

On February 18th, we held a Candidate School session on Public Health and Parks. NYLCV's Candidate Schools aim to educate candidates for public office in New York City and their campaigns on key environmental and public health issues in the city. A recording of the session can be watched [here](#). The first part of the session featured presentations focused on lead poisoning, while the second part brought more presentations from experts on the city's parks. Each part was followed by a Q&A session.

NYLCV President Julie Tighe kicked off the public health portion of the forum by discussing the problem of lead poisoning in the city and detailing the League's past efforts to remediate it. The first panelist was Dr. Morri Markowitz, an Attending physician at the Children's Hospital at Montefiore and Professor of Pediatrics at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine. Dr. Markowitz started his presentation by providing some history on lead poisoning, which he says was first discovered about 2300 years ago. He said that we've spread 300 million tons of lead, an element which species never evolved to cope with, on the surface of the planet, because of the many uses we've found for it. Lead poisoning usually happens when lead is ingested, often by children, although inhalation, while a rare occurrence these days, also causes sickness.

Among the biggest lead threats to children is lead paint, which was widely used in New York (and around the country) until around 1960. Between one and two million housing units in the city could still have lead paint, perhaps 300,000 of them being the homes of children. These children often place objects in their mouth with dust from deteriorating lead paint, and the lead in that dust accumulates over time. Other lead threats included soldering cans of food with lead solder, soldering pipes with lead, and using lead for pipes. Once ingested, lead enters the bloodstream and is distributed throughout the body. Lead can enter bones, which can store it for many years. The brain is the organ most sensitive to lead, and it does not take much to affect it.

Lead poisoning is detected through blood tests, which cannot tell how long the child has been exposed to lead. If it is detected, mitigation strategies are put into place to limit future lead exposure. The lead intervention level is at 5 micrograms per deciliter of blood. This number represents the highest 2.5% of lead levels. A group of kids with lead levels of 10 micrograms per deciliter will score between 4 and 6 IQ points lower on average than those who have 1 microgram per deciliter, with all other factors equal. Kids who come from lower-income families are most at risk for lead poisoning.

Taylor Morton is the Director of Environmental Health and Education at WE ACT for Environmental Justice. She stressed that lead poisoning makes housing a health determinant, meaning that where you live determines your health. They are focusing on children under the age of 6 who live in neighborhoods of high poverty. She said that a lot of communities impacted by lead are also impacted by other environmental justice and social justice issues such as food insecurity. The combination of lead poisoning and other environmental justice and social justice issues often makes life especially difficult for the people who live in these communities.

There are potential solutions in public and private housing laws, but enforcement must be carried out. Local Law 1 includes extensive measures that NYCHA must take to identify children

under the age of six. It also requires NYCHA to perform abatement before a new resident moves into an apartment. Morton also said that many people don't have a place to stay during lead paint abatement, because they are not offered any. She mentioned the importance of making sure that people of color and those who live in lower income communities receive the help they need when dealing with problems such as lead poisoning.

The next two panelists, Brandon Kielbasa and Liam Riley, presented together. Brandon is a community organizer who has worked at the Cooper Square Committee for the last fourteen years, now serving as Director of Organizing and Policy. Liam is a Tenant Organizer with the Cooper Square Committee, which seeks to preserve and develop affordable, environmentally healthy housing, as well as community and cultural places on the Lower East Side. Kielbasa introduced the Cooper Square Committee, an organization specializing in tenant organizing. They do anti-displacement organizing, which helps tenants organize against their landlords to keep their homes, as well as issue-based campaigns, which tackle larger issues tenants might face, from lead to harassment.

Kielbasa said that lead poisoning can come from paint, water, or construction dust, and mentioned that the presentation would focus on the latter. Riley said that he helps coordinate Lead Dust Free NYC, which is focused on ending lead poisoning in NY. They are calling for new legislation as well as stronger enforcement of existing legislation. It is designed to prevent lead poisoning in children, and stipulates how work in pre-1960 buildings must be done. Kielbasa explained that Local Law 1 of 2004 is the city's main lead poisoning prevention law. He says that what is causing the law to be ineffective is a lack of vigorous enforcement, such as the city not citing landlords for violations. For example, landlords are required to abate friction surfaces during vacancy, but many don't abate it on windows or doors unless the law is enforced. There is also room for improvement in enforcing the mandated annual inspections of buildings housing children under the age of six.

