

One Percent for Parks? A Historical and Current Overview of the Parks Budget

June 22, 2023



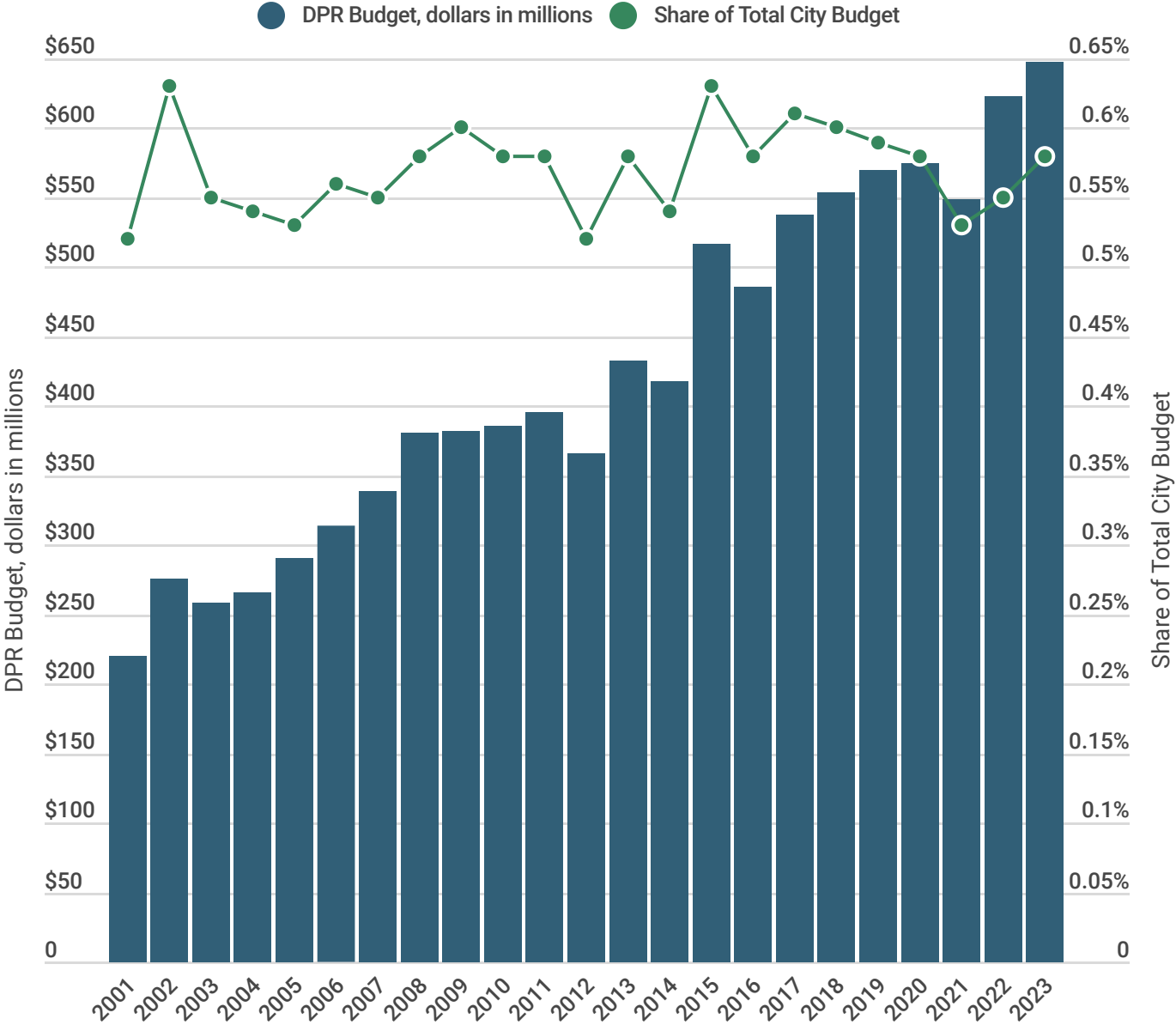
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Share of City Budget Dedicated to Parks Holds Steady as Department Budget Grows

