

13



Testimony of Parks & Trails New York

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

January 28, 2015

Good afternoon. My name is Laura DiBetta and I direct Parks & Trails New York's parks program. In 1985, Parks & Trails New York was founded to support the state park system, and in the 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. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the proposed Executive Budget for Fiscal Year 2015-2016.

A State Parks Renaissance

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 215 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.

Through the leadership of the Governor and Legislature, state parks have received an historic infusion of capital funding through the New York Works initiative—nearly \$270 million—to restore and rebuild state parks' aging and dilapidated infrastructure.

Thanks to this investment and ongoing commitment, state parks are in the midst of an exciting 21st Century transformation. Nearly 300 park improvement and enhancement projects are taking place in every region of the state. At more than 60 million visits annually, visitation is at its highest in a decade. Groundbreakings for state-of-the-art projects are regularly happening across

the state, with many more planned. New opportunities to connect people with healthy, active outdoor recreation and environmental, historical and cultural education are now available. Innovative public-private partnerships are helping to create vibrant and inviting spaces. Flagships like Niagara Falls, which only a few years ago were called “shabby” and “underfinanced” by the *New York Times*, are beginning to receive makeovers that will encourage increased visitation from tourists all over the world. Parks are transforming into destinations—places people want to visit for a day or an entire weekend, not just a few hours.

And in this year’s budget, there is a new initiative that will unlock the potential of local, grassroots groups across the state who lead citizen initiatives to rebuild, strengthen and improve access to these wonderful state treasures. I look forward to telling you more about this new capacity-building grants program in my testimony.

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

We know that this investment in our shared natural, cultural and historical resources is paying dividends. According to a study¹ commissioned by Parks & Trails New York, the state park system generates \$2 billion in economic activity for the state and provides a 5-to-1 return on investment. The same report showed that state parks create 20,000 jobs and that 40% of visitor spending—\$744 million—comes from visitors living outside the communities in which the parks are located. Clearly the tourism dollars generated by parks are critical, especially to struggling Upstate communities.

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 three 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.

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

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.

Challenges and Opportunities Remain

With an estimated \$1 billion² 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 report³ 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. The storms of 2011 and 2012 (Irene, Lee and Sandy) only further compounded that need, and highlighted both the vulnerabilities of the system, and the important role that the natural infrastructure features found in our parks play in storm and flood protection.

Support Proposed \$110 Million for State Park Infrastructure Needs and Modest Operations Increase

The \$110 million in new capital funding through the New York Works program for capital needs at state parks and historic sites proposed in the FY2015-FY2016 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. 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.

²New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, 2010. *New York State Parks & Historic Sites: Capital Needs Assessment*, October 12, 2010.

³NYS Office of the State Comptroller. *Safety of Infrastructure, Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation*. September 2012. Report 2012-S-29.

Through this annual state investment—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.

We appreciate that the Governor’s proposal also maintains OPRHP’s operations budget essentially flat. With visitation at its highest in a decade and state-of-the-art nature centers and other facilities being designed and built, there is tremendous opportunity for OPRHP to provide education, guidance and inspiration to the public as to how we can best protect and enjoy our environment and celebrate our past. Our state parks are essential community resources and with continued investments, they can and should be utilized to provide important education and interpretation of the natural world and global environmental issues such as climate change. Plus, more programs mean more engaged visitors, resulting in longer stays, more frequent visits and a greater overall impact on tourism.

Putting OPRHP’s operations budget on an upward trajectory will enable our state parks and historic sites to more fully realize their potential as economic engines for local communities, and allow OPRHP to provide accessible, quality outdoor recreation and open space to all New Yorkers.

As the Legislature works with the Governor on the State FY2015-2016 budget, we encourage you to keep the momentum for parks going with another round of funding through the NY Works program as proposed by the Governor in his executive budget. A \$110 million investment in state parks infrastructure, along with maintenance of the agency’s operations budget, will strengthen the role state parks and historic sites play in sustainable economic development and tourism in communities across the state.

Restore the Environmental Protection Fund

The Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) is a critical 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. The EPF supports more than 350,000 jobs across a spectrum of industries, from outdoor tourism, agriculture and forest products to drinking water protection for millions of New Yorkers. All told, EPF-supported industries generate approximately \$40 billion every year.

Parks & Trails New York strongly supports increasing the EPF to \$172 million, as is proposed in the Executive Budget. After steep cuts and significant sweeps of EPF funding during the economic crisis, the continued restoration of the EPF is critical to support programs that create jobs, protect clean water, and improve communities in every county of New York State. This \$10 million increase is progress towards reaching a \$200 million EPF in the near future, and a fully-funded \$300 million EPF in the long-term.

Unlocking the Potential of Grassroots Friends Groups

As I indicated before, included in the Governor's budget proposal for the EPF is \$500,000 for a new capacity-building grants program for organizations that support and strengthen the state's parks, trails and historic sites. Often, these nonprofit organizations are comprised of dedicated individuals—in most cases, volunteers—who accomplish Herculean tasks on shoestring budgets. These groups raise private funds for conservation and capital projects; they perform maintenance and stewardship tasks; they lead tours and provide educational programming for young and old; and they promote public use and enjoyment of these sites through communications and special events.

The capacity-building grants program, to be administered jointly by Parks & Trails New York and OPRHP, will unlock the potential of these organizations by increasing their effectiveness, productivity, and volunteer and fundraising capabilities through this innovative public/private partnership.

A small investment of EPF funds in a capacity-building grants program to strengthen these organizations will reap large benefits, enabling groups to leverage more private and federal funding, marshal more volunteer power, and augment the state's historic investment in parks. Their efforts will enhance park, trail and historic site stewardship, leading to even greater economic benefits from tourism and outdoor recreation, improved access to outdoor resources, and healthier, more sustainable and resilient communities. Parks & Trails New York looks forward to working with the Governor and Legislature to implement this transformative program.

Closing

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. Parks & Trails New York looks forward to working with the Senate, the Assembly and the administration to protect and preserving the legacy of our great park system, as well as strengthening the network of state and local parks, trails and greenway across the state.

