Testimony Prepared for the Committee on Parks and Recreation
An Examination of Parks Department Properties Currently Inaccessible to the Public
December 4, 2016, 1:00 PM

Good afternoon, my name is Alix Fellman and I am a Senior Program Manager at the Women’s Housing and Economic Development Corporation (WHEDco). Our community development work focuses on improving quality of life for families and individuals in the South Bronx; parks and open space are essential components of healthy, vibrant communities.

NYC Parks has been a partner on several of our past projects to revitalize and activate underutilized parks and open space. We have hosted clean-up days and painted murals, and we’ve installed Boogie Down Booths – colorful temporary installations that provide seating, solar-powered lighting, and music – in two Parks properties, including Seabury Park, a Community Parks Initiative site. However, we regularly hear from residents in all our neighborhoods that they need greater access to parks and open space.

Today I’d like to focus on City Council District 16, which overlaps the southern portion of the Jerome Avenue Study Area currently being considered for rezoning. Although the area has some large Parks properties, such as Mullaly Park and Macombs Dam Park, the quantity, quality, and accessibility of parks severely declines north of 167th Street and west of the Grand Concourse, all the way north to the Cross Bronx Expressway. Of the few Parks properties in this area, two are closed to the public, behind fences and locked gates: Corporal Fischer Park, which consists of two unconnected, undeveloped, and overgrown parcels, one on West 170th Street and one on West 169th Street and Nelson Avenue; and Jerome Playground, on a former handball court on Jerome Avenue overlooking the Cross Bronx Expressway. Together, these properties represent almost an acre of public park land.

While we applaud DCP’s proposal through the rezoning to de-map Corporal Fischer Place and open Corporal Fischer Park, we believe that the Parks Department, which purchased the park in the 1990s and has left it closed off for years, has a responsibility to invest in this park independent of the rezoning. Additionally, DCP’s Draft Scope of the Environmental Impact Statement does not include plans for the West 169th Street lot of Corporal Fischer Park. We hope that Parks recognizes that opening and investing in only one of the park’s two lots will not be sufficient for this growing community.

The neighborhoods surrounding Corporal Fischer Park and Jerome Playground are very dense, with a high percentage of seniors and families with young children. The City considers this area adequately served by open space, but while some parks may technically fall within a half mile radius of people’s
homes, this measurement does not take into account physical barriers that limit accessibility for many of our community members, such as steep hills and dangerous major roadways. This measurement also does not take into account the size or quality of nearby open space. According to New Yorkers for Parks, City Council District 16 has just 2.6 acres of parks and playgrounds per 1,000 children, compared to a citywide average of 13.3 acres. The district also has just 9.2 acres of parks and playgrounds per 1,000 seniors, compared to a citywide average of 23.3 acres. Opening Corporal Fischer Park and Jerome Playground will add nearly an acre of public space, but this community still needs more parks and playgrounds, especially since the proposed rezoning is expected to bring 12,000 additional residents to the neighborhood.

We encourage NYC Parks to work closely with community residents to redesign and open Corporal Fischer Park and Jerome Playground, and to invest in improvements to other Parks properties that are little more than concrete and benches, like Inwood Playground or Keltch Park. We also hope that future assessments of park accessibility will take into account physical barriers, size and quality of available open space. Thank you.