CENTRAL PARK CONSERVANCY TIMELINE

The Park in Crisis

1960s – 70s  Cuts in the form of work-force attrition are imposed on the Parks Department; at the same time, enforcement of rules is relaxed and Central Park is increasingly used for events of unprecedented scale, including mass concerts, festivals, and political rallies.

1974  A report by the City’s Bureau of Budget assesses the productivity of Parks Department work crews at only 30 – 35%, which it attributes to a lack of long-range planning, operating standards, and work-force supervision.

Citizens Mobilize

1974  The Central Park Community Fund (CPCF) is founded by a diverse group of private citizens intent on addressing the Park’s alarming deterioration. CPCF focuses on raising funds for desperately needed equipment and maintenance projects. Board members include George Soros (Chair), Richard Gilder (President), former Parks Commissioner Richard Clurman, Columbia Professor E.S. Savas, and future CPC trustees Arthur Ross and Joan Schwartz, among others. Staff and consultants include Alexander Allport (Executive Director), Olmsted historian William Alex, author and naturalist M.M. Graff, landscape architect Bruce Kelly, and Central Park Curator Henry Hope Reed.

1975  At the height of the City’s fiscal crisis, budget cuts force massive layoffs within the Parks Department.

1975  The Central Park Task Force is founded, with Elizabeth Barlow—an urban planner and writer on New York’s natural history and Olmsted legacy—as its Executive Director. The Task Force focuses on volunteer, youth, and educational initiatives to improve the park and foster stewardship within the community.

1976  E.S. Savas’s *A Study of Central Park*, commissioned by CPCF’s President Richard Gilder and Chair George Soros, is released. Based upon analysis of the Parks Department’s management of Central Park in the early 1970s, the study concludes that a fundamental lack of planning, supervision, and accountability—more than the declining number of personnel—is to blame for the inadequate maintenance of Central Park. The study recommends, for the first time, appointment of a Chief Executive Officer for Central Park and establishment of a Board of Guardians (eventually realized through creation of the position of Central Park Administrator and the Conservancy’s Board of Trustees).

1977  The Parks Department’s strategy in response to personnel cuts is to “broadband” its civil service job titles, creating a more flexible workforce by collapsing 23 narrowly-defined titles into 6 broader job descriptions, and to rely on the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA)—which provided federal funding to hire and train unemployed individuals for 18 months—for half of its employees.
1978  CPCF’s *Evaluation of Alternative Governance Proposals for Central Park* builds upon the Savas report, other studies, and numerous interviews to evaluate various proposals that have emerged for the governance of the Park. The study concludes that the most important requirement for improved management is to establish the Park as a unified entity for management purposes, and it reiterate the Savas report recommendations for the appointment of a park administrator and establishment of a board of guardians serving in a fundraising and advisory capacity.

Public Leadership

1979  Mayor Ed Koch and Parks Commissioner Gordon Davis establish the position of Central Park Administrator to consolidate authority for all planning, management, and interagency coordination pertinent to Central Park under one office, and they appoint Elizabeth Barlow to the position. Conceived as a pilot project that, if successful, would be extended to other large parks, the Administrator position is funded for an initial 18 – 24 month period by private contributions from the J.M. Kaplan Fund and CPCF secured by Commissioner Davis, who also provides office space and support staff.

The City funds several major capital projects, including restoration of the Sheep Meadow, the Dairy, the Reservoir running track, dredging of the 59th Street Pond, and landscaping of the Southeast Corner of the Park.

A Unique Partnership

1980  The Central Park Conservancy is founded to support initiatives of the Central Park Administrator’s office. Chaired by business and civic leader William Beinecke, who collaborated with Commissioner Davis and Central Park Administrator Elizabeth Barlow to found the organization, the original 35-member Board of Trustees includes three Central Park Community Fund directors (Richard Gilder, Arthur Ross, and Joan Schwartz) and three Central Park Task Force directors (Adele Auchincloss, Jason Epstein, and Grace Hechinger), as well as broader representation both by influential citizens and elected officials.

Supplementing and Planning

1980 – 81  The Conservancy’s early initiatives include: recruitment of interns to perform soil surveys and much needed horticulture and preservation projects (including care of the newly restored Sheep Meadow); publication of an outline for a 10-year restoration plan and funding for parkwide studies needed to complete the plan; establishment and operation of the Dairy as a visitor center; and purchasing horses for a mounted unit of Urban Park Rangers (a new program of the Parks Department).