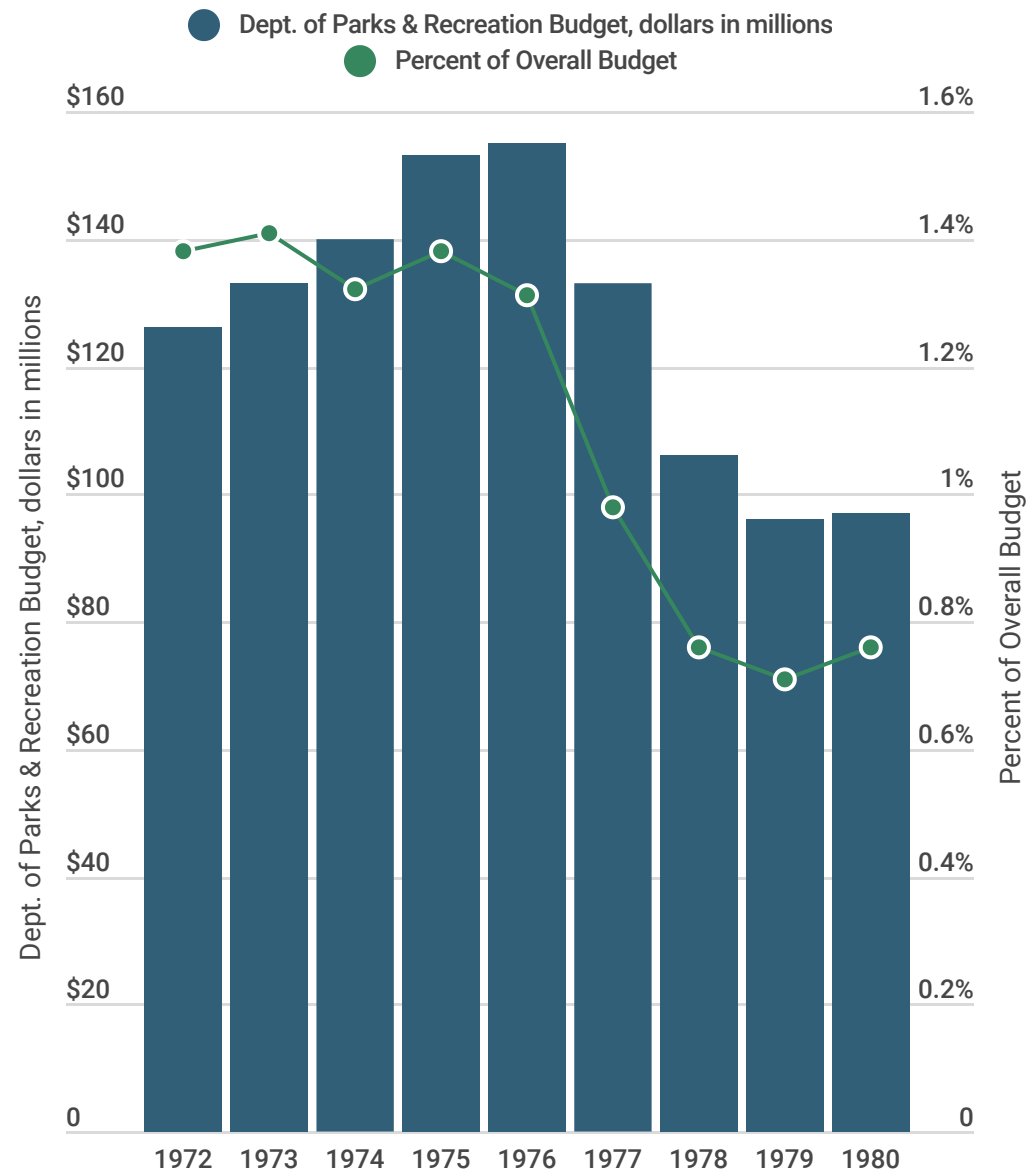


For decades, park advocates across New York City have pushed mayors to baseline at least one percent of the city’s Expense Budget to the Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR, or the Department). While city parks serve as a place for recreation and leisure, they also provide habitats for wildlife, help mitigate climate change, and provide clean air through the tree program. IBO examined how the Department’s funding and staffing levels have shifted over time and how the current budget funding is allocated.

- In the Mayor’s Executive Budget, released in April 2023, DPR’s budget for 2023 is \$647 million. (All years refer to fiscal years.) While this allocation is the largest in the Department’s history—in terms of budgeted dollars—after adjusting for inflation, 2020 represents peak park funding. The current budget of \$647 million represents only 0.58 percent of the city’s \$111 billion Expense Budget, a share that has held steady in recent years. Around three-quarters of DPR’s budget is city funds.
- Dating back to 2001, the share of funding budgeted for the DPR has remained around 0.57 percent of the city’s total Expense Budget. In 2001, the Department budgeted \$220 million (\$366 million if adjusted for inflation), while in 2022, the Department budgeted \$623 million. Even though DPR budgets have increased, the percentage spent relative to the overall budget since 2001 has remained at less than 0.6 percent of the city’s overall budget.

