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Testimony of Parks & Trails New York

Joint Legislative Public Hearing on the 2014-2015 Executive Budget Proposal

January 29, 2014

Good afternoon. My name is Robin Dropkin and I am Executive Director of Parks & Trails New York. In 1985, Parks & Trails New York was founded to support the state park system, and in the almost 30 years since, we have been the state's leading organization working to preserve and enhance a network of parks, trails and greenways for all New Yorkers for generations to come. Our influential reports and advocacy efforts have been critical to keeping parks and historic sites open and protecting New York's natural, recreational, cultural and historical resources. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the proposed Executive Budget for Fiscal Year 2014-2015.

New York State Parks—A 5-to-1 Return on Investment

New York's state park system is the nation's oldest, dating to the creation of the Niagara Reservation in 1885, and one of the most heavily visited. Today, our 214 state parks and historic sites are significant economic drivers, while also strengthening New Yorkers' health and fitness, enhancing their quality of life, and preserving invaluable landscapes, ecosystems and historic and cultural treasures.

The tourism dollars generated by parks are critical, especially to local Upstate economies. According to a 2009 independent study¹ commissioned by Parks & Trails New York, the NYS Park System boosts the state's economy to the tune of nearly \$2 billion annually—that's a 5-to-1 return on investment. Plus, the state park system creates and supports 20,000 jobs—exclusive of

¹PERI Institute. *The NYS Park System: An Economic Asset to the Empire State*. March 2009. Prepared for Parks & Trails New York.

state parks employees. Overall, outdoor recreation in New York State generates \$33.8 billion in consumer spending, 305,000 direct jobs, and \$12.4 billion in wages and salaries.² Our world-class parks are key assets in helping the state and localities attract tax-paying businesses and a high-quality workforce.

Parks also generate significant additional benefits to the state, including maintaining the natural environment, protecting communities from the impacts of extreme weather events and mitigating impacts from climate change, providing an escape for millions of New Yorkers and others from around the world, and protecting the state's heritage for future generations. Because of these additional benefits, most assessments of the economic impact of parks underestimate their true economic contribution.

But when most New Yorkers think of state parks, they don't think about return on investment or state appropriations: all they know is that they love their parks. When parks were threatened with closure, tens of thousands of New Yorkers rallied to their support. For the past two years, on the first Saturday in May, thousands of New Yorkers have taken time out of their busy weekend to volunteer for I Love My Park Day and help clean up, improve and beautify state parks and historic sites across the state. It is thanks in large part to this outpouring of support—including support from many of you—that parks have remained open and are beginning to thrive again.

Because parks are loved by so many New Yorkers, they are one of the most visible and symbolic of government programs. When parks look shabby and neglected, New Yorkers notice and feel less proud of their state. And, since rebuilding a park restroom or repairing the roof of a visitor center can be done quickly and at a fraction of the cost of rebuilding a bridge or highway underpass, park improvements offer government a tangible way to show New Yorkers—and the world – that New York is on the move again.

Preserve and Enhance the NYS Park System

Parks are an integral part of the state's infrastructure. The Governor and Legislature have recognized this by including parks over the last two years in efforts to rebuild the state's infrastructure and economy. This commitment has made it possible for State Parks to sustain its progress in addressing the estimated \$1 billion in critical infrastructure needs, breathing new life into the park system. The \$179 million investment made by the state over the last two years, leveraged with \$50 million in other funds, is creating strong local jobs and helping to grow the state's economy while also restoring and reinvigorating treasured and beloved state parks and historic sites. Flagships like Niagara Falls, which only a few years ago were called "shabby" and

²Outdoor Industry Foundation, 2013. *The Active Outdoor Recreation Economy*. http://www.outdoorindustry.org/images/ore_reports/NY-newyork-outdoorrecreationeconomy-oja.pdf

“underfinanced” by the *New York Times*, are beginning to receive makeovers that will encourage increased visitation from tourists all over the world.

Visitors are clearly noticing the improvements. With visitation now up to more than 60 million people annually, our state parks and historic sites are primed to anchor the state’s regional tourism efforts, particularly Upstate.

With an estimated \$1 billion³ backlog in health, safety, and infrastructure projects, state parks and historic sites still face a tremendous need. In November 2006, Parks & Trails New York released its *Parks at a Turning Point* report in which we highlighted the many challenges facing the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP), particularly the agency’s enormous capital projects backlog. These challenges remain; according to a recent report⁴ by the Office of the Comptroller, almost every park and historic site in the system has some infrastructure need, from crumbling buildings and bridges and leaky swimming pools, to outdated water, sewer and electrical systems and deteriorating roads.