Initial fundraising by the Conservancy focuses on hiring staff and interns—and purchasing equipment—in order to undertake projects that cannot be accomplished with existing Parks Department staff and equipment, with a dual focus: (1) projects that will have an immediate, visible impact, and (2) long-range planning and design. Beginning with projects such as Belvedere Castle, the Dairy landscaping, and Bethesda Terrace, the Conservancy institutes an approach of using private contributions to fund design work that stimulates capital investment by the city.
At the outset, a “benchmarking” exercise is conducted to determine the City’s existing spending on Central Park, and the Conservancy secures a pledge from the Mayor that the City’s commitment of funds to Central Park will not be disproportionately reduced as a result of the private funds raised by the Conservancy.

CPC’s crew of horticultural interns restores the Point in the Ramble, starts a composting operation, and works throughout the Park pruning trees, removing brush, and mowing lawns.

A preservation crew is established to restore and reconstruct rustic structures.

1982
A graffiti crew is established to implement standards for routine graffiti removal.

The Conservancy takes on pathway lighting throughout the Park, retrofitting lampposts with new luminaires.

CPC initiates its first formal volunteer program. L.I.V.E. (Learning and Involvement for Volunteers in the Environment)

1982 – 83
CPC hires planning staff, who work with consultants to conduct parkwide studies (soils, vegetation, trees, circulation, hydrology, structures, playgrounds, users and security) that will be incorporated into a restoration plan.

1983
CPC hires a mechanic to repair and maintain equipment.

The first annual Frederick Law Olmsted luncheon, which leads to the establishment of the Women’s Committee, raises $172,000

1984
$7.8 million in capital work is initiated, of which $6.6 million is funded by the City and $1.2 million by the Conservancy.

The Conservancy restores the East Green with inhouse crew

1985
The Conservancy completes Rebuilding Central Park: A Management and Restoration Plan, which synthesizes parkwide studies conducted in 1982-84 into a comprehensive blueprint to guide the restoration and management of the Park.

Reiterated in the plan is the idea that the Conservancy’s fundraising is intended to supplement the City’s budget—a description of the Central Park Administrator’s responsibilities includes managing the use of the two budgets supporting the park (the City’s and the Conservancy’s) and ensuring that private funds are not applied to expenses that should be funded by the City.

First Zone Gardener hired (for Strawberry Fields)
Focus on Restoration

1986 – 91 Campaign for the Central Park Conservancy. The Conservancy’s first capital campaign raises $50 million over a five-year period. $21 million funds major restoration projects including Bethesda Terrace, Grand Army Plaza, Shakespeare Garden, the Mall, and Cedar Hill. $22 million supports five years of annual operating expenses, and $7 million establishes an endowment fund for the maintenance of the Park.

1986 Adopt-a-bench program instituted

1987 The Conservancy spends $5 million on park restoration and maintenance, supplementing the City’s expenditure of $10 million.

1988 The Conservancy spends $5.6 million on park restoration and maintenance, supplementing the City’s expenditure of $10.1 million.

CPC establishes the Greensward Trust, an endowment fund for the maintenance of the Park.

1989 – 90 Citizens Task Force on the Use and Security of Central Park, chaired by Ira Millstein, addresses in particular the security challenges and perceptions faced in the north end of the Park by virtue of its rugged topography, prevalence of woodland landscape, and less central location; a report by the Task Force recommends projects and programs aimed at increasing the usage and, by extension, the maintenance presence in this part of the Park. The Upper Park Community Advisory Committee is formed to monitor implementation of the Task Force’s recommendations

1990 $7.9 million in capital work is completed, of which $4 million is funded by the City and $3.9 million by the Conservancy.

The Conservancy’s Capital Projects Division of designers, preservationists, and construction supervisors oversees the $7.9 million of construction activity

The City remains primarily responsible for maintenance and operations, which CPC supplements with more specialized maintenance and preservation activity (monuments, rustic structures, intensive horticulture and tree care) as well as special, recreation, education, and volunteer programs.

Woodland Management Advisory Board formed

Expanding Maintenance Role

1991 In the face of City budget cuts affecting the Parks Department’s spending in Central Park, the Conservancy makes a commitment to raise funds toward the shortfall, and moves into areas of general maintenance that had previously been provided by the City.

The Tree trust is established to provide an endowment fund for tree care.

