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Unlocking Public-Private Partnerships to Help Support and Strengthen NYC's Parks

New York City has an extraordinary parks partnership ecosystem, but outdated rules and uneven policies limit their impact, especially in under-resourced communities. This report offers five ideas to unlock greater community, private, philanthropic, and institutional support for parks that need it most.

by Tim Tompkins and Eli Dvorkin

No other city has been as successful as New York in tapping public-private partnerships to support and strengthen vital city services, spaces, and infrastructure, from the civic-minded corporations and labor unions that helped New York avert bankruptcy in the 1970s to the creation of Business Improvement Districts and parks conservancies. But with the city now facing a precarious fiscal situation that is likely to worsen in the year ahead, policymakers will have to act decisively to develop a new generation of public-private partnerships that can help improve, activate, and sustain the city's parks and open spaces.

Parks have borne the brunt of many decades of crisis-fueled budget cuts, and they are vulnerable once again as the city's expenses exceed revenues, the economy slows, and major headwinds from Washington threaten to blow multibillion-dollar holes in state and city budgets. Even with a temporary reprieve from city budget cuts this year, it is unlikely that next year's city budget will meaningfully boost funding for parks. And the city remains a long way from being willing to commit the tax levy dollars needed to create and sustain a truly excellent—and equitable—system of parks and open spaces.

The consequences are visible across the city. Years of growing park usage, unpredictable budgets, and persistent staffing gaps have left the system stretched thin, with park quality varying dramatically by neighborhood. According to the Citizens Budget Commission's 2025 residents' survey, 62 percent of Bronx residents rate their neighborhood parks and playgrounds as "fair" or "poor," compared to 29 percent in Manhattan. Without additional investment—including targeted public investment to match and incentivize incremental private dollars—and creative partnerships, the system will struggle to keep up with deferred maintenance needs, much less expand the programs and services New Yorkers need, from summer day camps and recreational programming to accessible natural areas, fully staffed pools, and more vibrant neighborhood parks.

Closing these disparities will require a significant increase in baselined funding for the maintenance and operations staff essential to keeping parks clean, safe, and well used. Getting to that level of city tax levy investment will likely necessitate new dedicated, recurring revenue, including the use of well-established value-capture mechanisms employed in major cities across the country—and by New York City in limited areas, like the 7 train extension to Hudson Yards. But at a time of serious fiscal constraints, policymakers should also look to innovative public-private partnerships as a vital strategy for bringing more resources, capacity, programming, and stewardship to NYC's parks and open spaces.

New York City already has an extraordinary parks partnership ecosystem, including more than 1,000 parks and open space partner groups currently working with NYC Parks. Conservancies, friends groups, volunteer stewards, recreation leagues, community organizations, local businesses, hospitals, universities, philanthropies, and civic-minded New Yorkers all have a role to play in supporting parks and open spaces. But the city has not yet built a modern, equitable, and intentional policy framework to unlock that support at the scale needed, especially in neighborhoods with the greatest unmet needs.

The challenge is that public-private partnerships, if left to develop only where local resources are greatest, can deepen the very disparities they should help address. The answer is not to curb New Yorkers' willingness to support their parks, but to build a more intentional framework that encourages that support while steering a larger share of the benefits toward parks and groups with the greatest unmet needs.

This report examines what could be unleashed if the city deliberately recognized, rewarded, and incentivized more forms of community, private, philanthropic, and institutional support for parks and open space, especially in less-resourced areas.

THIS REPORT ADVANCES FIVE ACTIONABLE IDEAS TO DO JUST THAT:

1. Cut the bureaucratic barriers that prevent community partners from supporting parks.
2. Pilot multi-site "Concessions Kits" to support small-scale park activation and revenue generation.
3. Launch an ambitious public-private campaign to strengthen grassroots park stewardship.
4. Incentivize contributions to parks and programs through indexed city matching funds.
5. Partner with hospitals, insurers, and health institutions to support recreation and wellness in nearby parks.

