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Testimony of Daniel Huber
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To the New York City Council Committee on Parks and Recreation
Regarding Reporting on Park Capital Expenditures
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Good Morning Chairman Grodenchik and members of the Committee on Parks and Recreation. I am Daniel Huber, the environmental analyst at the New York City Independent Budget Office. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding Intro 161. The Intro would expand the information the Department of Parks and Recreation is required to report on its online Capital Project Tracker—a useful tool that already provides detail on each project’s location, phase, funding level, and timeline. New data required by Intro 161 would include information on the reasons for capital project delays and the cause and extent of cost overruns.

IBO’s role is to provide nonpartisan information on the city’s budget to members of the Council, other elected officials, and the public. Although we generally do not make recommendations, we are in favor of increasing government transparency, especially when it comes to budgeting, and for disclosing additional information of the sort required in Intro 161.

As IBO’s environmental analyst, I often receive questions about parks department capital projects. These questions range from the status of a local project to broader questions about the city’s capital budgeting process. While we can provide information on changes in the overall budget and shifts in funding for specific projects, we often run into roadblocks when trying to track and identify the *cause* of project delays and cost overruns—which is often what requesters most want to know.

Identifying the cause of a delay or a cost overrun for a specific project is difficult given the nature of New York City’s Capital Commitment Plan, the city’s capital planning document. In terms of delays, the Capital Commitment Plan provides little detail on the planned timeframe of a capital project. In fact, the parks department Capital Project Tracker already provides more information than is available in city budget documents because it contains a project timeline, with estimated start and completion dates. The commitment plan does contain a “milestone” field to indicate the project’s current status along with projected start and end dates. Unfortunately these fields are generally left blank. Moreover, even when status is included, it is rarely updated between plans.

Recognizing a cost overrun in city budget documents is similarly difficult. The Capital Commitment Plan is divided by budget line and then by project. A project may be either for discrete work (for example, “Orchard Beach Pavilion & Ancillary Reconstruction”) or it may be for a bundle of similar projects (for example, “Parks Security Measures Citywide”). While the commitment plan provides the total funding

planned for a project, there is little detail on funding for the project's individual components. Moreover, it is often unclear if the funding levels represent the total estimated cost of the project. If funding is increased in subsequent plans, it can be difficult to discern whether the new funding level represents an increase in cost (an overrun), a change of scope, or if the additional funds were part of the initial cost estimate, but are just newly reflected in the city's budget documents.

It is important to note that difficulty in identifying delays and cost overruns is not limited to the parks department; it is something we encounter with capital projects citywide. The parks department is actually already more transparent about its capital projects than other city agencies because of its online Capital Projects Tracker. The tracker is a valuable resource that we use routinely and we often assist members of the public in using it as well.

In summary, parks capital projects are an area of intense public interest and adding information to the Capital Projects Tracker, particularly on the extent of and reasons for delays and cost overruns, would help shed light on an opaque process. Given IBO's support for increased transparency and data sharing in general, perhaps the enhanced Parks Capital Project Tracker could be an example for other agencies on how to communicate progress and provide detailed information on their capital projects.

Thank you and I am happy to answer any questions.