Riley also said that some landlords harass rent-regulated tenants out of their apartments to perform renovations to deregulate the unit. Landlords can use negligent work to harass tenants, exposing the tenants to lead. Some children were exposed to lead hundreds of times the legal limit. Tenants worked with Cooper Square and local elected officials to generate media attention, putting pressure on landlords to face construction guidelines. The tenants received rent abatements and a nearly \$250,000 settlement. He said that it is crucial for local elected officials to have robust constituent services. Kielbasa stressed the importance of oversight as well as actually collecting the fines issued to landlords. Appropriating adequate funds in the budget for the regulatory agencies is also necessary. He suggested that new legislation to raise the penalties to landlords for noncompliance could be an effective solution.

The first group of presentations was followed by a Q&A session. Dr. Markowitz said that the discovery of lead in the water of the vast majority of schools is very recent, happening within the last four years. The result was mandating that schools test water every four years and remediate the situation if the amount of lead in the water exceeds the permissible standard. He said that the EPA's lead threshold was based on convenience, not health. According to Dr.

Markowitz, legislation must be passed decreasing the amount of lead permissible in school water from 20 parts per billion to a number approximately equal to zero parts per billion. He also suggested that the law regulating lead paint in schools be better enforced. Kielbasa said that the lack of enforcement could be due to prior city administrations not supporting anti-lead poisoning legislation. For example, Mayor Bloomberg tried to veto Local Law 1 in 2004, but it was overridden by the Council. Taylor said that there are a lot of groups organizing around the issue of lead poisoning. She cited the work WE ACT has done with NYCHA residents, and said that people need the support of their councilmembers. Councilmembers could provide that support through holding meetings and listening to what people are saying. Tighe added that the council can use their “bully pulpit” to get press as well as holding the mayoral administration accountable through holding hearings. Asked about whether the same rules for lead apply for short term rentals like B&Bs, Kielbasa said that they do indeed, although many of those establishments are run illegally. Dr. Markowitz said that any property where a child resides for 10 hours in a week is subject to the lead laws.

The second part of the candidate school focused on our city’s parks, which are essential ecological features. Tighe explained their benefits, including removing carbon dioxide, providing shade, giving food and shelter for wildlife, and capturing billions of gallons of stormwater runoff. However, Tighe says, the parks are underfunded, receiving under 1% of the city budget. The first panelist, Emily Walker, the Director of Outreach and Programs at New Yorkers for Parks. She manages their relationships with park and garden advocates and friends of parks groups throughout the city as well as overseeing the organization’s relations and advocacy work.

Walker kicked off her presentation by talking about New Yorkers for Parks, the only independent citywide organization which advocates for quality parks and open spaces for all New Yorkers. Along with the League, NY4P co-founded the Play Fair Coalition, a campaign dedicated to seeking more robust funding for our city’s parks. She emphasized that parks are critical infrastructure, which contribute crucially to New Yorkers’ health and wellbeing, increase our city’s resilience to climate change, drive economic development, and promote civic and community engagement. She said that although parks cover 30,000 acres, or 14% of the city’s land, they do not receive adequate funding and are not equally accessible. Parks policy is driven not only by the Department of Parks and Recreation, but also through nonprofit conservancies and alliances, friends of groups, licensees, volunteers, and advocates. Walker said that these other groups need a seat at the decision making table when it comes to parks policy.

Regarding funding, Walker said that the Parks Department is chronically underfunded and understaffed, and that the city has a \$6 billion backlog in deferred maintenance. Additionally, the amount of Park acreage has not grown with the population and as a result does not meet community needs. Low income and black residents often do not have access to park spaces. Although New Yorkers relied heavily on parks during the pandemic, the Department of Parks and Recreation was hit with the second largest budget cut (14%) of any city agency. As a result, a million New Yorkers lost access to a local park during the pandemic.

Walker then proposed solutions to these problems. First and foremost, she said, the Parks Department budget needs to be restored. She also said that we need to restore the Parks Seasonal Staff Plan as well as prevent further parks staff cuts. She said that we need to ensure that Parks volunteer networks have the resources they depend on, and that we must fast-track parks construction projects. Walker also suggested the longer-term solution of pursuing new public funding models for parks. Ensuring equity must also be part of the long-term recovery strategy.

Carter Strickland has worked for the New York State Director for the Trust for Public Land since 2017. He leads a team protecting open space and opening parks and playgrounds across the state. He previously served as part of NYC's Sustainability Team and as Commissioner as the city's Department of Environmental Protection. He started with a slide on benchmarking the city's parks, using the Trust for Public Land's ParkScore ranking system. The city has a ParkScore ranking of #11. He said that there is room for improvement in the park acreage per person and park amenities. Strickland then presented a project at MS 354 in Crown Heights, highlighting the transformation of an asphalt lot into a beautiful park including trees, sports courts, and playgrounds. He also showcased a similar revitalization effort at MS 581 in East Flatbush.