1. CUT THE BUREAUCRATIC AND COST BARRIERS THAT PREVENT COMMUNITY PARTNERS FROM SUPPORTING PARKS.

Any serious strategy for expanding parks partnerships has to begin with the city's own rules. Across the five boroughs, nonprofit organizations, conservancies, friends groups, and community activists are ready to raise funds, organize programming, activate underused spaces, and help maintain the parks their communities rely on. But too often, the city's wildly inconsistent licensing, legal, insurance, and revenue rules make that work slower, costlier, and more uncertain than it needs to be.

The mayor should direct the Law Department, Office of Management and Budget, and NYC Parks to address the most persistent bureaucratic barriers cited by community partners: overly complex license agreements; inconsistent rules around revenue retention, permitting, sponsorship, and fundraising; and burdensome insurance and indemnity provisions. With a regulatory framework that supports and strengthens community partners, instead of a set of unevenly enforced rules that restrict their capacity for action, these groups could do far more to support day-to-day care, expand programming, mobilize volunteers, and generate revenue that can be reinvested in public spaces.

Across the parks system, partners face strikingly different rules governing licensing, revenue, insurance, and liability. Some parks can retain concession and sponsorship revenues; others cannot. Some can hold local fundraisers in the park; others cannot. Some long-established partners receive indemnification from the city, meaning the city agrees to protect them from certain legal claims tied to their work on public property. Other, often smaller and less-resourced organizations are asked to shoulder risks that can threaten their ability to operate at all, while driving insurance premiums to unaffordable levels.

The consequences can be significant. The Parks Department's largest partners are indemnified by the city, except for acts of gross negligence. "Our organization would not exist but for the City's indemnification of the work that we do," said one leader, a sentiment echoed separately by the head of another organization that raises tens of millions of dollars for parks. "That is the unlocking that happens when you allow people to do good things on public property without having to worry that you are somehow going to get sued if somebody . . . gets stabbed with a needle while they are planting a tulip."

Smaller partners, many of whom operate in the boroughs outside Manhattan, often face a different reality. When the Bronx River Alliance wanted to open its state-of-the-art Bronx River House recreation center in 2020, it had to delay opening because the Parks Department, directed by the Risk Management Division in Corporation Counsel, insisted that the Alliance, with a budget of roughly $2 million, indemnify the City of New York, with a budget of roughly $125 billion. Far smaller groups, including all-volunteer organizations, have had to secure insurance that can cost as much as half their budget for programming or events. Among the Parks and Open Space Partners, representing 50 small and medium-sized nonprofits with a $1.7 million median budget, lack of indemnification was the number one issue cited in a 2025 survey of "top challenges in dealing with NYC Parks."

This is not just a technical legal issue. It is a barrier to partnership, and one that contributes to an inequitable landscape. Groups working in lower-income communities and smaller parks want to raise funds, organize volunteers, secure public or private support, and help create vibrant, clean, safe public spaces. But parks groups express enormous frustration with perceived inconsistencies in who is required to indemnify the city, who can retain revenue, and who is granted flexibility to fundraise, program, and operate in public spaces. One leader of a parks stewardship organization, who requested anonymity to avoid jeopardizing city relationships, said the current system often appears to give the most flexibility to organizations that already have the most resources.

The city's lack of investment in parks compounds the problem. The agency's legal, revenue, and permitting divisions are understaffed, even as they are asked to manage major concessions, tens of thousands of sports permits, and a growing universe of public-space partnerships. Hiring more staff would make a difference. But so would a clear directive from City Hall to simplify, standardize, and enable more partnerships.

The city should respond by shifting from a posture of risk avoidance to one of problem-solving, reducing unnecessary barriers and engineering faster pathways to "yes." That work should start with standardized license templates for different tiers of parks partners, from small volunteer-led stewardship groups to larger conservancies with long-term operating responsibilities. These templates should clarify what different types of partners are allowed to do, including fundraising, programming, sponsorships, concessions, and revenue retention—starting from an assumption of "yes" rather than "no." The city should also allow partners to retain revenues generated through park-based activities, particularly when those dollars are reinvested in maintenance, programming, or stewardship.