1992 Operating budget of $10 million is evenly divided between private and public dollars
CPC employs ten Zone Gardeners (in restored areas such as Strawberry Fields, Cedar Hill, and Bethesda Terrace), supported by endowments, and initiates playground maintenance crew with funding from the Playground Partners Program of the Women’s Committee.

Maintenance and operations staff in the Park numbers 172 (89 Parks employees and 83 CPC employees.)

1993 The Conservancy and the Parks Department sign a Memorandum of Agreement outlining the nature of their partnership in the management and operation of Central Park. The MOA reiterates the City’s commitment to continue providing Central Park’s proportionate share of the Parks Department budget.

1993–96 Wonder of New York Campaign. This three-year capital campaign is launched as the result of a $17 million challenge grant to restore major landscapes of Central Park. The unprecedented private contribution requires both the City and the Conservancy to match the grant. Through overwhelming support of thousands of New Yorkers and many corporations and foundations, the Conservancy exceeds its goal by approximately $5.7 million, raising a total of nearly $77.2 million, which is used to restore the Park’s remaining major landscapes—Summit Rock, Merchant’s Gate, Naturalist’s Walk, Turtle Pond, the Great Lawn, and North Meadow—with $26 million for operating support and endowment.

1994 Grant for restoration of Cedar Hill includes endowment for zone gardener to maintain the area.

1995 The Conservancy contributes 70% of the Park’s $12 million operating budget

Ten years after the first zone gardener is hired for Strawberry Fields, CPC employs 15 zone gardeners, each responsible for a specific restored landscape.

1996 Full implementation of zone management throughout the Park. In a departure from crew-based management, the Conservancy divides the Park into 10 sections and 49 zones, and reorganizes existing park-based staff so that a every zone has a zone gardener assigned to it who reports to a section supervisor, thereby introducing accountability for daily maintenance at the level of the individual landscapes. This approach to organizing staff fosters a sense of ownership and pride among the zone gardeners as well as the volunteers assigned to each zone. Zone gardeners are supported and supplemented by the existence of specialized parkwide crews for areas of maintenance and operation that require specialized expertise and equipment, or are most effectively addressed on a parkwide basis.

FLO luncheon raises $2.5 million.
Keeper of the Park

1998 With the Park’s major landscapes restored, the Conservancy and the Parks Department sign an agreement for the management of the Park. The agreement formalizes the Conservancy’s role and makes it the official keeper of the Park, charged with specific fundraising and maintenance responsibilities and entitled to payment from the City according to a formula that takes into account Conservancy funds raised and spent in the Park (as well as concession revenues generated for the City) in the previous year. The Conservancy is officially responsible for the day-to-day maintenance and operation of the Park. In practice, the Conservancy’s management role extends beyond these services, encompassing in addition to them: the operation of visitor centers; provision of public programs; coordination and support of special events; and the design, contract bidding, and supervision of capital projects.

2000s Expansion of night and weekend operations

2006 The Conservancy’s management agreement with the City is renewed. The terms of the agreement are largely unchanged, but a cap that had existed on the amount of the Conservancy’s fee that is based on concession revenues is lifted.

The Conservancy launches the Campaign for Central Park, $100 million including $50 million capital for major landscapes remaining to be restored (Lake and Met to Meer), and $50 million for long-term operating support. Campaign is expanded to include additional capital projects, increasing the total campaign to $126 million ($76 million capital and $50 million operating).

2009 August 2009 microburst devastates landscapes above 90th Street, destroying more than 500 trees in less than 30 minutes.

2010 The Conservancy launches the Central Play initiative to fund projects in the 16 (out of 21) playgrounds that have not been comprehensively rebuilt in recent years, bringing all the playgrounds up to the same standard at the same time.

The Conservancy launches a fundraising initiative for the Park’s woodlands.

2011 October snowstorm destroys hundreds of trees throughout the Park.

2012 Hurricane Sandy devastates the City and impacts the Park, destroying more trees.

The Conservancy secures a $100 million gift towards restoration and management of the Park. Roughly half is directed toward a 10-year capital program for the Park.

2013 The Conservancy’s management agreement with the City is renewed. The new contract eliminates the threshold of concession revenues that the City previously had to earn before additional revenues were shared with CPC. It also includes provisions for the City to reimburse CPC for expenses over $250K for catastrophic events.

CPC signs contract with Parks for 10 Year Capital Plan for the Park. $60 million from the City towards estimated $170 million capital program.