

End of the Green for Parks? After A Four-Year Rise, Funding May Tumble

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Since reaching a recent low point in 1997, funding for the city's Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) has risen 34 percent—from \$162.0 million in 1997 to \$217.6 million in 2001. This increase of nearly \$56 million followed a period through the early 1990s in which parks funding fell by 12 percent in nominal dollars, and full-time staffing plummeted. But the budget cuts proposed in the Mayor's Executive Budget would erase the increase in parks spending, essentially rolling back the parks department budget to below its 1997 level in inflation-adjusted terms.

Even prior to the Mayor's proposed cuts, the bloom in parks spending that began in 1998 was not accompanied by a renewed growth in full-time staffing. In fact, the number of full-time parks workers fell even as spending increased. And with the loss of full-time staff has come a drop in the number of workers with critical skills for maintaining parks and recreation areas. In 1991, for example, DPR employed 30 full-time gardeners. A decade later that number had fallen to 12. Over the same period, the number of climbers and pruners had dropped from 99 to 55 and the number of full-time plumbers from 30 to 18.

To compensate for the loss of full-time personnel DPR has increasingly relied on hourly and seasonal workers, many of whom lack the training and experience in skills important to parks upkeep and repair. The growing reliance on temporary workers also means DPR has less ability to develop and promote staff who have gained the kind of insight and experience that typically comes from years on the job.

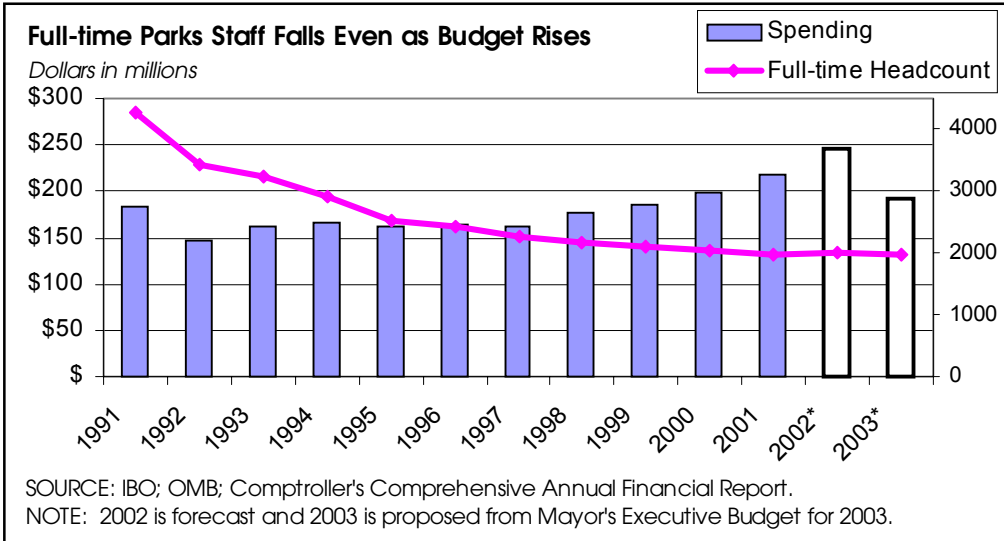
Cutbacks in the early 1990s. The city's fiscal difficulties during the recession of the early 1990s affected the parks department dramatically. The budget fell sharply in 1992, then rose again slightly through 1994, before drifting down again through 1997. Full-time staffing fell from 4,285 in 1991 to 2,275 in 1997, a decrease of 2,010 positions, or 47 percent.

Because it is the largest component of parks spending, maintenance and operations (M&O) took the biggest cut in dollar terms. Between 1991 and 1997, M&O was cut \$14.3 million—11 percent. M&O staffing, which includes functions such as gardeners, pruners, and plumbers, decreased during this time from 2,448 to 1,796 full-time positions—a decline of 27 percent.