Strickland said that access to nature is an integral part of healthy neighborhoods. He said that multiple studies have shown that the strongest determinants of life expectancy in the country are where people live and their socioeconomic status. Compounding the issue is the lack of park space in low-income neighborhoods and communities of color. Many students attend school in urban heat islands, a fact that emphasizes the need for more park space. He then described a three-part park equity plan for the city. This plan calls for 100% of residents living within a 10 minute walk of a park, the construction of 100 new community playgrounds and outdoor learning centers, and increased park space in the neighborhoods that need it most. The plan would require an increase in the DPR's budget from 0.6% to 1% of the city operating budget, as well as a capital funding increase of \$1 billion for the park's department. He said that \$100 million of the \$1 billion can come in the form of time-value through process streamlining.

Sarah Charlop-Powers is the Executive Director and Co-Founder of the Natural Areas Conservancy. She previously worked as the Parks Manager for Scenic Hudson and worked on the creation of local revenue streams for the South Bronx Greenway. She started by saying that 40.5% of the city's land cover is green, and 11.6% of the city's land cover is natural areas. Charlop-Powers then explained the benefits of natural areas, including improving air quality, cooling neighborhoods, and capturing stormwater. Natural Areas are also essential in climate resilience, as wetlands mitigate flooding and forested natural areas sequester 85% of the carbon sequestered in the city's trees. Healthy forests sequester three times as much carbon as degraded forests.

She said that we can improve public access to 10,000 acres of existing parkland, through measures such as improved signage and uniform publicly-available maps. 50% of city residents only experience nature in the city's parks. During COVID, there was a 65% increase in

visitation to natural areas. She then mentioned plans completed by her organization along with partners which lay out roadmaps for the care of and investment for the following major systems: forests, trails, and wetlands. To carry out the plans in the roadmaps, we can prioritize care of and access to natural areas, increase policy support for forests and wetlands, invest in parks, expand job training, and create permanent green jobs.

The final panelist was Masoom Moitra, a community urban planner, architect, educator, and artist working as Director of El Puente's Green Light District in the neighborhoods of South Williamsburg and Bushwick. El Puente is a community human rights institution founded in 1982 which has a long legacy of fighting for environmental justice. It looks at problems holistically and puts the power of development in the hands of local residents. They have recently been focusing on a campaign to improve air quality in the south side of Williamsburg. This air quality is poor because of the presence of a large amount of transportation infrastructure and industrial activity in the area. This issue is compounded by a lack of green spaces. Consequently, the rate of asthma hospitalizations in the area is twice that in Brooklyn and New York City.

Although air quality has improved overall, it has improved less in environmental justice communities, says Moitra. She also emphasized that low income communities lack the same volunteer capital as wealthier communities, leading to poorer park maintenance in those areas. She also said that we should focus on parks as mitigation and public health tools, emphasizing the need for self-determination. She said that people should listen to ideas from the local community on parks improvement. One suggestion was adding "green walls" separating the BQE from the surrounding green areas. She said that the main takeaway should be that equity and self-determination go hand and hand.

A Q&A section followed the second panel. Walker said that the nonprofit organizations that are helping to fund the parks are a huge benefit because of the work they put in for free. This frees up parks department dollars for parks in underserved areas. Strickland agreed, saying that public-private partnerships can help bring in federal and state money. Moitra proposed a Green Development Fund, which would take the dollars coming in from city, state, and federal funding and distribute it equitably. Charlop-Powers emphasized the difference between asking communities for money and asking for volunteer work. Strickland said that people interested in the Green Infrastructure Project known as QueensWay can go to a website called [thequeensway.org](http://thequeensway.org). The project involves the transformation of a 3.5 mile long abandoned rail line into a park. He says that it has not happened yet because people wanted a transit line along the stretch of abandoned track, but mentioned that the QueensWay would be a walkable and bikeable transit corridor. Strickland said that there needs to be a public commitment to build the park not for upzoning, but for the good of the community. In response to a question about the Parks Department spending seemingly exorbitant amounts of money on minor projects, Walker said that the Capital Process for Parks (and citywide) needs reform. She added that the agency needs to put the projects for bidding by outside contractors, and that 70% of the process is out of the Parks Department's control. Strickland added that the Center for Urban Futures put out some useful reports on the matter.