT'S HAPPENING NOW

- Advocacy for an integrated policy that positions the public realm—green, blue, and gray spaces—as critical infrastructure to drive public investment.

CALL TO ACTION

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN NEXT

-  **Develop and translate clear advocacy goals representative of the broader public realm.**
 - Establish mechanisms to ensure local needs inform citywide policy and funding advocacy.
 - Create and share tools for open space organizations to advocate, including talking points, data, and lists of decision makers.



SPOTLIGHT: New Yorkers for Parks



Photo Credit: Adrian Childress

MISSION

Passing the Five-Point Plan for Park Equity

New Yorkers for Parks (NY4P) is the city's leading advocacy organization for the 14 percent of the city's land mass designated as parkland. Between putting forth legislative agendas and holding lawmakers accountable, NY4P has helped to elevate public interest in parks equity and care. Most recently, it's done that through the Play Fair Coalition—a body of over 400 groups representing parks, transportation, the environment, social justice, and infrastructure, the largest of its kind in city history. The Coalition leads the effort to push forward a Five-Point Plan for Equity, a campaign to reform the capital construction process, and the One Percent Pledge, through which one percent of the city's budget would be dedicated to parks.

“We're focused on developing and broadening the voices within the Play Fair Coalition, especially the communities with parks and open spaces whose voices are not being heard or prioritized by the city's policymakers,” said Adam Ganser, the executive director of New Yorkers for Parks. “We want to create a plan for NYC Parks that anticipates receiving funding at one percent of the city's budget: What would it look like to have an appropriately and equitably funded parks system? How does that funding get used to make a more equitable city? What would it mean for staffing lines? What would the impact be for the communities that are relying on these parks and open spaces?”

ADVANCE EQUITABLE OPEN SPACE PLANNING

Numerous neighborhoods in New York City do not yet have adequate open space. As a result of factors like misguided planning, socioeconomic differences, and systemic racism, among others, the city faces a lopsided landscape when it comes to who has access to open space and its benefits—and who does not. About half of New Yorkers encounter nature most regularly in a park. But beyond that, having the space in a dense city to breathe, spread out, and enjoy should be available to everyone.

The COVID-19 crisis made these inequities clear. It is no surprise that neighborhoods hit hardest by both the virus and the resulting economic downturn also coincided with those that had the least access to open space. Yet the pandemic also offered new ways to think about what that space could be—be it our parks, our streets, or the public realm writ large—and reminded us why it's vital to fill the gaps.

WHAT'S HAPPENING NOW

- Exploring and utilizing alternative methods to increase open space.
- Opening NYC's waterfront spaces to the communities that need them the most.
- Collection, input, and establishment of feedback channels with neighborhood partners for parks and open space issues and data.

CALL TO ACTION

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN NEXT

-  **Increase coordination on open space planning between agencies, communities, and organizations.**
 - Engage communities lacking access to open space.
 - Assess the policies that perpetuate unequal distribution of open space
-  **Develop an open space plan that includes open streets and strengthens the connection between transportation and public spaces.**

Support the creation of new open space.

SPOTLIGHT: North Brooklyn Parks Alliance



Photo Credit: North Brooklyn Parks Alliance

MISSION

Ensuring Open Space Equity in North Brooklyn

As North Brooklyn has seen rapid growth in recent years, so have its parks. The area has seen the development of brand-new green spaces, like Domino Park, as well as the redevelopment of underserved areas, such as Under the K Bridge Park and the Newtown Creek Nature Walk. That has provoked serious questions around parks equity and access, or lack thereof.

North Brooklyn Parks Alliance, a community group and fiscal sponsor for over 100 parks in its district that coordinates actions from local nonprofits and volunteer groups—including Newtown Creek Alliance, North Brooklyn Neighbors, and El Puente—is at the forefront of that effort. The newly formed North Brooklyn Open Space Equity Coalition aims to change the conversation with elected officials around how to plan open space equitably.

“It’s been more than two decades since this district has had a master plan, and so much has changed since the 2005 rezoning,” said Katie Denny Horowitz, the executive director of North Brooklyn Parks Alliance. “We came together during the pandemic, after experiencing firsthand the changing landscape in terms of equity. Blacktop recreation courts were closed, for example, which hit southside Williamsburg differently than places where there are more green spaces. Capital projects were being dispatched in some areas, but not others. There was an obvious need to take a look district-wide ... and see how we could, in a way, equitably distribute resources.”

SPOTLIGHT: South Bronx Unite



Photo Credit: South Bronx Unite

MISSION

Fighting for Policies That Protect Communities from Dirty Development

The South Bronx is a battleground for environmental justice: As the poorest congressional district in the country, it suffers from disproportionate effects of air pollution and asthma rates after decades of misguided urban planning decisions, with substantially lower access to green space. But thanks to organizations like South Bronx Unite, work to right those wrongs and build a more sustainable future has risen to the top of local policymakers' priority lists.

The group is working to create tools for other neighborhoods to deploy community land trusts that can help reclaim green space, quantify community value, train citizen scientists to monitor air quality, and push for policy and budget reforms. That is done in service of its Waterfront Plan, which presents a new vision for a neighborhood disconnected from its own shores.

“To sustain interest, we’re connecting the environmental injustices in our community with the plan,” said Arif Ullah, the executive director of South Bronx Unite. “We’re engaging with policymakers at city and state agencies and collaborating with other waterfront groups. But we want tools for organizations and groups to do open space advocacy: talking points, data, infographics; key legislators to target; community mapping resources and lists of city- and state-owned spaces that could potentially be converted into green spaces.”