Other DPR functions were pruned at differing rates. Recreation programs, although a small share of the parks department budget to begin with (less than 9 percent of the total), were cut

proportionately more than M&O: \$8.8 million, or by over half. The department's management and administration division was cut by 2 percent—while personnel spending in this division fell by one-third, it was largely offset by higher energy costs and other mandatory spending. Conversely, the department's design and engineering services, which are responsible for the design and oversight of capital repair and improvement projects, saw a spending increase of 7 percent.

through 2001. Two major changes explain almost two-thirds of the growth. Part of the growth results simply from the fact that in 1997, \$5 million of the total city contribution of \$9.6 million to the Wildlife Conservation Society came from the city's capital budget, rather than the expense budget, where it usually is incurred. As a result, expense budget spending was "artificially" low for 1997, boosting the increase over the period.



A larger portion of the increase stemmed from the decision to spend more on tree pruning. In November 1997, the Mayor and City Council pledged funds to maintain a 10-year pruning cycle for the 500,000 city trees in DPR's care. Prior to 1997, the department's pruning cycle was officially set at 50 years. From a practical perspective, this meant that trees were pruned only in cases of emergency. The forestry budget was \$4.4 million in 2001, up from \$711,000 in 1997.

Renewed growth in parks spending. Parks spending rebounded in 1998 and continued to grow through 2001, with DPR's budget rising by \$55.7 million over four years, from \$162.0 million to \$217.6 million—a 34 percent increase. During the same period, however, full-time headcount continued to decrease, from 2,275 at the beginning of 1998 to 1,965 in 2001—less than half its 1991 level.

Recreation programs also regained some of the funding lost during the first half of the 1990s, although by 2001, at \$10.5 million it was still \$5.7 million, or 35 percent, below its 1991 level, even without adjusting for inflation. While in 1991 recreation totaled 9 percent of the parks budget, it is now less than 5 percent of the department's total spending.

Even with the additional funding the parks department continued to change the composition of its staffing. Despite the decrease in permanent, full-time staffing, spending on personnel accounted for two-thirds of the total increase from 1998 through 2001. Of the \$36.3 million rise in spending on staffing, \$28.5 million paid for new hourly and seasonal positions.

Relying on temporary labor. To help supplement its diminished full-time staff, the parks department employs both current welfare recipients, through the Work Experience Program (WEP), and individuals whose welfare benefits have recently expired, through the Parks Opportunity Program (POP). WEP participants work an average of 20 hours a week and participate in general job-training programs. Funds for administering WEP come from the Human Resources Administration (HRA). In 2001, as in 1997, parks received \$6 million from HRA for WEP administration and supervision. The number of WEP participants has been declining over the last several years, but could increase as a result of the faltering economy or if Congress approves President George Bush's proposal to raise the work requirements for public assistance recipients.

DPR allocated the largest portion of its funding increase to maintenance and operations, bringing it \$45.5 million, or 38 percent, above its 1997 level. M&O personnel spending increased by \$30.1 million—although full-time headcount decreased by 175 positions. Again, increased use of seasonal and part-time positions, for which spending increased by \$25.1 million, drove the growth in spending.

POP is a new program that began in 2001. Employees work 40 hours per week for 11-month contracts at an hourly rate

Other M&O spending grew \$15.4 million from 1997

of \$9.38. To pay for POP worker wages, the department taps federal welfare block grant funds through HRA. During its first year, POP wages totaled \$3.8 million and comprised a portion of the increased spending on seasonal positions.

Toward centralization. The cutbacks in full-time employment have contributed to changes in how the department assigns workers and responsibilities. This has meant moving resources away from the local parks districts and into borough-level offices, giving the department greater flexibility in workforce assignments. Both seasonal workers and supervisors, for instance, work across districts. The summer months, in particular, shift the workforce toward pools and beaches, which requires flexibility in assigning parks employees. All together, funds allocated to local parks service districts fell \$5.2 million from 1997 to 2001, while borough-level budget allocations grew \$24.6 million.