SOURCE: IBO Analysis of Office of Management and Budget data
 NOTES: Funding amounts from 2001 through 2022 reflect final funding amounts, while 2023 reflects the current budgeted amount. Funding amounts are in nominal dollars.

1970s Financial Crisis Corresponded With Budget Cuts to Parks Department



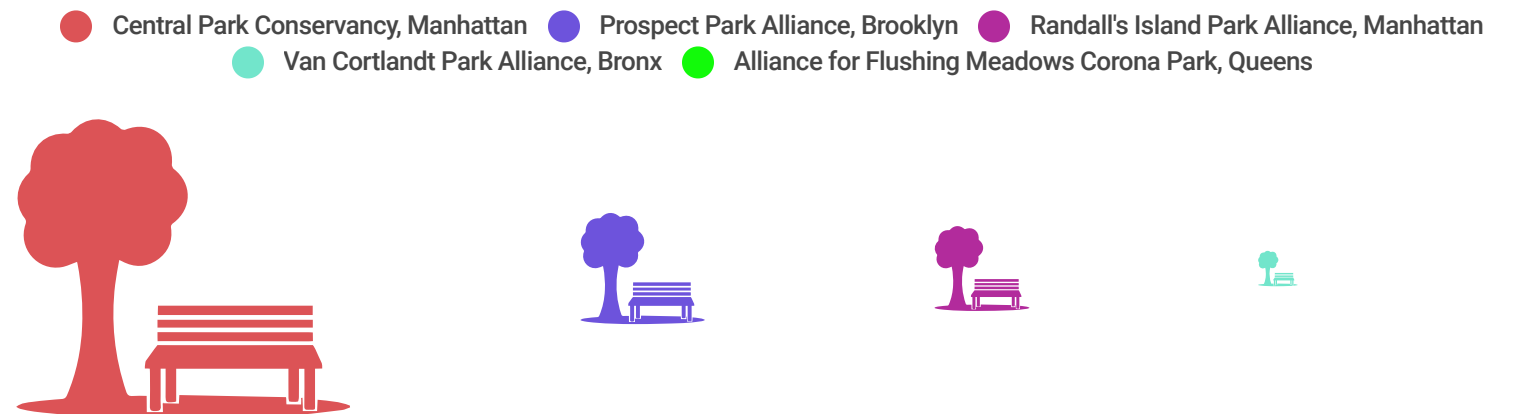
SOURCE: IBO analysis of Adopted Budget data through the New York City Department of Records and Information Services

NOTE: Funding amounts are in nominal dollars.

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- The last time DPR's budget was around or above the one percent threshold was in 1977. At that time, the Department's budget was 0.98 percent of the city's Expense Budget. However, by 1979 it had fallen to 0.71 percent, in the wake of the city's unprecedented financial crisis. Parks regained funding in the 1980s; by 1986, its budget was 0.86 percent. By 1990 it had dropped to 0.65 percent, and by 2000, it had fallen to 0.52 percent.
- Out of the budget crisis in the 1970s, the Koch Administration focused on using private sector support, which paved the way for non-profit park conservancies. Formed in 1980, the Central Park Conservancy was the first of what is now 85 separate organizations tied to specific parks. Conservancies are independent, privately-funded nonprofit organizations that support parks and are not part of the city's DPR budget. Through fundraising, these conservancies employ staff to do landscaping, maintain facilities, and work on construction and design projects. While many serve a singular park, others provide technical assistance and funding to additional parks space across the city, at the discretion of the organization.
- DPR relies on conservancies to boost funding for parks. Although conservancies are using private donations (not city dollars) for operations, the city sees this as complementary funding that allows the Department to spread its resources across more areas.