City Hall should also reduce or eliminate insurance requirements that are disproportionate to the scale of a group's work, and consider subsidizing premiums for smaller organizations, as the city has begun to do for some other public-realm partners. It should provide regular workshops and plain-language guidance to help partner groups navigate licensing, fundraising, insurance, permitting, and revenue-retention rules. And it should invest in NYC Parks' own partnership, concessions, permitting, and legal teams, with a focus on hiring staff who are excited about reducing barriers, standardizing processes, and helping partners get to "yes."

Finally, every agency that works with public-realm partners—including NYC Parks, the Department of Transportation, and the

Department of Small Business Services—should be given the directive and staffing necessary to analyze existing partnership documents, create an internal database that helps the agencies understand what their thousands of partners are already allowed to do, identify the provisions and precedents that most empower community partners to create positive impacts for their parks, and—most importantly—make those models more rather than less available.

Other cities have recognized the need to modernize partner agreements that evolved over time without a consistent framework. Atlanta recently issued an RFP "to evaluate and modernize the framework governing public-private partnerships with park conservancies" in order to "establish a clear, scalable partnership framework that strengthens park operations, increases philanthropic investment, and improves governance and accountability," noting that "existing agreements have evolved independently and lack a consistent model."

New York should do the same, while recognizing that one size will not fit all. A tiered framework, much like the partner taxonomy the Austin Parks Department established to rationalize its support services, would allow the city to calibrate requirements to the capacity and track record of different organizations. Established groups with a decade-long record of being reliable park partners should be treated as trusted and vetted partners, rather than treated with suspicion. The benefits conveyed to them should not be driven primarily by how much money they bring to the table, but by the consistency and duration of their commitment to the park.

2. PILOT MULTI-SITE "CONCESSIONS KITS" TO SUPPORT SMALL-SCALE PARK ACTIVATION AND REVENUE GENERATION.

The city's current concessions model is built largely around a large number of mobile carts and food trucks and a relatively small number of high-value opportunities, like restaurants, marinas, and golf courses. But this current landscape does not yet take full advantage of revenue-generating amenities that could bring food, foot traffic, activity, and recurring revenue to neighborhood parks. That leaves too many parks and playgrounds without the kinds of visitor-serving amenities New Yorkers would use and appreciate, from a taco stand near a ballfield and a coffee cart at a playground to athletic equipment rentals, picnic supplies, ice cream, sunscreen, and other everyday offerings that make parks more enjoyable to use.

To change that, NYC Parks should expand the use of multi-site "Concessions Kits" that lower the cost and complexity of bringing small-scale commercial activity into parks and playgrounds. The city should begin by engaging four to six respondents in low-risk, low-barrier, multi-site pilots of at least ten parks each, with a focus on mobile vendors, modular setups, basic infrastructure, and revenue-sharing models that support both activation and income. The goal should be to unleash the entrepreneurial energy of New Yorkers while allowing revenues to be retained by local parks partners.

This opportunity for targeted expansion of parks concessions is increasingly gaining traction. The city's executive budget now books $11 million annually in additional Parks concession revenue beginning in FY 2027, following the City Council's official budget response, which cited the Center for an Urban Future's recent report in calling for an expansion of parks concessions.

But the current model still has significant room to grow. NYC Parks sometimes requires significant upfront capital investment by concessionaires, while concessions on parkland are revocable at will, making financing—and attracting bidders—more difficult. In other cases, existing buildings need major city capital investment to render them leasable—capital needs that can compete with the hundreds of millions of dollars in other needs that exist across the system. That combination means that only the most lucrative concession opportunities draw multiple bidders, and both current and former concessionaires have expressed frustration with a process that is often viewed as unnecessarily time-consuming, unrealistic in terms of what is expected of concessionaires, and bogged down in bureaucracy that extends well beyond the Parks Department to include the city's Law Department and Office of Management and Budget.