Much of the borough-level rise in spending came from the increased employment of seasonal workers. Spending on hourly unsalaried and seasonal workers rose by \$13.7 million, or 55 percent of the total borough-specific increase.

Not as green as it seems. To some degree, the change in parks staffing patterns reflects fiscal reality: although spending rose over the past four years, when adjusted for inflation the department's budget is still below its 1991 level. Nor has the department's budget kept pace with the growth in overall city spending. The parks department budget shrank from 0.65 percent of total city spending in 1991 to 0.52 percent in 2000. Measured differently, while overall city spending increased 48 percent between 1991 and 2001, parks spending increased by 18 percent.

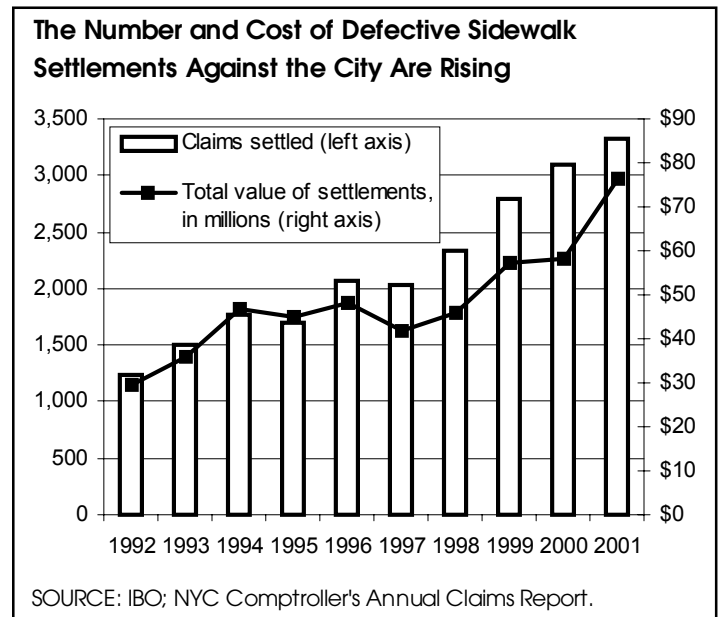
The new budget cuts proposed for the parks department will test the agency's ability to continue to stretch its resources. While the Mayor's budget proposals call for the parks to generate new revenues, including \$2 million from naming rights for recreation centers and park areas and \$8.4 million from recreation center and golf course fees, it also demands further headcount reductions, both full-time and seasonal. The budget cuts would effectively erase the gains in park spending over the past four years and bring budgeted staffing to 1,961, a new low.

Written by Elizabeth Zeldin

Lawsuits and the Sidewalks of New York

In an effort to begin to tackle the city's rising costs for settling lawsuits, Mayor Bloomberg proposed this week to make property owners, and not the city, liable for accidents that result from poor repair of sidewalks. Currently, the city is liable in court even though property owners are responsible for maintaining sidewalks and clearing them of snow and ice. One-, two-, and three-family homeowners would be exempt from this change, which requires City Council approval.

Over the past 10 fiscal years, from 1992 through 2001, sidewalk suits have been the most commonly filed personal injury claim. In 2001, a total of 3,604 personal injury claims resulting from defective sidewalks were filed. This accounted for 23 percent of all personal injury claims that were filed against the city. Except for 2001, sidewalk settlements and judgments have been the second most costly category of claims over the same 10-year period. In 2001, a total of 3,318 personal injury claims due to defective sidewalks resulted in settlements or judgments totaling \$76.3 million. This equaled 14 percent of the \$550 million in personal injury settlements and judgments against the city in 2001.



Defective sidewalk claims arise from alleged defects, such as cracked or uneven surfaces, in public sidewalks. This type of claim includes personal injuries for "slip and fall" accidents resulting from such defects, as well as accidents from falls on snow and ice-covered sidewalks.

Written by Richard Greene