Wide Range of Budgets for Conservancies



SOURCE: Conservancy audited financial statements

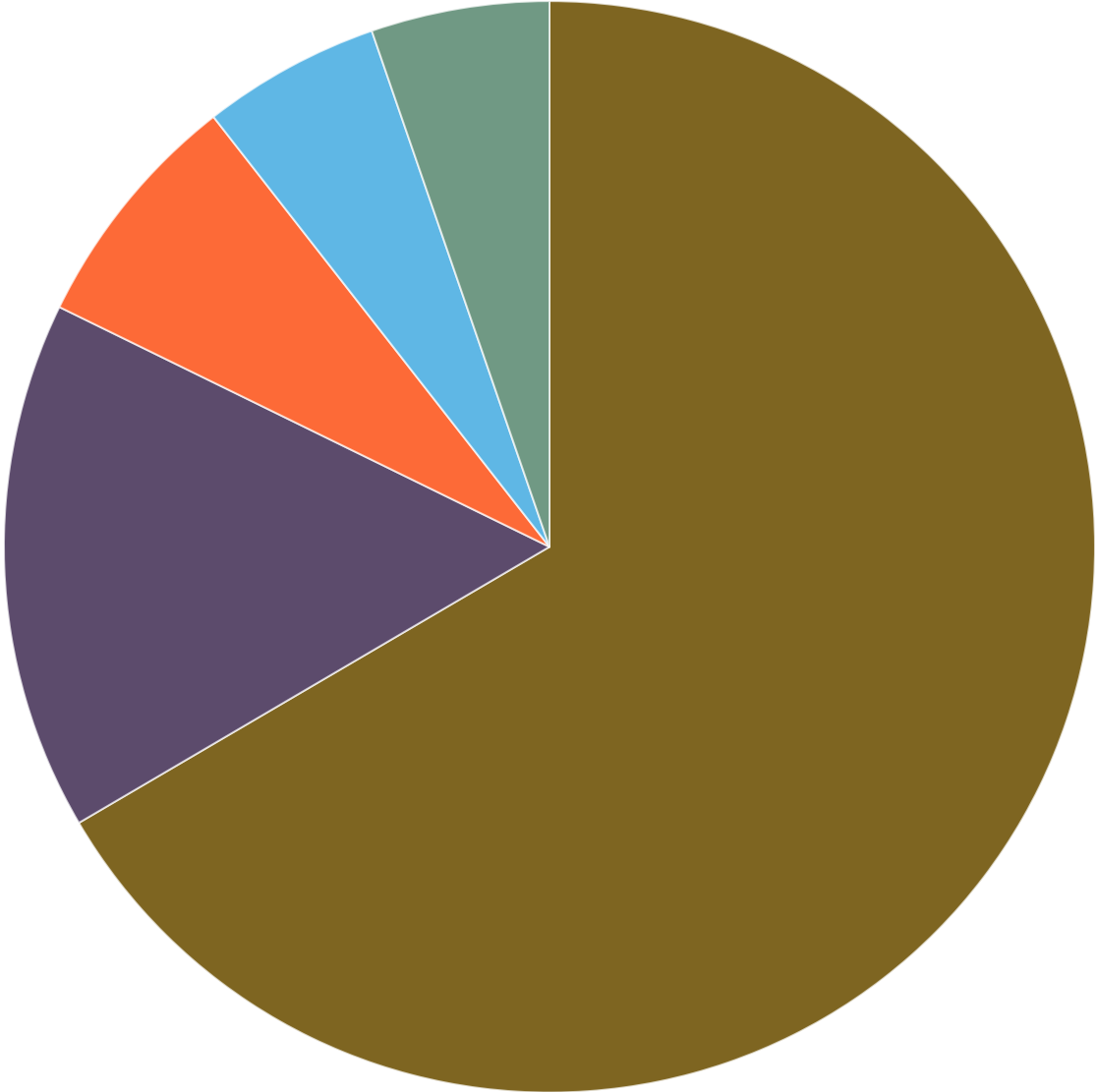
NOTE: Conservancies may operate on different fiscal year schedules, so expense budgets span calendar years 2021 and 2022.

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Majority of Department of Parks & Recreation Budget is for Maintenance and Operations

Dollars in millions

● Maintenance and Operations ● Other ● Administration ● Recreation ● Forestry & Horticulture



Maintenance and Operations: Funding is given to each borough to support the upkeep and repairs of parks, playgrounds, and other park assets. Maintenance and operations funding also covers zoos, the job-training Parks Opportunity Program, and non-borough-specific funding for citywide projects such as synthetic turf maintenance, rat mitigation, and water fountain testing.

Other: Other includes expense funding to support capital projects, PlanNYC 2030, and the Urban Park Service.

