UNIVERSITY POLICE | ENCON POLICE

PBA of New York State

PARK POLICE | FOREST RANGERS

Testimony of the Police Benevolent Association of New York State

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This testimony is submitted on behalf of the Police Benevolent Association of New York State (PBA of New York State), established in 2011, the law enforcement labor union representing the interests of approximately 1,200 members of the New York State Agency Police Services Unit (APSU).

The PBA of New York State is the exclusive bargaining agent for the New York State University (SUNY) Police, the Environmental Conservation Police (EnCon), the State Park Police, and the Forest Rangers.

Our members patrol and protect New York State's public universities and colleges; state parks and historic sites; and they enforce state laws and protect our lands, forests and wilderness areas to ensure environmental safety and quality throughout the state.

The University Police, Environmental Conservation Police, State Park Police and Forest Rangers comprise the second, third, fourth and fifth largest units of police officers employed by the State of New York. These officers live and work in your communities. We are keeping you and our natural resources safe and we will respond to a crisis anywhere in the state where lives or resources are threatened.

This testimony will specifically address the budget priorities of the Department of Environmental Conservation's (DEC) Forest Rangers and Environmental Conservation Officers, as well as the Office of Parks Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP) State Park Police. Our testimony is intended to bring attention to the critical need to update equipment and staffing for our divisions so we can continue to fulfill our mission.

We ask that the legislature appropriate funding to:

- ***Host additional academies for each of the Forest Rangers, Environmental Conservation Officers and Sate Park Police units;***
- ***Increase staffing levels for the Forest Rangers to keep pace with the new acquisition of property;***
- ***Consider new structures to optimize State Police and Troopers units, and***
- ***Provide resources for new cars and critical equipment for all three of these important public safety units.***

ADDITIONAL ACADEMIES

We need additional staff to continue performing the vital functions we do on behalf of New York residents and visitors. We are encouraged by the 2017 academies that have begun as appropriated in this current budget. However, the glass is only half-full, we still have to recover from the depletion of personnel lost during the State's financial crisis and prepare for the next wave of retirements. Without a continued commitment to augment and

maintain critical staffing levels, we will not be able to adequately protect the public and the environment.

In more tangible terms this means fewer officers to respond to calls when children are lost, when wild fires rage, or when toxic chemicals threaten our air and water.

The Forest Rangers, Environmental Conservation Officers and State Park Police have experienced a decline in force for a number of reasons; the down turn of the economy and corresponding tough fiscal times, attrition due to retirements and more competitive pay and benefits offered by other state and local police agencies.. It is essential that the 2018-19 budget include dedicated funding for staff and equipment to reverse this long-term trend.

The PBA of NYS strongly urges the Legislature to add additional funding to the Environmental Conservation Budget as well as the Office of Parks Recreation and Historic Preservation to allow for the appropriate staff and train Forest Rangers, Environmental Conservation Officers and State Park Police in 2017 and beyond. It is important to note that in order to match the size of the divisions with their responsibilities, it will be necessary to follow up quickly with another class of academy recruits during the 2018-19 fiscal year.

FOREST RANGER STAFFING

The Forest Ranger force currently contains a number of vacancies. However, the greater problem stems from the lack of new members to patrol and protect the vast acquisitions made by the state over the past 40 years.

Since the establishment in 1885, Forest Rangers have protected the Adirondack and Catskill Parks. Today Forest Rangers and police officers are assigned to protect over five million acres of Forest Preserve, State Forest, Wildlife Management Areas and many other land classifications. They patrol the lands that surround the New York City watershed, fight fires, and rescue lost and injured people in remote areas of the state. But while the duties and responsibilities have grown, their numbers have not. Currently, approximately 120 Forest Rangers are each responsible for patrolling an average of 53,752 acres. In contrast, in 1970, 143 Forest Rangers patrolled an average of 28,516 acres. Over 1.5 million acres have been purchased since 1970 and require protection but the number of protectors has been reduced by 16 percent.

It is important that the Legislature partner with the Department of Environmental Conservation in recognizing that additional Forest Rangers must be added when property is acquired or purchased. We are asking for an additional Forest Ranger for every 30,000 acres acquired going forward. This is a reasonable growth rate for the state

and for the taxpayers who expect it to consider their safety when enjoying its recreational assets.

NEW STRUCTURES

For years the State Park Police have spoken to the legislature about the chronic underfunding of the Office of Parks Recreation and Historic Preservation, and the direct impact it has on patrons and its State Park Police. The agency, in an effort to meet the Governor's requirement for budget reductions, deferred the replacement of vehicles, equipment and academies for far too long, and now we are running from behind with no real opportunity to catch-up without truly significant investment from the state.

The average attrition rate per year for the past three years for new recruits is 30 percent per year. Currently State Park Police are at 259 members which includes a State Park Police academy class of 28 recruits scheduled to graduate later this year. In 2000 the staffing level was 282, yet after 17 years and 13 academies producing over 390 police officers there has been a net loss of Officers – a total of 413 – at a cost of tens of millions of dollars in recruitment, evaluation and training.

An October 2012 report by Brian A. Reaves, Ph.D., a statistician with the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, found the national average attrition rate for police agencies to be seven percent.

