OPEN SPACE INSTITUTE

Testimony Before the Joint Fiscal Committees of the State Legislature on the FY2017-18 Budget

Erik Kulleseid
Senior Vice President
Open Space Institute and its Alliance for New York State Parks Program
February 13, 2017

Senate Finance Chair Young and Assembly Ways & Means Chair Farrell, Chairs O'Mara, Englebright, Funke and O'Donnell, distinguished legislators – thank you for the opportunity to discuss Governor Cuomo's proposed budget as it relates to our state parks and environmental funding.

I am Erik Kulleseid, Senior Vice President at the Open Space Institute and Executive Director of its Alliance for New York State Parks program.

OSI is among New York's leading land and park conservation nonprofits. As such, we are grateful that with his budget proposal, Governor Cuomo is seeking to expand his park revitalization initiative, improve recreational access to trails, parks, state forests and preserves, maintain a $300 million EPF and raise the bar on clean water – with a welcome emphasis on source water land conservation.

Through our 40-year history, OSI has conserved 143,000 acres in New York State. These conservation transactions achieve a variety of goals, including creating and expanding parks, protecting habitat, mitigating the effects of climate change and, yes, protecting water sources. The overall effect on the state park system has been significant. OSI's work accounts for more than 10 percent of the state park system's total acreage of more than 335,000 acres. Through decades we have been instrumental in the creation of Sterling Forest and Schunnemunk State Parks and have more than doubled the size of Minnewaska, Fahnestock, Thacher and Moreau Lake State Parks.

And with our Alliance for New York State Parks program, OSI has extended its commitment to public enjoyment of parks through advocacy, private fundraising (to the tune of $19 million) and support of public-private endeavors that are adding to the revitalization of New York's magnificent state park system.

As such, we enthusiastically welcome the governor's continued support for improving and upgrading state parks through his NY Parks 2020 initiative; and his inclusion of a $120 million installment in his proposed budget. We also endorse the creation of the complementary $30 million Adventure NY program within the DEC – our state forests and preserves are superior recreational destinations and ought to offer high quality access points and trails as well. Within that program we are pleased to see a specific sub-focus on the Catskills.

With his budget proposal, Governor Cuomo is maintaining momentum on the 10-year commitment outlined in his NY Parks 2020 plan to revitalize state parks and make them more accessible, appealing and welcoming for generations of park visitors. This commitment comes after decades of state park underinvestment that had resulted in a $1 billion backlog in maintenance and repairs.

We are extraordinarily grateful to the governor and the legislature for the renaissance that is underway throughout the system, a renaissance validated by last year's record-setting attendance. New Yorkers and out-of-state tourists are loving our parks and that is a great thing for communities and local businesses throughout the state.

On the operations side of the ledger, this year's budget once again by-and-large freezes Office of Parks and DEC funding at last year's levels. For agencies confronting the triple whammy of budget cuts in excess of twenty percent over recent years, rising fixed costs, and a growing number of visitors, it is difficult to maintain confidence that these agencies and the New Yorkers they serve are truly not being impacted.

We once again credit Commissioner Rose Harvey for leading the Office of Parks during these lean times. The Commissioner's efforts to establish operating partnerships, improve efficiency and enhance the visitor experience shine through with the capital projects and programs advancing through NY Parks 2020 and her securing of $264 million in outside funding for state parks. We are pleased to see Commissioner Basil Seggos making increased capital and staffing investments in partnerships and enhanced access as well.

I am also eager to express our enthusiasm for a second year of a record $300 million EPF. The Legislature has long been champions of the EPF and we remain grateful to both houses for your continuing support for the fund and all that it achieves.

There are four categories of particular interest to OSI within the EPF: the State Land Stewardship line and its NYS Park and Trail Partnership program funding, the Municipal Grants line and the Open Space/Land Conservation account.

State Land Stewardship and the NYS Park and Trail Partnership program are important initiatives aimed, respectively, at caring for the natural resources within state parks and DEC forests and preserves, and strengthening local park friends groups. We urge your continued support for each of these stewardship items. The Municipal Grants line is an additional important boost for building private sector and local government partnerships and should be maintained in strength.

As we applaud the $300 million total, we call your attention to two items within the EPF that require scrutiny.

First, under the label "Navigation Law" the proposed EPF budget includes an unprecedented $2 million offload from the general fund of the state's practice of reimbursing local government for the enforcement of the state's boating laws. This is an inappropriate move of aid to localities into the state's environmental capital fund, and we ask the legislature to correct that error in the final budget.

In addition, as a prominent land conservation organization, I would be remiss if I did not express some concern for the reduction in the Open Space/Land Acquisition category within the proposed EPF – from $40 million to $33 million. While this EPF reduction for land

acquisition may be offset elsewhere if, for example, the $2 billion water quality improvement initiative is adopted, it does give us pause.

Much of OSI's land conservation work occurs around watersheds, rivers, lakes, and streams that help ensure reliable supplies of clean drinking water. It is simply a matter of fact that no matter where you live, it is likely that land conservation positively impacts your drinking water and keeps it available for future generations.

That is why we are very encouraged that the governor is including source water protection as part of his new clean water initiative. We are hopeful that once this program is more fleshed out, that there will be gains in open space funding. After all smart land conservation is one of the most cost-effective tools the state can pursue to ensure safe, clean drinking water for all New Yorkers.

OSI actively supports the governor's initiative to create a new Adirondack gateway at Exit 29 on the Northway in North Hudson. OSI has been involved in the planning for this project that will provide access to newly acquired lands in the park and catalyze regional economic development.

Finally, OSI strongly supports the executive budget's Empire State Trail proposal. Across the state, and in particular the Hudson Valley, OSI is a practitioner of trail expansion and building. Already one of the strongest rail-trail networks in the nation, the Empire State Trail promises to knit together the state's recreational wonders into a network that will be a global destination for recreation enthusiasts. And best of all, the trail is an eminently doable proposition. We heartily endorse the effort to complete it.

In closing, I thank the governor and members of both the Senate and Assembly for working together in support of parks and the environment. Your commitment and effectiveness is setting a new national standard, one that can make all New Yorkers proud.
Thank you for your time this afternoon and for the work you do to advance the cause of protecting and enhancing New York's precious environmental and recreational resources.