Even basic infrastructure requirements can keep new or innovative players away. Installing gas service alone can run over $1 million. For many potential concessions locations, the upfront investment is difficult if not impossible to square with the revenue potential, leaving parks structures underutilized and preventing interested entrepreneurs from moving forward.

One way to lower these barriers is to invest in modular, plug-and-play concession infrastructure. NYC Parks has already seen some success with this approach, including the use of retrofitted containers at Pier I Cafe and Ellington in the Park in Riverside Park, as well as bike rental kiosks and the Strand Book Store in Central Park. The agency is also taking steps to expand and modernize concessions, including the highly popular McCarren Parkhouse, which opened in 2022, and a new food market RFP for multiple sites in Manhattan. Governors Island has also demonstrated the value of this approach, using retrofitted shipping containers as a core part of its culinary program. City Hall should work with NYC Parks to adapt this approach for more neighborhood parks, pairing modular structures, mobile vendors, and basic infrastructure with simplified agreements and shared revenue models.

This expanded initiative could take several forms. Some operators could receive special permits to facilitate food trucks or mobile vendors who pay site-specific fees and agree to deliver specific services. Other sites could receive a concessions capital "infrastructure kit," including an accessible above-ground power box, access to water, and storage space. In larger parks, such as Flushing Meadows Corona Park, the city could test a concessions infrastructure "spine" through the middle of the park, with water, trash, compost and recycling, power, shade, seating, and other basic infrastructure that allows vendors to operate without relying on diesel generators. These pilots should also include simple agreements that enable revenue to be shared with the park.

NYC Parks should also consider launching a new Concessions Investment Fund in partnership with NYCEDC. The fund could mobilize the upfront capital needed to attract private-sector investment and help prepare underutilized or empty parks structures to become attractive, revenue-generating concessions. This could include purchasing shipping containers or other modular structures, installing basic utility hookups, financing buildouts in partnership with qualified partner organizations and local entrepreneurs, and helping convert underused park buildings into visitor-serving amenities.

The ability to retain concession revenues is also arbitrarily uneven. On and near Broadway alone, Duffy Square permits some revenue retention, but far less than the Broadway plaza adjacent to it, which is governed by DOT rules. Bryant Park and Madison Square Park retain all revenues from Bryant Park Grill and Shake Shack, respectively. Union Square gets none of the millions in revenues from its restaurant, holiday market, and Greenmarket. Each partner agreement has its own history, but the city should be moving toward a more consistent framework that allows more parks to retain and reinvest revenues, especially parks in need of both funding and activation.

Going forward, new concession revenues should not simply disappear into the general fund. The city should create a Parks Improvement Trust or similar mechanism to ensure that revenues generated in parks are captured and reinvested back into the parks system, with safeguards to ensure the funding supplements, rather than supplants, baseline city support.

NYC Parks could structure the pilots through license, concession, funding, or permitting agreements with implementing partners. One option would be to work with a sister agency with more flexibility, such as EDC, which could help manage the Concessions Investment Fund and support upfront infrastructure. Another would be to work with a citywide partner such as City Parks Foundation or New York Restoration Project, or with larger parks nonprofits such as the Prospect Park Alliance, which could experiment both in their own parks and nearby parks.

The implementing partner could then issue and oversee a simple, flexible RFP that can adapt to evolving conditions and allow revenues to be retained by existing parks partners rather than flowing to the city's general fund. A critical element would be working with legislators to waive or reform concessions criteria that solely prioritize the highest bidder. That approach can shut out local businesses and nonprofit partners while ignoring the immense community value that small concessions can bring to a struggling park, even when revenues are modest. Alternatively, allowing partners with license agreements to oversee and retain concessions revenue can allow a workaround from the "highest bidder" requirement, much as DOT does for plaza agreements. And the city should invest in bolstering the capacity of NYC Parks to manage and execute on an expanded concessions strategy, including additional in-house staff to oversee an expanded flow of concessions-related agreements and initiatives.

