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Building Community and Civic Engagement in Parks

Regardless of background, New Yorkers rely on parks for recreation, to strengthen social ties, and improve physical and emotional well-being. Parks strengthen and sustain communities and build goodwill among neighbors. The NYIC's Immigrants and Parks Collaborative—a unique partnership of seven community groups, the JM Kaplan Fund, Partnership for Parks, and the NYIC—aims to ensure that our city's open spaces are accessible to all and meet New Yorkers' needs for recreational and gathering places.

Connecting Immigrants With Their Parks

New immigrants often know very little about the parks system and how to get involved in their parks. It's a myth that housing, employment, and financial worries prevent immigrants from being involved in parks and community life—it's really an issue of inadequate outreach and public processes that most cannot access.

Currently, the Parks Department depends on local leaders and service organizations to reach out to immigrant communities. But there are better ways to reach out to immigrant communities—for example, by connecting to existing social networks, which would enable the department to secure broader input on park programming, services, and improvements. The end result is smarter, more useful investments, and a stronger relationship with the community.

To help the Parks Department strengthen its working relationship with immigrant communities, we urge the agency to create an immigrant liaison position that would advise on and help implement better policies and outreach methods for immigrant communities.

Recommendations

- Create an immigrant liaison position at the Parks Department that would provide guidance to the agency on policies and outreach methods and help address issues affecting immigrants in parks.
- Improve language access in our city's public spaces through full implementation of Executive Order 120.
- Revisit parks permitting and vending policies to make them clearer and more transparent.
- Encourage culturally diverse food options in parks to reflect the rich cultural diversity in our neighborhoods and help spur local economic development.

Improving Language Access for Park Users

Immigrants are learning English at faster rates than ever before. However, many still cannot navigate the government bureaucracy or are denied essential services due to language barriers. It's difficult for newcomers who are just starting to learn English to find out about how the parks system works and what their rights and responsibilities are, if the information is only available in English. Improved language access helps eliminate misunderstandings between park personnel and

immigrant park users and expands opportunities for all to participate in park improvements, activities, and maintenance.

All city agencies, including the parks department, are required to provide language access as a result of Executive Order 120, issued by Mayor Bloomberg in 2008. The Immigrants and Parks Collaborative is partnering with the Parks Department to help the agency fulfill its mandate. The collaborative is developing language access best practices and will be testing outreach to limited-English-proficient New Yorkers. We urge Mayor Bloomberg, the City Council, and the Parks Department to continue working to improve language access in our city's public spaces.

Improving Vending and Permitting Opportunities for Immigrant Park Users

Cultural activities and sporting events bring life to our open spaces and health to the city's residents. Unclear park permitting policies, however, make it difficult for immigrant groups to organize cultural and sporting events in their local parks. Clearer, more transparent park permitting policies are long overdue.

Culturally diverse food options can draw more visitors to parks and improve the park experience. Immigrant street vendors offer some of the city's best locally prepared, authentic ethnic foods. Unfortunately for park visitors, the Parks Department is missing a tremendous opportunity to bring diverse food vendors to our parks. Park users continue to be limited to the standard park fare of pretzels, boiled hotdogs, and ice cream bars.

The problem lies with the parks vending process, which grants vending permits to the highest qualified bidder. The process limits what food can be sold, where, and for how much. It requires bidders to front thousands of dollars in insurance costs and to submit complicated financial analysis documents, making it nearly impossible for immigrant vendors with less experience and resources to obtain permits.

A clearer and more transparent permitting and vending process is one way all New Yorkers can better access these park services. A vending process that eliminates barriers for new immigrant vendors and encourages culturally diverse food options in parks will not only allow our public spaces to reflect the rich cultural diversity in our neighborhoods, but will help spur local economic development. We strongly encourage Mayor



Bloomberg, the Parks Department, and the City Council to explore these recommendations and fulfill the potential parks have to build communities, celebrate diversity, and enhance civic life in our city's neighborhoods.

Detailed Recommendations:

Create an immigrant liaison position at the Parks Department that would provide guidance to the agency on policies and outreach methods and help address issues affecting immigrants in parks.

Improve language access in our city's public spaces through full implementation of Executive Order 120.

Fulfill the potential parks have to build communities, celebrate diversity, and enhance civic life for all New Yorkers by:

- Revisiting permitting and vending policies to make them clearer and more transparent;
- Eliminating barriers in the vending process for new immigrant vendors; and
- Encouraging culturally diverse food options in parks to reflect the rich cultural diversity in our neighborhoods and help spur local economic development.