Oral and Written Testimony on Parks Department Properties
Currently Inaccessible to the Public

December 1, 2016 NYC Council Committee on Parks and Recreation Oversight Hearing

My name is Dian Hawkins. I am here today from the Bronx. I have lived in the Highbridge neighborhood for over 30 years.

I am here to testify about the impact of the inaccessible Parks Department properties in my neighborhood, Council District Bronx 16 and Bronx Community District 4. Particularly I am going to tell you about a fenced off area located between West 169th and 170th Street between Nelson and Shakespeare Avenues – Bronx block 2519 lot 32 and Bronx Block 2520 lot 19, which is adjacent to a vacant public DOT lot. The sign on the fence, which has been closed for the decades I have lived here, says it is called Corporal Fischer Park.

I lived near this property and often walk by just to see what’s new. In the summer days, it brings much sadness to the neighborhood. Sometimes it’s an eyesore. When I stand by it and observe, children playing on the sidewalk ask me, Why is this park always closed? Is there something wrong with it? Why can’t we use it?

Over the past years, it has been very much neglected. You used to not even be able to walk on the sidewalk outside the fence of this public lot. In 2016, the Parks Department finally started cutting the grass and cleaning it up. The lots remain enclosed by fence and padlock, but now are sometimes cleaned.

The City has owned the land for 20 years. Parks Department took jurisdiction over it about 7 years ago to create a park meant to honor Corporal Irwin A Fischer, a New Yorker who served in the Army Air Corps during World War II and flew in locations including Iwo Jima, the Philippines and Saipan. It is kept locked up because it’s undeveloped. I was also told by Elizabeth Gonzalez from the CD4 District Manager’s office in April that the Parks Department does not have the funding to develop it, and it’s a major capital improvement to make a park.

I’ve been an active member of my community, engaged in communal activities from helping the homeless to cleaning up litter to maintaining our parks and community gardens. Through this, I worked with New York Restoration Project, Bronx Botanic Garden and GreenThumb, and realized the potential of this space. Over the past couple of years, I started feeling connected to it. I see so much potential each time I stop by. I develop more ideas and fondness for it as a respite for a hot summer heatwaves, especially for seniors who live in the senior housing across the street.
Now we are organizing to make Corporal Fischer Park real and planning for what kind of park we want it to be.

We see the potential for it to become a flourishing and rewarding community green space for the growing community’s residents in a neighborhood where open space and growing space is limited. It will expose students to environmental and sustainable urban environment in their communities, providing teaching and learning opportunities for all residents willing to learn about the environment and how plants grow. It will be the location of community activities that will enrich and have lasting benefits to our residents and neighborhood. It will help to promote health and wellbeing in today’s stressful environment – and organic oasis to meditate, relax, rejuvenate.

Thank you for holding this Oversight Hearing to examine Parks Department properties currently inaccessible to the public. Though there is inaccessible and underutilized NYC Parks property in my neighborhood, I wouldn’t have known about this hearing without an invitation from 596 Acres. Turning these properties into real parks in collaboration with local residents will ensure their lasting benefit to our neighborhoods.