3. LAUNCH AN AMBITIOUS PUBLIC-PRIVATE CAMPAIGN TO STRENGTHEN GRASSROOTS PARK STEWARDSHIP.

High-quality parks are increasingly central to New York City's ability to attract and retain talent, families, and employers. At a time when recent college graduates, young families, and working New Yorkers are struggling to stay in the city amid skyrocketing costs, parks and open spaces help make New York more livable, more affordable, and more worth choosing. They are also essential to daily life, health, and neighborhood vitality: one survey of more than 1,000 New Yorkers found that 88 percent considered parks and open space very or extremely important to their mental health, while 80 percent said the same for physical health.

For employers, this creates a clear opportunity. Supporting parks is a way to invest in the neighborhoods where their workers live; strengthen the public spaces that make New York attractive; and align corporate giving, sponsorships, and employee volunteerism with the interests of their own workforce. The same is true for philanthropy. As parks become more central to public health, climate resilience, youth development, social connection, and quality of life, they should be a growing focus of civic and philanthropic investment.

But New York City is still only scratching the surface of what this support could look like. Companies, universities, hospitals, real estate firms, local businesses, philanthropies, and civic-minded New Yorkers all have reasons to support neighborhood parks and open spaces. What's missing is a larger platform for turning that interest into sustained support, especially for the smaller parks groups and underresourced open spaces that need it most.

The city is not starting from scratch. For decades, Partnerships for Parks, a joint program of NYC Parks and City Parks Foundation, has helped New Yorkers organize volunteer parks groups, care for and activate local parks, apply for small grants, build community leadership, and strengthen the civic infrastructure around neighborhood open spaces. With its current $3 million budget of city-funded positions, Partnerships for Parks is able to support almost 500 neighborhood parks groups. But the program is operating at a surprisingly small scale relative to both the need and the opportunity, especially when it comes to attracting and channeling private-sector support and mobilizing historically underserved parks partners.

The city should make supporting neighborhood parks in need a major civic priority and launch an ambitious public-private campaign to strengthen grassroots park partnerships, especially with sports and recreation and other neighborhood groups that use vibrant parks and public spaces to advance their mission and strengthen community bonds. Using a mix of public and philanthropic dollars as a challenge grant, the city should mount a high-profile campaign linked to park activations, community projects, and civic challenges, with Partnerships for Parks as the platform for channeling more support to neighborhood park groups, recreation leagues, immigrant-led organizations, volunteer stewards, and other local partners.

One city parks partnership leader notes that demand for community stewardship support far exceeds current capacity. The program has been unable to expand for several years, not because of a lack of community interest, but because there are too few staff to engage, support, and sustain additional volunteer groups. As the official put it, growing community stewardship requires more on-the-ground capacity: "In order to get people, we need people."

The city has shown that mayoral leadership can mobilize private resources around civic priorities. Mayor Mamdani recently took a similar approach to childcare, seeking to raise $20 million in private contributions through the Child Care Action Fund to help advance the city's universal childcare agenda. The city should consider a comparable push to support parks and open spaces, especially the small local groups working in parks with the greatest unmet needs.

A serious campaign could take many forms: corporate and institutional challenge grants; foundation-backed neighborhood park stewardship and activation funds; employer-sponsored volunteer programs paired with flexible microgrants; hospital, university, and company contributions tied to nearby parks; sponsorship of borough-based organizers; or a five-borough parks walk-a-thon or civic challenge campaign. Because the point is not simply to generate one-time donations or one-day cleanups, but to build lasting local capacity, these should amplify existing efforts wherever possible.

For example, to drive interest and participation, the city could build on existing activation infrastructure such as It's My Park Events, when thousands of people volunteer in parks, or the annual Run for CityParks linked to the November Marathon. The city and parks partners could also link the campaign to a special series of in-park performances at several dozen bandshells and performance stages throughout the parks system, or to permitted events in city parks over one or two weeks. As one form of corporate philanthropy, an innovator in New York City's advertising industry could potentially help develop the campaign pro bono, making neighborhood park stewardship visible, compelling, and easy to support.

