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Design Trust Testifies to New York City Council on Public Space Management Oversights

Statement from the Design Trust for Public Space’s Executive Director Matthew Clarke

New York, NY, — The New York City Council Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure held a hearing earlier this month on new legislation that would improve the management of the city’s public spaces. Design Trust Executive Director Matthew Clarke testified in support of critical bills under consideration, including the implementation of an Open Spaces program and citywide greenway master plan. Below is his full statement:

“Thank you to Chair Brooks-Powers and the Committee for having me today. My name is Matthew Clarke and I serve as the Executive Director of the Design Trust for Public Space. Our organization has spent the past 27 years unlocking the potential of New York’s public space.

I’m testifying today to support public space and the three bills under consideration. However, my primary message to this Committee, and to the council at large, regards the context in which these programs can be successful.

Over the past two years, we have worked with hundreds of organizations, from large BIDS (Business Improvement Districts) to small place-based advocates, with thousands of individuals, and with many of you, on projects that reframe what public space means to New Yorkers. For example, with Neighborhood Commons, we worked with Small Business Services to identify a new way to manage and support commercial corridors and public space that don’t have the benefit of a BID. With Turnout NYC, we’re testing a new model of public space arts infrastructure that puts power in place, particularly BIPOC and historically marginalized communities. And with Alfresco NYC, we’re working to imagine the long-term development of Open Restaurants in New York City.

These efforts have made two points abundantly clear: We are meeting a generational moment to rethink how public space can serve every New Yorker, and that our government is not yet structured to take advantage of this opportunity.

New York needs a centralized voice to address public space management with three critical capacities:

1. Being able to vision, plan, and coordinate our parks, streets, plazas, and corridors, and to understand how those projects intersect with each other.

2. Providing a clear and inclusive regulatory process, such that non-governmental entities have centralized and simple procedures for permitting and licensing.
3. Directing existing and future resources, like grants and maintenance, in a coordinated and equitable way, to small businesses, CBOs, and other public space managers.

Design Trust recommends that the Interagency Public Space Working Group be strengthened to serve as a forum to design a long-term, more formal structure to address these capacities. In support of these Bills, Design Trust wants to support public space as a leading cause for New York City. Thank you.”

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The Design Trust for Public Space is a nationally recognized incubator that catalyzes change and transforms New York City’s shared civic spaces—streets, plazas, parks, public buildings, transportation, and housing developments—to create a vibrant, inclusive, and sustainable city. Established in 1995 by Andrea Woodner, the nonprofit brings design expertise and systems thinking to the public realm to make a lasting impact. Founded on the tenet that New York City’s cultural and democratic life depends on viable public space, the Design Trust focuses on social justice and equity, environmental sustainability, design excellence, and public engagement. Its innovative model brings together government agencies, community groups, and private-sector experts, utilizing cross-sector partnerships to deliver creative solutions that shape the city’s landscape.