PARKS & TRAILS
NEW YORK

Joint Legislative Public Hearing
on the
2017-2018 Executive Budget Proposal

Respectfully submitted by
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Chairperson Young, Chairperson Farrell and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak to the impact of the budget on New York's outstanding outdoor recreational resources, especially its magnificent state park system and its thousands of miles of biking and walking trails.

Since 1985, Parks & Trails New York has been the state's leading advocate for the expansion, protection, and promotion of a network of parks, trails, bike paths, and greenways throughout the state. Our mission and our vision is to ensure that all New Yorkers, regardless of where they live, socioeconomic status, or physical or mental disabilities, should have close access to outdoor recreation including parks and trails. Through our work—including promotion of the state's wealth of outdoor resources, our popular bike tours and cycling guidebooks—we also promote sustainable tourism in all regions of the state.

Empire State Trail

I'll start with the budget proposal that has captured the imagination of trail users and outdoor recreationists from across New York, and beyond – the Empire State Trail. The Governor has proposed funding for a statewide multi-use trail, called the Empire State Trail, that would connect NYC to the Canadian border, and Buffalo to Albany.

This bold plan responds to more than a decade of advocacy by Parks & Trails New York and partners from across the state to *Close the Gaps* in the Erie and Champlain Canalway Trails, and to build a connected trail in the Hudson Valley. The Governor's budget proposes to do that, and then some, with a proposed $53 million to be split between the Erie Canalway Trail and the Hudson River Greenway. To say that we're supportive is an understatement, and I'd like to tell you a bit more about why we think this is a great idea.

Upon completion, the 750-mile Empire State Trail will be the nation's longest multi-use trail, securing New York's place as a national and international destination for outdoor recreation and heritage tourism. Building the trail will add a unique asset to the state's tourism portfolio, one that caters to modern tourists who seek adventure, outdoor recreation, and authentic cultural experiences.

Visitors create positive economic impacts for local communities, as we've seen on the Erie Canalway Trail, where a 2014 study found that the trail generates $253 million in annual economic benefit, and supports over 3,000 jobs – *that's on the Erie Canalway Trail alone.* We believe the impact of the full Empire State Trail will dwarf this figure.

And it's not just tourism. The Empire State Trail will create a community recreation space in 26 counties and hundreds of communities across the state, providing a safe and accessible place to walk, ride, jog, push a stroller, rollerblade – you name it in terms of outdoor activities. This supports the state's efforts to combat chronic health issues such as obesity and diabetes, as well as encouraging "screen-free" time that we all need, especially our kids. For those whose trail excursions extend farther afield, the Empire State Trail will also serve as the spine for a wider network of hiking and biking trails that connect every part of the state.

The Empire State Trail will also create a new way to experience New York's rich history and unique heritage. Finishing the Erie Canalway Trail, and connecting New York City to Canada will provide a seamless off-road connection to many of the State's most important historic sites and cultural assets – truly a "Path Through History." From Niagara Falls, to Fort Ticonderoga, to Battery Park, the trail will serve as a new venue for exploration.

Two more quick trail-related stats, and then I'll move on to other parts of the proposed budget:

- Every $1 million invested in multi-use trail construction creates an estimated 9.6 jobs, a higher multiplier than road-only projects;

- Home buyers rank off-road trails as one of the most important community assets when purchasing a home, so the Empire State Trail supports the state's goal of attracting and keeping residents, especially millennials.

Continuing the State Parks Renaissance

Through the leadership of the Governor and Legislature, since 2011 state parks have received an historic infusion of capital funding through the NY Parks 2020 initiative. Over the last five years, $470 million has been used to restore and rebuild state parks' aging infrastructure. 383 park improvement and enhancement projects have been completed or are underway at more than 130 parks and historic sites in every region of the state. The Governor and members of the Senate and Assembly deserve credit for this.

This sustained attention to restoring state parks and historic sites is rejuvenating flagship parks like Niagara Falls and Jones Beach. New and improved trails, playgrounds, and nature centers are promoting healthy recreation and environmental education while engaging a new generation of park stewards. Our shared past is being honored with restored historic buildings and landmarks.

