



**OPEN SPACE
INSTITUTE
LAND TRUST**

Testimony Before the Joint Fiscal Committees
of the State Legislature on the FY2019-20 Budget

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Senate Finance Chair Kruger and Assembly Ways & Means Chair Weinstein, Chairs Kaminsky, Englebright, Serrano and O'Donnell, distinguished legislators – thank you for the opportunity to discuss Governor Cuomo's proposed budget as it relates to New York's state parks and the environment.

I am Kathy Moser, Vice President at the Open Space Institute and Executive Director of its Parks and Policy program. I am here today representing OSI for the first time. As you may know, my now former colleague Erik Kulleseid has been chosen by Governor Cuomo to be the next state parks commissioner.

While we will miss him greatly, we are proud and confident that he will serve the agency and the people of New York State with great skill, expertise, and professionalism.

OSI is among New York's leading land and park conservation nonprofits. As such, we are very grateful that with his budget proposal, Governor Cuomo is continuing his park revitalization initiative, improving recreational access, and maintaining a \$300 million EPF. We applaud the plastic bag ban and the bottle bill expansion, as well as his clean water infrastructure program – with a welcome emphasis on source water land conservation.

Regarding the plastic bag ban, we strongly encourage instituting a small fee on paper bags. Such a fee would further reduce waste and encourage shoppers to provide their own reusable bags. We also call for funds generated by a paper bag fee to be used to add much-needed staff at environmental agencies. OSI strongly believes that the EPF should be utilized for its original intended purposes. A fee on paper bags could supplement environmental agency staffing and protect the integrity of the EPF.

Throughout our 40-year history, OSI has conserved more than 148,000 acres in New York State. These conservation transactions achieve a variety of goals, including creating and expanding State Parks, Forests and Wildlife Refuges, expanding access to outdoor recreation, protecting water sources and mitigating the effects of climate change. Indeed, smart, effective land conservation is one of the most cost-effective ways to sequester carbon and absorb the effects of climate change.

OSI's overall effect on the state park system, alone, has been significant. Our conservation work accounts for more than 10 percent of the state park system's total acreage. Throughout the years we were instrumental in the creation of Sterling Forest and Schunnemunk state parks; have more than doubled the size of Minnewaska,

Fahnestock and Thacher State Parks; and are on track to triple the size of Moreau Lake state park in the Adirondack foothills.

OSI has also protected the southern hiking gateway to the Adirondack's High Peaks, and the shores of the Marion Carry, important to the annual 90-miler canoe paddle. On Long Island, we are protecting fragile coastal ecosystems.

With our parks program, OSI is extending its commitment to public enjoyment of parks through advocacy, private fundraising, and support of public-private endeavors that are adding to the revitalization of New York's magnificent state park system.

For example, OSI is partnering with New York State Parks to renovate the cultural center at Denny Farrell Riverbank State Park. OSI raised approximately \$1.2 million in private donations and public funding to upgrade the popular park centerpiece which serves as a cultural and arts hub in West Harlem.

Having helped to create and expand the state's parks and, today, working to improve the overall visitor experience, we enthusiastically welcome the governor's continued leadership in improving and upgrading state parks through his NY Parks 2020 program.

We are extraordinarily grateful to the governor and the legislature for the renaissance that is underway throughout the system. The Times Union ran a story, in the Sunday, January 20th edition, on the record tourism expected in NY in 2019. New Yorkers and tourists are loving our parks and that is a great thing for communities and local businesses throughout the state. Similarly, we are happy to support its sister program benefitting DEC properties – Adventure NY.

While we applaud the governor for his conservation vision and bold actions, we remain concerned over the lack of sufficient staff at NYS Parks and DEC. The urgency to protect our parks and environment should be extended to funding for agency staff. The greatest opportunity for success of the cutting-edge proposals advanced by the governor relies on a steady workforce that will carry out the work.

I am also eager to express enthusiasm for another year of a \$300 million EPF, particularly with the myriad of pressures being placed on the state budget from the failings of Washington DC. 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.

Four categories of particular interest to us within the EPF are the Open Space Acquisition funding line, the Municipal Matching Grants pool, the State Land Stewardship Fund and the NYS Parks and Trail Partnership Grant Program. These are important initiatives aimed at expanding and buffering our protected lands, bolstering local and nonprofit park projects, caring for the natural resources within state parks and forests, and strengthening state park friends – and we urge your continued support for each of these items.

Still, I call your attention to an area of concern within the EPF that requires some scrutiny. OSI is concerned that the proposed amount for land acquisition is reduced – from \$35 million to \$32 million. While this reduction can be partly attributed to a reduced volume of land projects in agency pipelines, OSI is concerned about gaps in line staff available to efficiently move open space conservation projects.

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 and for the work you do to advance the cause of protecting and enhancing New York's precious environmental and recreational resources.