The campaign should also make visible the emotional connection New Yorkers have with their local parks. It could feature well-known New Yorkers who grew up near a neighborhood park; highlight recreation leagues, friends groups, immigrant-led organizations, and volunteer stewards; and encourage residents to enlist "sponsors" for volunteer projects, runs, walks, or even canoe paddles, with donations tied to a matching incentive. The campaign could also harness the mayor's unmatched social media presence, holding contests for New Yorkers to create short-form videos about their parks—for instance, $250 awards (allocated by a private partner) for 100 influencers who highlight their connection to 100 different parks—that could then be diffused widely through the mayor's and the city's social media channels.

Several components would be key to success. First, the city should commit to a focused promotional campaign, even if it is centered on a single event or finite period of time. That could include a one-time mailing to every parks permittee and partner in the city's system, as well as PSAs at event venues on parkland such as Yankee Stadium, the Cyclones stadium, and Arthur Ashe Stadium. Second, the campaign should be developed in coordination with City Parks Foundation and other parks groups that have the infrastructure not only to raise funds for this effort, but to turn one-time donors into sustained givers and make this an annual drive. Third, the city should enlist employers, retailers, real estate owners, universities, hospitals, hotels, and other institutions near parks to encourage voluntary contributions, sponsorships, employee volunteer programs, and challenge grants, as creative partners like the High Line have done. Fourth, donations should be structured to benefit both local park groups and a citywide Parks Improvement Trust that would support specific improvements or activations in less-resourced parks.

To make this effort more than a one-time fundraising push, the city should also strengthen the underlying stewardship infrastructure. It should double the community engagement staff of Partnerships for Parks under its Parks Equity Initiative, hiring from targeted communities and constituencies, with a particular focus on team members with ties to recreation partners and groups in immigrant communities. With more organizers on the ground, Partnerships for Parks could help many more local groups attract volunteers, connect with private and philanthropic supporters, and turn one-time contributions into sustained stewardship.

4. INCENTIVIZE CONTRIBUTIONS TO PARKS AND PROGRAMS THROUGH INDEXED CITY MATCHING FUNDS.

A citywide campaign can help generate more attention, donors, and volunteers for neighborhood parks. But New York also needs a standing mechanism that makes parks giving easier, more attractive, and more equitable. The city should create indexed matching funds and microgrants to encourage more residents, businesses, and institutions to support parks, while ensuring that the largest public matches go to communities with the greatest unmet needs.

This idea solves a different problem than the broader campaign for grassroots park stewardship: how to turn small donations, volunteer time, in-kind support, local business participation, and everyday transactions into a predictable and equitable source of support for parks. The goal is not simply to match private giving, but to create many more ways for New Yorkers and local businesses to contribute in the first place, while using public dollars to multiply those contributions where local fundraising capacity is lowest.

There is no escaping the disparities in parks services that grow out of decades of inadequate public funding. But rather than penalize donors who have the means and will to help their local park, the city should acknowledge, reward, and multiply the efforts of parks partners and supporters in lower-income areas.

One relevant model is the city's campaign finance law. If the city can "level the field" figuratively for political candidates, why not do it literally for parks? "If somebody in an under-resourced neighborhood can run for City Council and have a six-to-one match up to a certain dollar figure, why shouldn't everybody be able to do the same thing, but for parks?" says Alan van Capelle, executive director of Friends of the High Line. "Someone on the Lower East Side could make a check for $25 for Corlears Park and the City should return that with a $125 check."

The innovation should not simply be that the city matches private donations; it should also be that New York creates more frictionless opportunities for people and businesses to generate those donations. Restaurants could offer a voluntary "round up for your parks" option on the bill. Gyms could allow members to opt into a contribution for nearby recreation spaces. Stadium tickets could include the option of a small donation to youth sports in parks. Hotels could invite guests to support a parks improvement fund. Local businesses could donate supplies or staff time and receive an in-kind match. Residents could contribute to a friends group and unlock a higher public match in lower-income neighborhoods.

