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Contact: Eric Sumberg, 347-804-7205, [esumberg@comptroller.nyc.gov](mailto:esumberg@comptroller.nyc.gov)

COMPTROLLER SCOTT M. STRINGER AUDIT REVEALS MISMANAGEMENT  
OF NEW YORK CITY'S TREE PRUNING PROGRAM LEADS TO POTENTIALLY DANGEROUS  
CONDITIONS ON CITY STREETS

*Parks' negligence increases the risk that falling limbs will injure people and damage property*

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NEW YORK, NY—The New York City Department of Parks and Recreation (Parks) has mismanaged the City's street tree pruning program responsible for maintaining approximately 650,000 street trees citywide, increasing the risk of personal injury and property damage from falling branches, according to an audit released today by New York City Comptroller Scott M. Stringer.

"I'm not going out on a limb when I say that Parks' performance has been unacceptable," Comptroller Stringer said. "Auditors found that Borough Forestry offices in the Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan and Staten Island were paying contractors for pruning the wrong trees, for pruning that was never done and were not keeping accurate lists of trees that were properly maintained. Taxpayers deserve better management of our City's trees."

New York City's street tree pruning program is run by the Department of Parks and Recreation's Forestry Service, which oversees all street tree maintenance and operates an office in each borough. Private contractors that plant the street trees are responsible for maintaining them for two years. Thereafter, Parks prunes them, except for trees five inches or more in diameter, which are maintained by contractors hired by the Parks Department.

Based on a review of Parks' operations and contracted street tree pruning services from July 1, 2012, to November 21, 2013, the Comptroller's audit revealed weaknesses in the operations of all Borough Forestry Offices, except for Queens. The audit found that offices in Manhattan, Brooklyn, the Bronx and Staten Island had:

- **Inaccurate lists, or no lists at all, of trees requiring pruning.** Manhattan and Staten Island failed to give contractors specific lists of trees that needed maintenance and could not provide evidence that contractors' work had been inspected. Lists prepared by the Brooklyn and Bronx Forestry Offices included undersized trees that should not

have been pruned by contractors.

- **No evidence that required post-pruning inspections were performed.** These inspections are meant to ensure that all contract terms are met and payments are only made for adequately pruned trees. The audit found that 20 percent of the sampled funds paid to contractors in Manhattan and Staten Island were for trees that were either not eligible under the contract or did not appear to have been pruned at all. This inappropriate use of funds raises the potential risks from falling limbs, because it means there is less money available to prune larger trees.
- **Inadequate controls to prevent payments for ineligible trees.** The audit found no evidence that the Manhattan and Staten Island Forestry Offices were reviewing vendor invoices before making payments to ensure that contractors were paid only for eligible trees. A review of payments for 2,363 prunings billed by a Manhattan contractor identified 99 trees that the contractor recorded as being undersized.

In contrast, Stringer noted, “Pruning operations in Queens are a model for the rest of the City. The Parks Department needs to implement reforms that will help protect all taxpayers, boost services and ensure greater safety in all neighborhoods.”

Comptroller Stringer issued a series of recommendations to correct the weaknesses in the City’s tree trimming program. The Parks Department must:

1. Ensure that accurate, detailed lists of trees that meet the minimum size requirement and need pruning are prepared, including the trees’ locations;
2. Make sure that post-pruning inspections are performed and documented;
3. Ensure that contractors’ invoices are reviewed to make certain that payments are made only for trees meeting the contract specifications;
4. Make sure that the Manhattan Forestry Office tracks the streets that have been pruned by the contractor to help ensure that no streets are missed and that all trees in need are pruned;
5. Investigate and try to recover money that was improperly paid to prune trees that were less than five inches in diameter or were not pruned; and
6. Refer to the Department of Investigation any evidence Parks finds of an intentional falsification of invoices by a contractor.

Parks officials agreed with the audit’s recommendations but disagreed with the audit’s finding that the agency has inadequate controls over its contract pruning program for street trees.

“The City pays out millions per year in settlements resulting from falling limbs. Reducing the City’s exposure to these types of claims is a mandate that cuts across all City agencies. ClaimStat, a new data-driven program I recently launched, is helping to spot troubling trends in claims and give the information needed to make corrections and reduce them. I look forward to working with the Department of Parks and Recreation to achieve better results for our City,” Comptroller Stringer said.

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