We are happy to report that this year's executive budget expands on this theme, with a proposed allocation of $120 million to OPRHP for capital funding. This includes the scheduled $90 million installment of Parks 2020 funding, as well as an additional $30 million for capital projects that will spur private investment in some of the State's flagship parks.

We fully support these investments.

New York State Parks—A Solid Return on Investment

We know that this investment is paying dividends. Last year, Parks reported a six-percent increase in visitors, up to a whopping 69.3 million. That's a 21% increase in visitors since 2011. Besides giving New Yorkers enjoyable and healthy outdoor experiences that are so important to their quality of life, the revenue generated by parks are critical, especially to struggling Upstate communities.

Parks & Trails New York is excited about the transformation that is underway in New York's State Parks, and we fully support the funding proposed in the executive budget. This funding will continue the momentum that has increased opportunities for New Yorkers to connect with the natural world and outdoor recreation, fostered

innovative public-private partnerships that create vibrant and inviting spaces. Parks are transforming into destinations—places people want to visit for a day or an entire weekend, not just a few hours.

Challenges and Opportunities Remain

While great progress is being made, challenges remain. State Parks, despite experiencing rising attendance, operate with the same staffing levels as they did in previous decades, when visitation was significantly lower.

We shouldn't waste the momentum created since 2011 in the State Parks system. Instead, let's seize the opportunity for state parks to engage increased numbers by increasing the agency's operations budget. This will enable our state parks and historic sites to more fully realize their potential as economic engines for local communities by offering more programming and encouraging longer stays, as well as providing accessible, quality outdoor recreation and open space to all New Yorkers.

This year's executive budget proposes an additional $1 million for OPRHP operations through NY Works program. **We don't believe this meets the needs that exist throughout the system.**

A Fully-Funded Environmental Protection Fund

Taken together, the renaissance in the state parks system and opportunities for growth in our multi-use trail network are moving us closer to Parks & Trails New York's vision for close access to outdoor recreation for all New Yorkers. Several other funding sources and initiatives are also moving us along in this regard.

Adventure New York is a new program that will be launched by the Department of Environmental Conservation to upgrade DEC recreational facilities and to improve access to public lands. $70 million in New York Works capital funding is proposed for the new initiative as well as other infrastructure needs within DEC lands. Parks & Trails New York fully supports DEC's goal of improving access to recreation, and the funding allocated for this program.

Finally, the Environmental Protection Fund is a critical source of funding for a variety of programs, including capital improvements at parks and campgrounds, restoration of historic sites, and management of trails and public lands. The EPF supports more than 350,000 jobs across a spectrum of industries, including outdoor

tourism. All told, EPF-supported industries generate about $40 billion every year.

Parks & Trails New York is very pleased that the Executive Budget proposes full funding for the Environmental Protection Fund at $300 million. The continued restoration of the EPF, after years of sweeps and cuts, is critical to support programs that create jobs, protect clean water, and improve communities in every county of New York State.

Invest in Grassroots Friends Groups

For the third year, included in the budget proposal for the EPF is $500,000 for a capacity-building grants program for organizations that promote and support the state's parks, trails and historic sites. These nonprofit "Friends groups"—oftentimes made up entirely of volunteers— already contribute significantly to the promotion of these venues in addition to doing things like building kiosks, clearing trails, leading programs, and raising significant money for capital projects.

The capacity-building grants program, administered by Parks & Trails New York, unlocks the potential of these organizations by increasing their effectiveness, productivity, and volunteer and fundraising capabilities.

In March 2016, the first round of Park and Trail Partnership funds was awarded to 20 Friends organizations at New York State parks and historic sites, with nearly $242,000 pledged in matching funds. The demand for the program was significantly high, with 36% of all eligible organizations submitting applications totaling $966,853. The second round of grant awardees will be announced in March 2017.

A small investment of EPF funds in a grants program to strengthen these organizations will reap large benefits for the state, enabling groups to leverage more private and federal funding, marshal more volunteer power, and augment the state's historic investment in parks. All this will lead to even greater economic benefits from tourism and outdoor recreation, and healthier, more sustainable and resilient communities.

Parks & Trails New York looks forward to working with the Governor and Legislature on this transformative program.

Closing

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak today.