The equity design is the key. This cannot become a system where parks with the strongest fundraising networks simply get more. The match should be indexed by need, with higher match ratios for lower-income communities and lower match ratios in higher-capacity areas. A secondary citywide regrant fund could ensure that contributions generated in or near higher-capacity parks also help support underresourced parks. Contributions eligible for a match could include cash, volunteer hours, professional services, materials, and other in-kind support, with clear dollar values assigned where appropriate. For example, volunteers who regularly clean trash from Forest Park or offer free classes at the Brownsville Recreation Center could generate matching donations in cash to support local stewardship and maintenance needs.

Seattle offers one relevant model. Through its Neighborhood Matching Fund and Community Partnership Fund, the city gives grants of up to $50,000 for neighborhood-led or neighborhood-initiated projects, matching money raised through volunteer hours, professional in-kind services, materials, or cash. In 2024, more than $2.1 million in grants were awarded.

New York already has precedents to build on. Through its Public Space Equity Program, the Department of Transportation gives direct grants to block associations, BIDs, and programming partners in lower-income areas. Similarly, the Department of Small Business Services has for years used Community Development Block Grant funds earmarked for low-income areas to strengthen small BID capacity for public-space maintenance and programming in less-resourced areas.

The city could also work with City Parks Foundation and Citizens Committee to adapt a newer procurement model that allows city agencies to move small grants more quickly to neighborhood-based organizations. That tool could help flexible public matching dollars reach community parks partners with less administrative friction, especially in lower-income neighborhoods where all-volunteer groups often lack the capacity to navigate traditional city contracting. To date, this model has operated through numerous city agencies, with DOT's public-space program among the newest additions, but Parks has yet to participate. If easier, EDC rather than Parks could be the agency partnering with City Parks Foundation and Citizens Committee.

Over time, an indexed matching system could become part of a broader effort to use public-private partnerships more equitably across the parks system. The city could pair higher match rates for lower-income neighborhoods with a citywide Parks Improvement Trust or similar mechanism, ensuring that private contributions, concession revenues, and other park-related resources help strengthen the full parks system rather than simply reinforcing existing disparities. As Christopher Rizzo, an environmental and land use attorney, wrote in a report for New Yorkers for Parks and the New York League of Conservation Voters, while adapting these models to less affluent communities may be difficult, "well-maintained parks and open space have profound economic and environmental benefits for all types of communities," making it "worth the struggle" to bring greater "creativity and vision" to public-private partnerships in lower-wealth communities.

5. PARTNER WITH HOSPITALS, INSURERS, AND HEALTH INSTITUTIONS TO SUPPORT RECREATION AND WELLNESS IN NEARBY PARKS.

Health care facilities and parks each offer something the other needs. Hospitals, insurers, and health providers are looking for more effective ways to support preventive health, physical activity, mental health, and community well-being. Parks and recreation centers offer exactly that kind of infrastructure, but NYC Parks is offering far fewer recreation opportunities than before the pandemic, with city-run recreational program sessions declining 45 percent from 2019 to 2024.

That makes the city's health care sector a major untapped partner for parks and recreation. Health care is one of New York City's largest and most geographically dispersed industries, employing 850,000 people and driving much of the city's private-sector job growth in recent years. With 62 hospitals, more than 300 urgent care clinics, 25-plus standalone community health offices run by Medicaid insurers, and hospital budgets totaling $55 billion to $65 billion, even a very small share of this institutional capacity could help restore active programming in communities with significant health needs.

For instance, if just 1 percent of the roughly $9.5 billion in annual community benefits reported by NYC nonprofit hospitals were directed to NYC Parks for parks-based wellness and recreation, it would generate about $95 million a year—enough to significantly expand recreation programming, support frontline staffing, and strengthen preventive health infrastructure in neighborhoods across the city.

