



Joint Legislative Public Hearing on the New York State Fiscal Year 2018-2019 Executive Budget Proposal

Alison Jenkins, Parks Program Director
February 7, 2018

Chairperson Young, Chairperson Weinstein, and distinguished members of the Senate and Assembly, thank you for the opportunity to present testimony today on behalf of Parks & Trails New York (PTNY). My name is Alison Jenkins and I am the Parks Program Director. 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, historic sites, trails and greenways for all New Yorkers for generations to come. Our network of dedicated park and trail supporters is nearly 40,000 strong.

I want to start by thanking members of the Senate and the Assembly for your solid and consistent support for New York's state park system. The Governor's Executive Budget Proposal for 2018-19 includes important funding for New York's park system, trails and shared greenspaces. We thank the Governor, and encourage support from the Senate and Assembly for \$90 million in capital funding for state parks and historic sites, and \$300 million for the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF), which includes \$500,000 for PTNY's Park and Trail Partnership Program (a capacity building grant program). These important programs create a legacy for generations to come, one that supports itself, as well as the economy, and shows a commitment to the environment, outdoor recreation and shared greenspaces.

Support Proposed \$90 Million for State Park Infrastructure Needs

We encourage the Legislature to include \$90 million in NY Parks 2020 capital funding for the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP) in the 2018-2019 budget, as proposed by the Governor. Thanks to the commitment of Governor Cuomo and the Legislature, for seven straight years, budgets have included significant capital funding for state parks to build and restore visitor centers, bath houses and other critical infrastructure and modernize the nation's oldest state park system. The more than \$500 million investment to-date is rejuvenating flagship parks, promoting healthy recreation and environmental education, restoring historic buildings and landmarks, improving storm resiliency, and engaging a new generation of park stewards. This investment of \$90 million in state parks infrastructure will strengthen the role state parks and historic sites play in sustainable economic development and tourism in communities across the state.

As part of the \$90 million, the Executive Budget Proposal includes \$15 million to build a new state park in Brooklyn’s Jamaica Bay. This 407 acre park will be the largest in New York City, and will include 3.5 miles of trails, dramatically increasing access to open space and recreation opportunities for the community. An additional \$50 million in capital funding will complete the Hudson River Park on Manhattan’s West Side. Originally supposed to be completed in 2005, this funding will leverage public-private partnerships and ensure that the Estuary Management Plan is complete.

Eight years ago the park system was in disrepair, after years of neglect. The cost to fix basic health and safety needs, such as drinking water, sewage treatment and electrical systems totaled \$461 million, and an additional \$595 million was needed to rehabilitate buildings, campgrounds, cabins, pools and shelters¹. This state of disrepair prompted Governor Cuomo to announce his NY Parks 2020 initiative, infusing \$900 million into the state park system over 10 years. We are seven years into this plan, with astounding results. Thanks to the influx of capital funds, New York State Parks such as Jones Beach and Niagara Falls have been transformed into world-class destinations for New York families and tourists alike.

This past year, Niagara Falls State Park received a \$7 million upgrade for the Cave of the Winds, part of a total investment in the park of \$70 million. The new facility will provide a year-round attraction at the park, and will extend the tourist season. It will also improve visitor experience by updating exhibits, and by eliminating long waits through timed ticketing.

As part of \$65 million in investments in Jones Beach State Park, upgrades in 2017 included \$8.8 million for reopening the Marine Dining Room and opening a new East Games Area. Other improvements this past year include restoring bus services to the park, and expanding cyclist and pedestrian access through the Jones Beach Shared Use Path.

These are just two of many examples of updates and improvements at state parks and historic sites. Additionally, this has brought billions of dollars to New York State’s economy through capital funds leveraged through private support, and increased tourism through 69 million visitors to state parks and historic sites.

New York State Parks—A 9-to-1 Return on Investment

We know that this investment in our shared natural, cultural and historical resources pays dividends. According to a study² commissioned by Parks & Trails New York, and released in the fall of 2017, the state park system generates \$5 billion in economic activity for the state and provides a 9-to-1 return on investment. It also showed that state parks create 45,000 jobs, exclusive of park employees, and that 21 percent of visitor spending—\$1.6 billion—comes from visitors living outside the communities in which the parks are located. These tourism dollars generated by parks are critical, especially to struggling Upstate communities.

¹ *New York State Parks in Crisis*, 2010, Parks & Trails New York and the Alliance for New York State Parks

²PERI: *Economic Benefits of the New York State Park System*. August 2017. Prepared for Parks & Trails New York.

Monetary benefits are not the only measurable benefits; additional positive impacts not reflected in the report's findings include the potential for increased property values for parcels close to parks, reducing pollution, mitigating the impacts of climate change, promoting health and wellness, and fostering a sense of community.

Fund OPRHP Operations at a Sustainable Level

We appreciate that OPRHP's operations budget has held steady, despite difficult fiscal situations. However, disproportionate cuts by prior administrations have left the agency on less than solid ground in terms of staffing and funding for every day operations. Although increased visitation has brought in additional revenue from user fees, the continued shrinking of General Fund support has wiped out potential gains.

Unlike many other agencies, OPRHP interacts with both New Yorkers in their communities, and tourists during their vacations. These park users see budget constraints first-hand, with fewer programs and workers (or fewer hours for workers), fewer park police, less maintenance, and fewer resources dedicated to natural resource protection, all directly impacting visitor experience. More visitors also mean greater wear and tear on facilities and increased pressure on park staff to keep up with visitor needs and safety. If visitors' expectations are not met, or if their experiences leave them dissatisfied, they are less likely to come back, or notice capital improvements.

