

**Testimony for NYC Council Committee on Parks and Recreation
Emily Nobel Maxwell, Cities Program Director, The Nature Conservancy in New York
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My name is Emily Nobel Maxwell and I am the director of The Nature Conservancy's Cities Program in New York. The Nature Conservancy is the world's largest conservation organization; our team members, including 400 scientists, located in all 50 U.S. states and 72 countries work to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends. We have 90,000 members across New York State, 35,000 of whom reside in New York City. The Nature Conservancy's New York City Program promotes nature and environmental solutions to enhance the quality of life of all New Yorkers.

Today I'm testifying on behalf of both [The Nature Conservancy](#) and [Forest for All NYC](#), a broad and diverse coalition which we convene that has nearly 40 (and counting) organizational members. Members include non-profits, businesses, academics, and government partners who work together to protect, maintain, and grow the urban forest in New York City. We envision a healthy, accessible, well-understood, and resilient urban forest that justly and equitably delivers its multiple benefits to all residents of New York City. On behalf of both The Nature Conservancy, and Forest for All NYC, I want to thank Chairman Koo and the Committee for holding a hearing on the urban forest – an important and pressing issue.

The more than seven million trees that span public and private land across our city, along with their associated physical and social infrastructure, constitute the urban forest. With nearly as many trees as people in the city, the urban forest is an essential system that provides enormous benefits and services to New York City. The urban forest provides shade on hot summer days and cools city streets and buildings, saving an estimated \$17.1 million in residential energy costs each year. It reduces air pollution by 1,106 tons of pollutants annually, thereby benefiting public health. It mitigates climate change by storing carbon and reduces stormwater runoff by 69 million cubic feet per year, helping protect people and properties in flood-prone areas from damage.¹ The urban forest also provides vital habitat for many plant and animal species. Interactions between people and trees can improve the mental and physical health of people, catalyze stronger connections with nature, support social and cultural connections, and much more. In the face of COVID 19 and the growing impacts of climate change, including extreme heat and flooding, its benefits are more important than ever.

Unfortunately, the urban forest in New York City is also vulnerable; it faces insufficient funding for long-term care, lacks a coordinated management plan for the system as whole, and is largely unprotected from removal on both public and private lands. It is also inequitably distributed across the city, meaning low-income communities and communities of color with less tree cover receive fewer benefits, contributing to their heat vulnerability. While 53.5% of our urban forest (by canopy) is cared for by the NYC Department of Parks and Recreation, 35.3% is privately owned, and 11.2% is managed by other public agencies, such as the NYC Housing Authority. Each of these urban forest segments would benefit from increased attention, resources, and longer-term vision.

The NYC Department of Parks and Recreation, which is responsible for over half of our tree canopy, including street trees, landscaped park trees, and forested natural areas, is chronically underfunded, especially for the demand for its activities related to managing our urban forest. Critical maintenance activities, like stump

¹ Nowak DJ, Bodine AR, Hoehn RE, Ellis A, Hirabayashi S, Coville R, et al. The urban forest of New York City. Newtown Square, PA: USDA Forest Service, Northern Research Station; 2018 Sept. 1–82. Report No.: NRS-117. doi: 10.2737/NRS-RB-117

removal, pruning, invasive species removal, and tree planting, are frequently treated as expendable and often subject to budget cuts, causing unpredictability for an asset that requires regular care from both professional staff and volunteer stewards. Consistent, sufficient, baselined funding is needed for the growth and maintenance of the entire urban forest.

Beyond the legislation considered today, we encourage City Council to consider setting a long-term, visionary direction for our city's urban forest in support of public health, equity, quality of life, resilience, and justice. Forest for All NYC recently released the *NYC Urban Forest Agenda*. *The Agenda* outlines 12 key actions to make a meaningful and positive difference both in our urban forest and in the lives of all New Yorkers. Together, we call on City Council to:

- Establish a citywide goal of 30% canopy cover by 2035 (As of 2017, the city had 22% canopy cover.)
- Call for and resource a master plan for of NYC's urban forest for its whole life cycle from planting to salvage
- Support development of community-scale urban forest plans and goals
- Increase and equitably distribute funding for both maintenance and planting of the urban forest
- Strengthen tree regulations and establish incentive programs that sustain and expand tree canopy across both public and private property

While I am pleased to share our goals and recommendations, I must also state that given these goals of protecting and expanding the urban forest in New York City, The Nature Conservancy and Forest for All NYC are unable to support legislation that diminishes protections or standards for the urban forest. For this reason, we oppose the passage of Int 0957 and Int 0199 as written, which would weaken current practices, creating greater risk for the urban forest and therefore negatively affect New Yorkers.

Given the critical role that trees play in the daily life of our city, we commend the Council for your attention to trees in NYC and your interest in improving their care and management. Both The Nature Conservancy and Forest for All NYC would be pleased to support legislation that will meaningfully improve the urban forest and its benefits for New Yorkers. We believe there are opportunities to shape the legislation being considered today to provide greater benefit to the urban forest and look forward to working with Council to do so. Potential legislation we would be eager to support would align with the goals of Forest for All NYC and the *NYC Urban Forest Agenda*, invest more resources in the urban forest and those who care for it, support ecologically and operationally sound practices, be administratively practical, provide more public information about the urban forest, advance equity and justice, support climate resilience, and enhance both the urban forest overall and its benefits for New Yorkers.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. We are grateful to the Committee members for considering issues related to our urban forest, given its role as vital living infrastructure that benefits New Yorkers, and we look forward to working with the Committee to advance meaningful and effective urban forest legislation.

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