Testimony to December 1, 2016 NYC Council Committee on Parks and Recreation Oversight Hearing:  
"An Examination of Parks Department Properties Currently Inaccessible to the Public"

New York City Council, Parks & Recreation Committee  
New York City Hall, City Hall Park

Dear Committee on Parks and Recreation,

My name is Jamie Jensen. I live in Lower Manhattan and work for NYCH2O.org, an environmental education non-profit, and I am here to testify about the hugely positive potential impacts of restoring and re-opening a currently inaccessible NYC Parks Department property located at Manhattan Borough Block 323 Lot Number 002. Street address is 326 Delancey NY NY 10002

This large, neoclassical building, a 115-year-old landmark located along the easternmost section of Rivington Street on the Lower East Side, pays tribute to two generations of New Yorkers whose work, directly and indirectly, helped bring health and recreation amenities to the masses. More than a century ago, new immigrants arriving on the Lower East Side were forced into congested tenement districts where overcrowding threatened their health and welfare, and epidemics of cholera and typhoid raged because of a lack of clean water and basic sanitation facilities.

Dr. Simon Baruch (1840-1921), who served as a surgeon during the Civil War, witnessed firsthand the debilitating effects of unhealthy water and lack of sanitation. In 1889 Dr Baruch voiced the first plea for public bathhouses, and in 1901 New York City completed and opened this building. Then known as Rivington Street Public Baths, the building featured indoor and outdoor bathing pools, as well as showers, tubs and changing rooms. In 1939, Bernard Baruch (1870-1965), son of Dr. Simon Baruch and noted financier, donated the surrounding land to the city, and the NYC Parks Dept assumed jurisdiction, renovating the bathhouse with better recreational facilities and constructing Baruch Playground on an adjacent site. Since the 1950s urban renewal era, when the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) preserved Baruch Baths while building Manhattan's largest public housing complex, NYC Parks Dept has administered this property for NYCHA, but in 1975, when a long fiscal crisis made the facility too expensive for the cash-strapped city to operate, the recreation center at Baruch Baths was closed.

As you can see from the photos I’ve pasted below, at present this once-proud public amenity stands as an all-too-vivid reminder of under-investment in New York City’s most marginalized communities. With support from the City Council and other agencies, the bathhouse could be brought back to productive life, perhaps being incorporated into the more than $1.5 billion of capital projects that’s being invested in post-Sandy resiliency efforts in the immediate vicinity of this long-neglected landmark. Particularly in light of the fact that NYC Parks Dept is giving up significant portions of its existing recreation sites in adjacent East River Park to construct these resilience projects, I ask the Parks Committee to do whatever it can to encourage the revival of this potentially valuable but currently inaccessible city-owned property.
Thank you for holding this Oversight Hearing to examine Parks Department properties currently inaccessible to the public. Reviving and reopening this historic property in collaboration with local residents will ensure its enduring benefit to the neighborhood and the City.

Yours sincerely,

Jamie Jensen

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