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## Bloomberg Cuts Funding for NYC Dept. of Parks and Rec.

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Once lauded as a champion of New York City's green spaces, Mayor Michael Bloomberg responded to the ongoing municipal fiscal crisis by slashing the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation's budget. While the mayor has not released information on how specific parks will be impacted, the cuts are likely to affect services and amenities at parks citywide, including local Morningside and Riverside Parks.

There are conflicting reports on how much money parks will lose in the next fiscal year. During his major Jan. 30 budget speech, Bloomberg revealed only one specific reduction—a \$5.6 million cut that will result in the loss of 167 seasonal employees. But the budget posted on the city's official Web site shows the Parks Department losing slightly more than \$20 million between 2009 and 2010. Meanwhile, some park advocates suggest that the cuts may not exceed \$14 million.

A Parks Department spokesman, Philip Abramson, declined to elaborate but said of the city's \$4 billion deficit, "Some tough economic times lie ahead—not only for New York City but for the state and the nation."

Abramson also said that Bloomberg's decision to shrink the parks budgets does not run counter to the mayor's policy of improving parks. "During Mayor Bloomberg's tenure, we have renovated and expanded New York City's emerald empire more than at any time since the 1930s."

Some local park watchers are not worried by the city's plans. Alexander Brash, senior northeast regional director of the National Parks Conservation Association, said that the department will probably privatize some programs in order to cut costs and maintain the current level of service. "Even in this climate, the worst they might implement is a hiring freeze rather than layoffs," he said. "Layoffs are very disruptive. They happen, yes, but I don't see it happening at this point. Personally, I'm optimistic about this situation."

Brash expects the parks to increase revenue by raising fees and opening waterfront areas to businesses, and he predicts that some projects under construction may be shut down.

Yet not all local advocates are as confident about the future of city parks. Sheelah Feinberg, government and external relations director at New Yorkers for Parks, said that her group will oppose any budget reduction that may threaten the parks' maintenance.

"There is definitely a downward trend in terms of parks financing," she said, referring to this year's reductions as well as \$11 million of cuts last year. "We gave playgrounds in New York City a C+ grade this year because they weren't well-maintained. There was litter and graffiti. Seasonal staffing in the summer has to alleviate that."

Feinberg added that calling for additional funds is difficult in light of the current federal, state, and municipal budget woes, but she recommended that the parks request some federal stimulus money.

Other observers warn that the city will be presented with even greater expenses in the future if the current level of investment in parks is not maintained.

“I know that the city parks budget has been in a better place than it was in previous administrations,” said Robin Dropkin, executive director of Parks & Trails New York, an Albany-based advocacy organization. “But the infrastructure is old. If you don’t replace the shingles every year, you’re going to have to eventually put a whole new roof on the house, which is more expensive than the repairs.”

Feinberg fears that continued cuts may signal a return to the policies of earlier decades when neglected parks became notorious hotspots for crime. “Parks are an experience for New Yorkers to experience the outdoors in a safe and fun environment,” she said. “We don’t want parks to become the sore sights that they were in the 1970s.”

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