With visitation now at more than 69 million, and state-of-the-art nature centers and other facilities being designed and built, there is a real opportunity to use state parks to provide education, guidance and inspiration to the public as to how we can best protect and enjoy our environment, tackle global problems like climate change, and celebrate our cultural and historic past. Plus, more programs mean more engaged visitors, resulting in longer stays, more frequent visits and a greater overall economic impact.

Investing in state parks has proven to provide significant return on investment, and targeted increases to support day-to-day operations will allow the agency to better fulfill its mission to provide accessible, quality outdoor recreation and open space to all New Yorkers and visitors to our state, and to be responsible stewards of our valuable natural, historical and cultural resources.

Support the Environmental Protection Fund at \$300 million

The Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) is a critical source of funding for protecting New York's water, land, 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. EPF programs improve communities in every county of the state and support more than 350,000 jobs across a spectrum of industries. All told, EPF-supported industries generate approximately \$40 billion every year and provide a 7-to-1 return on investment.

Thanks to the continued commitment of the Legislature, the EPF has experienced a few years of record-level appropriations and spending. After years of massive cuts and sweeps, this is a welcome change. We, like many of our partner organizations, applaud the Governor's commitment to a \$300 million EPF in his budget proposal. With legislative approval, this will continue New York's status as a national leader by ensuring the conservation of critical resources for future generations, while creating jobs and making our communities more resilient.

Parks & Trails New York is pleased to see continued funding proposed for state land stewardship, open space/land conservation, and the municipal park grants program. Funding for these categories will create and enhance public access to parks, repair recreational facilities like trails, campgrounds and boat launches, and expand opportunities for New Yorkers to enjoy the outdoors and appreciate nature, particularly in underserved communities.

One line item we are pleased to see is the Connect Kids initiative, which provides transportation to parks, nature and environmental education centers for children in K-12 education programs. This gives school kids the chance to experience nature and the environment, and also provides an opportunity to engage the next generation in the stewardship of our shared resources. We encourage you to continue to fund this initiative at \$1 million.

Include \$500,000 for the Park and Trail Partnership Program in the EPF

Thank you for including \$500,000 in the EPF for the Park and Trail Partnership Program for the past three years. The Park and Trail Partnership Program is a capacity-building grant program for the nonprofit Friends organizations that support, strengthen and improve access to state parks and historic sites. We ask that you continue that investment again this year.

Often, these local grassroots groups 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, perform maintenance and stewardship tasks, lead tours and provide educational programming, and promote public use and enjoyment of these sites through communications and special events.

This small investment will propel these organizations to a higher level of effectiveness, enabling groups to leverage more private and federal funding, and marshal more volunteer power, while providing synergy with the NY Parks 2020 plan. Their efforts will enhance stewardship of our wonderful state treasures, leading to even greater economic benefits from tourism and outdoor recreation, improved access to outdoor resources, and healthier, more sustainable and resilient communities.

We are proud to be administering this matching grant program in partnership with OPRHP and look forward to announcing the third round of grant awardees in March. This year's awardees will, for the first time, include both Friends of state parks and historic sites, as well as Friends groups associated with the Department of Environmental Conservation.

Grants awarded through this program include stewardship, capacity building and professional development projects. Friends groups have used funding to hire staff (sometimes for the first time ever) to support functions such as fundraising and programming. Stewardship projects run the gamut from painting the exteriors of buildings, to constructing and maintaining trails, to posting signs and kiosks to enhance visitor experience and education. Capacity building grants help Friends groups through training programs, website and other technical upgrades, program development, or strategic planning.

It is clear that there is significant need, interest and excitement about the Park and Trail Partnership Program and its potential to transform Friends organizations and, more important, their ability to steward state parks and historic sites. In the first two years of the program, requests far outweighed the amount available, and \$900,000 in grants leveraged \$480,000 in matching funds in parks and historic sites in every corner of the state.

Empire State Trail

Thank you for including \$200 million for the Empire State Trail in the 2017-18 state budget. When complete, this 750 mile continuous trail will be the longest in the country and will connect hundreds of communities across the state – from Manhattan to Canada and from Albany to Buffalo. We are pleased to see that expenses for out-years are included in the financial plan.

Dedicated Funding for Complete Streets

Parks & Trails New York wants New York State to be a leader in supporting active transportation options like biking and walking, which help achieve health and environmental goals. Unfortunately, New York State ranks last in terms of pedestrian and bicyclist safety. To address this, we encourage the creation of a dedicated funding stream for Complete Streets projects, including bike lanes, sidewalks, and multi-use trails. The state should protect New Yorkers who currently choose these emission-free transportation modes and encourage more to do so in the future. Biking and walking trips decrease our state's overall greenhouse gas emissions and advance New York's Climate Action Plan. Moreover, encouraging active transportation increases New Yorkers' health and well-being, and increasingly attracts financial investments. For example, nearly all of Amazon's HQ2 final contenders, including New York City, are rated bicycle-friendly communities.

Conclusion

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today. Parks & Trails New York looks forward to working with the Senate, the Assembly and the Governor to keep up the momentum for state parks, solidifying New York's conservation legacy, and strengthening the network of parks, trails and greenways across the state. These developments not only encourage stewardship of our shared green spaces, but have been proven to bolster the economy in New York State.

Decades of underfunding combined with the age and growing popularity of our park system have put tremendous stress on park infrastructure. Continuing to invest in the restoration and revitalization of New York's state parks and historic sites will enable these treasured places to more fully realize their potential as economic engines for local communities and as destinations for healthy outdoor recreation and open space for all New Yorkers.