At this time it is necessary for the Legislature to partner with the State Park Police to find creative solutions to prioritize the safety of park patrons and rectify the crisis of aged equipment.

We propose the merger of the State Park Police with the New York State Troopers.

The State Park Police have full law enforcement authority and statewide jurisdiction. In fact we frequently respond to calls on behalf of the New York State Police.

The PBA of New York's park delegates and its members believe the merger of these two units will provide enhanced police protection in both our state parks and throughout the state.

Additionally, the State Park Police bring with them the added expertise and training, including: swift-water and marine, as well as high-angle or steep terrain rescue; snowmobile patrol, and counter-terror tactics This additional expertise is part of the rigorous training that a State Park Police officer is required to complete while at its academy. Interestingly, State Troopers may receive similar training, but only after graduating from its well-regarded academy. Merging the two units immediately increases the statewide deployment capacity allowing for efficient and appropriate coverage throughout New York.

The size of the State Park Police has dipped far too low to recover, and the academies have been unable to maintain its ranks.

As you likely know, because Governor Cuomo and his Commissioner frequently cite to it, there are over 69.3 million visitors a year to our New York State Parks; and its economic impact is over $2 billion annually.

The Park Police patrol the busiest parks in New York, for example: It is not unusual for Jones Beach State Park to see more than one million people flock to its shore line each Memorial Day; the recently upgraded New York State Fair can now accommodate 1.1 million visitors over 10 days each summer; and the Saratoga Performing Arts Center boasts large crowds for both their classical music events and Live Nation managed rock concerts. It is unfortunate to note that these types of mass gatherings are also targets for potential terrorist attacks and present their own unique law enforcement challenges.

Niagara Falls State Park remains one of world's most popular destinations irrespective of season, and winter brings families to snow shoe, ski and ice fish in dozens of upstate locations.

If the Legislature cannot find the adequate funding to invest in the State Park Police, we ask for a creative solution – and we propose the merging of the State Park Police with the State Troopers.

EQUIPMENT

For years the state has made due with the equipment that it has, without an eye on investment in updating technology, replacing wear and tear and personnel. Failure to keep a replacement schedule for equipment and personnel results in the inevitable requirement for significant investment over and above the annual budgeted funding. We have reached that inevitable moment.

Our units are in desperate need of supplies and specialized equipment to support the mission going forward. Appropriations specifically designated to support our ability to respond to emergencies and protect the public have continued to fall short.

The state did not replace any vehicles for the three years spanning 2009-2011. This break has now come to roost and our patrol cars are in desperate need. The vehicles chronically breakdown, wheels have fallen off, cars are being repaired with component parts that exceed the value of the vehicle being repaired, and we are purchasing used body parts at salvage yards to replace doors and tailgates. The public needs to have confidence in the police force, however, that becomes difficult when the patrol car breaks down, loses parts or is rusted out.

The infusion of vehicles and funding to properly outfit them needs to be aggressively increased in the DEC Budget. Of the EnCon fleet, 48.9% of the vehicles exceed 125,000 miles. To bring the fleet up to par, an initial infusion of 100 vehicles needs to be appropriated for this year, to establish a vehicle replacement schedule.

In 2012, the department resumed purchasing police vehicles, however the budget did not allow for adequate procurement, (only 25-50) to keep up with the depreciation of the fleet. In 2016, the department purchased 60 police vehicles, which are still being retrofitted and have not yet been deployed, however, that only accounts for 5 to 6 cars per region, and each region has approximately 30-40 cars.

With an infusion of 100 additional vehicles in this fiscal year, DEC would be able to replace the cars for officers and Forest Rangers on a five year schedule. The average mileage a year on a vehicle is 25,000. After five years the vehicle would have 125,000 miles. To maintain the replacement schedule the DEC would need to replace 60 cars a year, and ample funding is required by the state for that goal to be achieved. The five year replacement also allows for the timely update of technology available in our vehicles, allowing us to be much more efficient as advancements are made in the automotive and law enforcement industries.

For Forest Rangers and State Park Police, it is important to note that technical rescues in extreme conditions require specialized equipment. Searching for lost children in the winter requires snowshoes and winter jackets designed for weather extremes. We need to update and replace this equipment on an ongoing basis as well as provide academy graduates with these tools. Out of necessity, some Forest Rangers have had to buy much of their own equipment such as helmets, gloves, crampons, ropes, packs and headlamps. Nearly half of our snowmobiles are 10 to 15 years old. We relied on these snowmobiles to respond to the Buffalo Blizzard to assist stranded motorist trapped on the New York State Thruway.

The average age of an ATV is 10-12 years old, although we have a few that have seen 22 years of service. In addition to checking for illegal hunting and fishing activity and timber thefts, ATVs are frequently called upon to search for lost or missing persons and fugitives.

Many of our boats are from the 60s, 70s and 80s.

We implore the Legislature to appropriate the public's money in a way that protects our greatest assets, the public's safety, and those of us dedicated to ensure the public's full usage of our natural resources. Increase the funding for the DEC and OPRHP to equip the Officers, Police and Forest Rangers with the basics, as well as unique equipment needed to carry out our missions.