NYC Parks has already begun exploring this concept with NYC Health + Hospitals. The city should build on those early efforts by launching a pilot modeled on the broader Healthy Parks, Healthy People movement, connecting hospitals, insurers, and health providers to nearby parks and recreation centers. NYC Parks should work with Health + Hospitals, the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH), researchers from the City University of New York (CUNY), and health care partners to develop turnkey recreation and wellness packages that institutions could sponsor in nearby parks, especially in communities with high rates of chronic disease and limited access to active programming.

The city could also test "RecRx" prescriptions, with doctors or health providers referring patients to recreation, walking groups, yoga, swimming, park-based fitness, rec center access, or other structured activities. Hospitals and insurers could sponsor programming in nearby parks and recreation centers, particularly where that programming aligns with nonprofit hospitals' community health needs assessments and community benefit obligations.

Linking health to parks is a growing trend nationally. Citing examples in Boston, including OutdoorRx, and Houston's "Dancing with a Doc," which features physician-led Zumba classes in a nearby park, Gideon Berger of the City Parks Alliance says that "the more enlightened [health care] institutions have recognized the broader connections to health and well-being not just for their patients and visitors but also their staff . . . they've basically gotten into the parks and public space business."

In Chicago, the FitnessRx program gives residents a three-month fitness center membership if they bring a prescription or referral from a health provider for conditions such as asthma, diabetes, or heart disease.

NYC's recreation programs would benefit from capturing even a minuscule portion of hospital and health care spending. But hospitals, insurers, and their patients could benefit as well. Numerous studies have linked parks, green space, and active recreation to positive physical and mental health outcomes. A 2025 study published in the *Journal of Urban Health* examined the association between per-capita spending by parks and recreation departments in 10 Southern California cities and health outcomes among 732,504 adults. For every $30 per capita spent on programming, the prevalence ratios for serious conditions were meaningfully lower. A 2016 study by Harvard's T.H. Chan School of Public Health of more than 100,000 female nurses established a correlation between proximity to green spaces and positive physical and mental health outcomes.

New York already has pieces to build on. Recent CUNY SPH research has linked park improvements to reduced stress, increased park use, and greater satisfaction with park quality, offering a useful foundation for a more intentional partnership between NYC Parks, health institutions, and researchers. Local hospitals like NYC Health + Hospitals, picking up on programs like the National Produce Prescription Collaborative, have already been looking at prescriptions and vouchers for healthy food. The city could pilot parks prescriptions like those tested through Project Nature in Washington State, which includes nature prescriptions from pediatricians and tools for parents to encourage outdoor play, or Austin's Healthcare Provider Toolkits, which are part of its ParksRx program.

There is also a practical reason this could appeal to hospitals. Nationally, nonprofit hospitals must meet a Community Benefit Standard linked to a Community Health Needs Assessment. New York State requires hospitals to go a step further by adopting a Community Service Plan. Because these assessments increasingly focus on social drivers of health, including physical activity, mental health, chronic disease prevention, and neighborhood conditions, parks and recreation programming could become a more natural fit for hospital community benefit investments. If NYC Parks can develop a menu of programming packages to be sponsored by nearby hospitals and then track results over time through partnerships with CUNY or other research institutions, both Parks and hospitals could more effectively make the case that this spending is linked to community health improvements.

To make this happen, the mayor should direct NYC Parks, working with Health + Hospitals, DOHMH, CUNY researchers, and health care partners, to develop an à la carte menu of turnkey parks programming packages at different sponsorship price points. These packages should focus on activities with the greatest potential for positive health impacts among targeted populations in parks near health facilities, and could be overseen by seasonal Parks recreation personnel, qualified nonprofit partners, or vendors acceptable to health providers.

The city should then convene local health care leaders and invite a pilot cohort of nonprofit hospitals, urgent care centers, and Medicaid-affiliated community health offices to sponsor a season of activities in nearby parks or recreation centers in return for appropriate recognition and support. After a first season, the program could scale up and be more formally linked to a university research effort to validate results. The Mayor's Fund could also approach health-oriented philanthropy to accelerate and incentivize health care participation, ideally doubling health partner contributions in low-income areas facing the greatest health risks.

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