Administration: Covers the costs associated with office and support staffing.

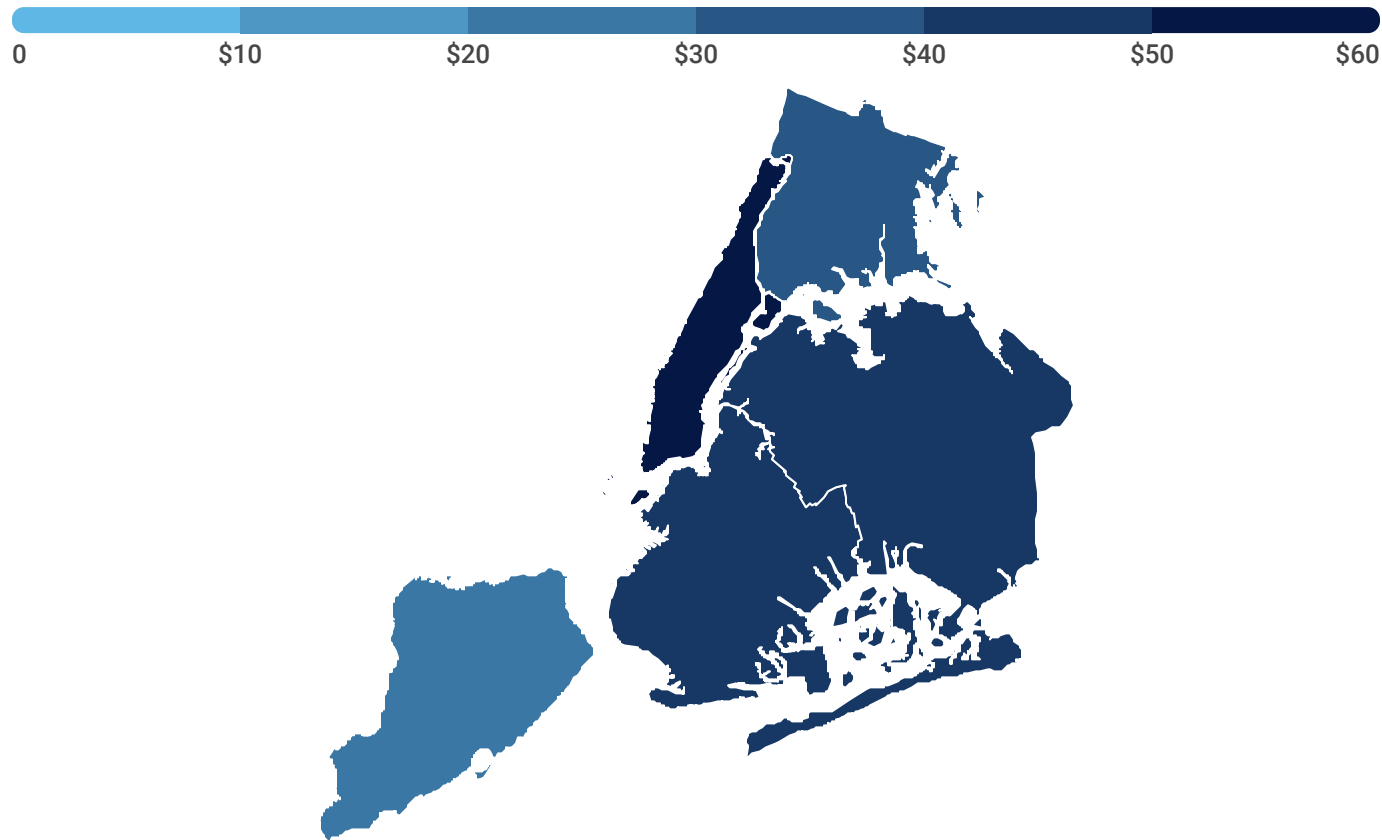
Recreation: Funding to support programs such as after school programs, youth and adult fitness classes, recreation centers, and playground activities.