Support Proposed \$90 Million for State Park Infrastructure Needs

The \$90 million in new capital funding through the New York Works program for capital needs at state parks and historic sites proposed in the FY14-FY15 Executive Budget recognizes the important role these treasured places play in local economic growth, in the protection of important natural areas, and in providing affordable recreational opportunities for New Yorkers and out-of-state visitors, alike.

The majority of these funds will be used to maintain and rehabilitate aging facilities in state parks, half of which are over 50 years old. We urge you to support the Governor’s budget proposal for parks and keep the momentum going. Through the commitment of the Governor and the Legislature, OPRHP will be able to sustain its progress in addressing the backlog in infrastructure needs and critical safety repairs, restoring and reinvigorating the state park system.

With an investment of \$90 million annually—leveraged with additional private and federal dollars—the backlog in capital needs can be addressed over a roughly 10-year period. Continuing to invest in these treasured places will keep people working to help grow New York’s economy sustainably, boost tourism in communities across the state, and secure New York’s parks and conservation legacy for future generations.

³New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, 2010. *New York State Parks & Historic Sites: Capital Needs Assessment*, October 12, 2010.

⁴NYS Office of the State Comptroller. *Safety of Infrastructure*, Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation. September 2012. Report 2012-S-29.

Lean Agency Operations Budgets Taking a Toll

The Executive Budget maintains the agency's operations budget. Given the state's recent fiscal challenges, we appreciate that OPRHP's operations budget has been held steady over the past several years. However, rising costs outside of the state's control mean that even a level operations budget will have deleterious results. OPRHP's budget has been cut 23% since the economic crisis—more than many agencies—and it is operating today with 1,500 fewer staff than it was in 2008. The effects can be felt on the ground with reduced hours, days, and seasons, fewer programs and workers, fewer park police, and less maintenance, not to mention fewer resources dedicated to natural resource protection and the visitor experience.

Essentially, our state parks are serving more and more visitors, but being given fewer and fewer resources with which to do so. While capital improvements are critically important, without sufficient funding for operations the agency is left struggling to achieve its mission of “providing safe and enjoyable recreational and interpretive opportunities for all New York State residents and visitors and to be responsible stewards of our valuable natural, historic and cultural resources.”

Support Reinvestment in Our Parks

In addition to investing in state parks infrastructure through the NY Works program, there are other creative ways to move forward and secure the future of the park system.

One option is to take a closer look at the role of park and historic site Friends groups. Active and engaged grassroots Friends organizations already contribute significantly to the stewardship of the state's parks and historic sites, raising tens of millions of dollars and logging hundreds of thousands of hours of volunteer assistance. Finding ways to strengthen and further engage these organizations will reap large benefits, enabling these groups to leverage more private and federal funding, marshal more volunteer power, and better fill the growing gap in government support.

Over the years, Parks & Trails New York has developed a suite of resources and opportunities for Friends groups. Through capacity-building grants, a one-on-one technical assistance program, an online resource kit, periodic regional gatherings and more, we are helping to build the capacity and strength of Friends groups. But there is clearly more that could be done.

Restore the Environmental Protection Fund

The Environmental Protection Fund—the dedicated source of funding for protecting New York’s water and air, providing stewardship for state parks and forests, and delivering essential resources to communities such as the municipal park program that supports local parks and trails—is increased by \$4 million to \$157 million in the Executive Budget proposal. While this increase is a start, it falls well short of what is needed to meet the significant and growing demand for environmental funding across the state.

In a year when New York has its first budget surplus since the recent economic decline and investments are being made in many sectors, we call on the Legislature to not miss the opportunity to continue to make necessary investments to protect and restore the environment. As you know, EPF programs are very popular; a recent survey of New York voters shows that a majority of voters in *every part of the state* support enhancing the Fund. Therefore we urge you, on behalf of all New Yorkers, to work with your colleagues to provide more funding for the EPF in this state budget.

Closing

Parks & Trails New York looks forward to working with the Senate, the Assembly and the administration on protecting and preserving the legacy of our great park system, as well as strengthening the network of parks, trails and greenways across the state.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify.