IMPROVE WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT, AND ENHANCE OPERATIONAL SUPPORT, FOR OPEN SPACE OPERATORS

Open spaces provided for the green jobs of the future long before they dominated national headlines. Whether it's updating drainage, caring for gardens and tree beds, or basic maintenance, the potential diversity of workforce opportunities embedded in the labor of operating open spaces is an immense strength of the organizations that take care of them. But only if that labor is harnessed.

Too often, park groups lack the capacity or funding to build the workforce of tomorrow; they are not able to offer training that fully takes advantage of the unique qualities of open space. As a result, work is limited by seasonality or poor employee retention, which squanders the chance to do more. Still, these organizations need workforce development help just the same.

WHAT'S HAPPENING NOW

- Partnering with local probation offices and organizations to recruit and create workforce development programs that build community wealth.
- Piloting of green infrastructure maintenance, contracts, and workforce development strategies in three watersheds.

CALL TO ACTION

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN NEXT

-  **Establish long-term support for sustainable employment pathways into green jobs.**
 - Broaden workforce development programs to include higher-level and more versatile jobs.
 - Identify and track critical data to show programmatic impact and value.
 - Expand partnerships with social service organizations.
 - Establish new methods for increased and long-term funding.
 - Explore strategies for retention across all levels.

SPOTLIGHT: Gowanus Canal Conservancy + The HOPE Program



Photo Credit: Gowanus Canal Conservancy

MISSION

Boosting Good Jobs through Rain Gardens

Over the last few decades, the Gowanus watershed has undergone drastic changes, from environmental harm to remediation, industrial shifts to a major rezoning. The Gowanus Canal Conservancy has witnessed that growth and led the effort to create a vibrant open space network along newly restored city land. That includes the Rain Garden Action in Neighborhoods (RAIN) Coalition, a pilot for collaborative rain garden stewardship of the city's green infrastructure. It is led by four community-based organizations: Bronx River Alliance, Gowanus Canal Conservancy, The HOPE Program, and Newtown Creek Alliance.

"We're positioning ourselves as a collaborator, convener, and conversation partner within Gowanus and beyond," said Cameron King, the Gowanus Canal Conservancy's development director. "New York City needs money for more than just parks; we need it for broader public realm maintenance, like for street trees and rain gardens. This funding must support long-term, sustainable open space maintenance jobs with a comprehensive approach that includes job security, competitive wages, and growth opportunities. We want to see more support for community stewardship—so we're making sure we're able to resource the neighbors and partners who want to meet these goals appropriately."

"The key to creating good jobs is to have good funding, and good funding is long-term funding," said Joanna Larson, the director of transitional employment at The HOPE Program. "That's what allows us to create the good jobs that will attract people into this field. Most people, in our experience, are looking for jobs that are reliable and have advancement options. The stability and strategic work that can be supported by long-term funding is crucial to developing and making those pathways real, doing the long-term engagement and partnership work, and creating those opportunities."

AN ACTION AGENDA FOR EQUITABLE OPEN SPACE IN NYC

Improve budgeting and funding for the public realm.

-  Collect, streamline, and establish metrics for critical data, including the economic value of federal/state open spaces to make a better case for funding.
-  Conduct open space use studies citywide.
-  Extend the lifespan of funding to alleviate the administrative burden on CBOs.
-  Report on the true costs of deferred maintenance.

Develop engagement and regulatory systems that support the public realm.

-  Streamline the event permit process.
-  Reform procurement processes.
-  Increase transparency around city decisions.
-  Support peer-to-peer mentorship programs.
-  Build out a more diverse, broader coalition.
-  Develop a matching and/or service-sharing system to connect providers to service seekers.
-  Fund organizing of the public realm.
-  Facilitate support around contract negotiations.
-  Ensure accessibility is addressed in funding, resources, multiple-language materials, transparency to NYC Parks protocols, etc.
-  Engage communities lacking access to open space.
-  Assess the policies that perpetuate unequal distribution of open space

Engage the new administration.

-  Establish mechanisms to ensure local needs inform citywide policy and funding advocacy.
-  Create and share tools for open space organizations to advocate, including talking points, data, and lists of decision makers.

Advance equitable open space planning.

-  Engage communities lacking access to open space.
-  Assess the policies that perpetuate unequal distribution of open space.
-  Support the creation of new open space.

Improve workforce development, and enhance operational support, for open space operators.

-  Broaden workforce development programs to include higher-level and more versatile jobs.
-  Identify and track critical data to show programmatic impact and value.
-  Expand partnerships with social service organizations.
-  Establish new methods for increased and long-term funding.
-  Explore strategies for retention across all levels.

WHAT COMES NEXT

Following the convening of the groups whose ideas make up this report, it is clear that there is much work to do to translate this bold, far-reaching agenda into lasting structural change. The Institute for Urban Parks was honored to play a part in this collective effort to advance park equity during a crisis that viscerally illustrated systemic shortcomings. We look forward to continuing to support the work of City Parks Foundation, grantees, and funders in the years ahead.

This report recognizes that a constellation of parties interact with the public realm in New York City. Its recommendations set the stage for robust dialogue, planning, and action between all stakeholders, including government leaders, community-based organizations, advocates, funders, and the public. This agenda should herald an unprecedented period of ambitious, equitable public realm planning—a New Parks Era.



Astoria, Queens. Photo Credit: Cormac Nataro, 31st Ave Open Street Collective

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