Forestry & Horticulture: Funds for planting and pruning the city's street and park trees, dealing with tree infestation, and city garden projects

SOURCE: IBO analysis of Office of Management and Budget Executive Budget 2023 data

Manhattan-Specific Funding Outpaces Other Boroughs

Average Annual Expenditures by Borough, 2018-2022, dollars in millions



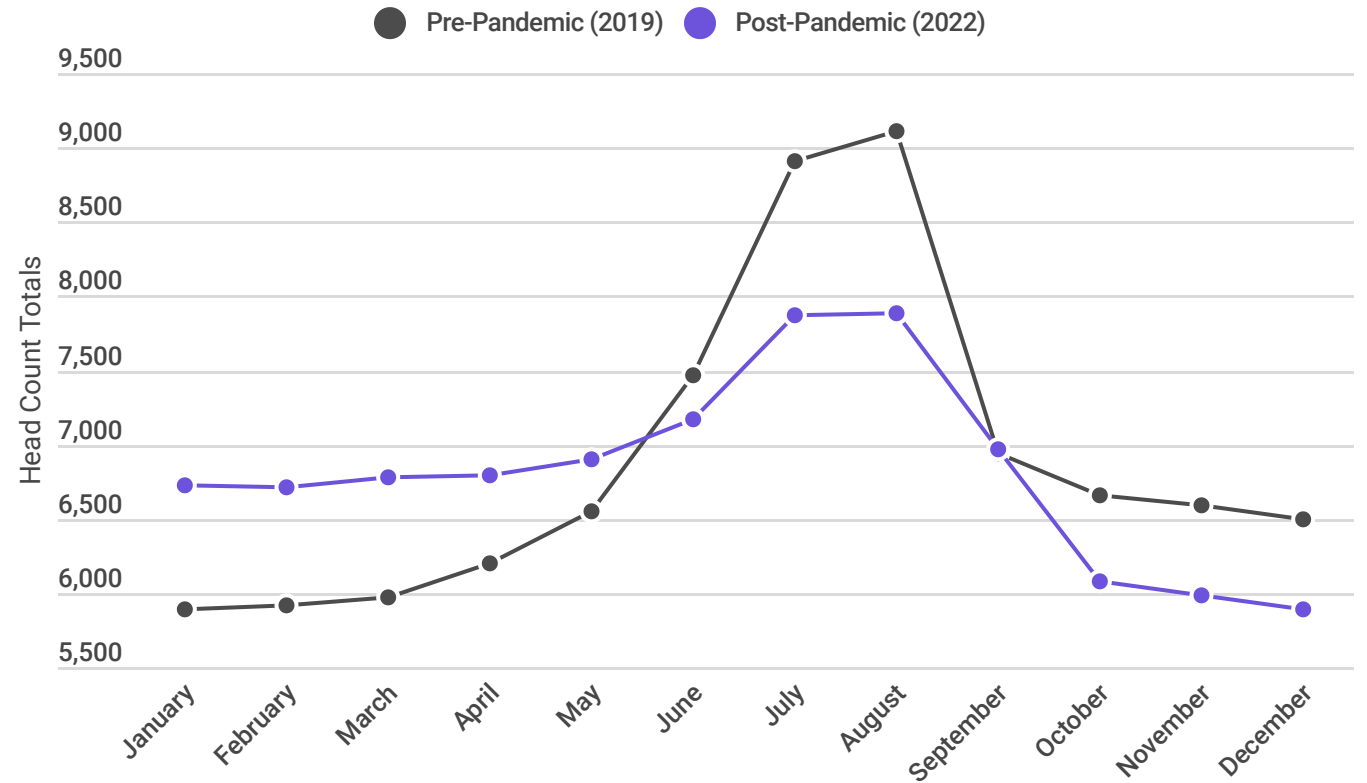
SOURCE: IBO Analysis of Office of Management and Budget data

NOTE: Borough-based expenditures include administration, maintenance and operations, and recreational costs.

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DPR's budget breaks out funding dedicated to individual boroughs, specifically for administrative, maintenance and operational, and recreational costs, while also budgeting funds that can be applied citywide for these purposes. Differences in borough-specific funding across boroughs reflects a variety of factors, including the number of programs and projects based in a borough and staffing costs.

Parks Department Headcount Still Lower Than Pre-Pandemic Levels



SOURCE: IBO Analysis of Office of Management and Budget data.

NOTE: Pre-pandemic data is from January 2019 through December 2019. Post pandemic data is from January 2022 through December 2022.

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DPR's headcount fluctuates upwards with seasonal staffing increasing mainly from May through September. DPR staffing has been a concern in the wake of the pandemic, with headcount lower for both year-round and seasonal jobs. Maintenance and operational employees as well as forestry services employees have high turnover rates each season, potentially hindering the retention of institutional knowledge.