

Testimony of Kelly Collins Choi
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April 27, 2026
Budget Oversight Hearing for the Department of Parks and Recreation
Committee on Facilities

Good afternoon, Councilmember Lewis George, Councilmembers, and staff. My name is Kelly Collins Choi, and I'm the Director of Policy and Land Conservation with Casey Trees. I appreciate the opportunity to testify today.

I want to start by thanking the staff at DPR for their important work. Our parks and recreational facilities are vital social and green infrastructure that contribute to the wellbeing of all DC residents. Casey Trees has a long history of partnership with DPR, planting over 6,000 trees on DPR sites, conducting environmental education programs at DPR summer camps, and engaging volunteers to enhance our park and natural areas.

We're particularly excited about our current partnership at Langdon Park. Casey Trees is working with dedicated neighbors and volunteers to remove invasive plants that are smothering the park's forest patch, thereby giving the trees room to breathe. This is critical in order for the forest to regenerate naturally, ensuring its long-term health. We are also supporting local green jobs maintaining the parks rain gardens, all with the support of a DOEE Parks Maintenance Grant.

Unfortunately, over the past two years, DOEE's Parks Maintenance Grants, Green Infrastructure Maintenance and Invasive Plant Management funding were drastically cut and, in some cases, zeroed out completely. While not part of the DPR budget, those funds supported Casey Trees and other organizations such as Ward 8 Woods and Rock Creek Conservancy to help maintain our park's natural areas and green infrastructure. Without those grant funds, that maintenance may not happen. **We urge Council to prioritize funding for our parks natural area planning and maintenance in FY27.**

We also encourage DPR to prioritize expanding public/private partnerships with organizations like ours that can bring expert technical assistance and philanthropic funding, creating an integrated web of support for our city's greenspaces, which takes some of the burden off city resources, especially in tight budget years.

On our end, Casey Trees is taking steps to formalize our partnership with DPR on forest conservation and stewardship. We stand ready to assist the city in maintaining and improving

the health of our forestlands; while ensuring they are accessible and welcoming spaces for our city's residents to enjoy nearby nature. I also want to thank you, Councilmember Lewis George, for championing the "Natural Areas Conservation Program Amendment Act of 2025." We hope to see that legislation move forward in the coming year.

I'd also like to highlight our concern with the severe cuts to DPR's Small Parks capital budget in FY27. These are so-called "small parks" because they are less than an acre in size, but they have an outsized impact on our communities, as they are often the most accessible for residents and seniors to walk to, for kids to play and neighbors to meet up. These are third spaces helping to strengthen the fabric of a neighborhood. **The capital budget for these small parks was reduced from over \$1M last year, to only \$75K this year, allocated to just one project. We urge Council to restore funding to the Small Parks Capital Budget.**

Here again, there is a public/private partnership opportunity. Casey Trees is a nationally Accredited Land Trust operating in perpetuity, and we regularly have ANCs and community members reach out asking about an underutilized greenspace in their neighborhood that they would love to improve and maintain, and that with modest investment could become community assets that improve neighborhood cohesion, resilience and health.

Casey Trees proposes partnering with DPR to develop a pilot program to harness and formalize community management of small parks, leveraging private and philanthropic resources. Through our land trust, Casey Trees would empower communities to plan, activate, and maintain these parcels with minimal cost to DC government. This model would stretch limited resources while reducing long-term maintenance costs and improving community health outcomes across all eight wards. We'd be happy to discuss this proposal further with DPR leadership and Council.

The investments we make today in our city's parks and greenspaces will compound in community benefits far into the future. It is imperative that we prioritize protecting and funding our city's greenspaces for the benefit of our residents and the next generation. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and I'm happy to answer any questions.