



## Joint Legislative Public Hearing on the New York State Fiscal Year 2019-2020 Executive Budget Proposal

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Chairperson Krueger, 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 Sarah Braymer 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 2019-2020 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 \$110 million in capital funding for state parks and historic sites, and \$300 million for the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF), which includes \$1 million for the Park and Trail Partnership Program, a capacity building grant program for grassroots Friends groups. 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 \$110 Million for State Park Infrastructure Needs**

We encourage the Legislature to include \$110 million in NY Parks 2020 capital funding for the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP) in the 2019-2020 budget, as proposed by the Governor. Thanks to the commitment of Governor Cuomo and the Legislature, for eight straight years, budgets have included significant capital funding for state parks to build and restore visitor centers, bathroom facilities and other critical infrastructure and modernize the nation's oldest state park system. The more than \$700 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 \$110 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 \$110 million, the Executive Budget Proposal includes \$20 million to complete Phase 2 of the Shirley Chisholm State Park. This new 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.

In 2010 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 shelters<sup>1</sup>. 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 eight years into this plan, with astounding results.

This investment has brought billions of dollars to New York State's economy through capital funds leveraged through private support, and increased tourism through 71 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 study<sup>2</sup> 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 shows 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.

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 this visitors 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.

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

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

With visitation now at more than 71 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. The commitment to protect our parks and environment should be extended to funding for agency staff, who will be relied on to carry out this important work. Plus, more programs mean more engaged visitors, resulting in longer stays, more frequent visits and thus a greater overall economic impact

We support the proposal in the Executive Budget to set up Parks Enterprise Fund accounts to account for and keep separate revenues from golf operations and gift shops, which are essentially self-sustaining businesses. By setting up these separate accounts, golfers will essentially be paying directly for golf course improvements. Likewise, purchasing merchandise for gift shops will be taken out of the pool of park funds and won't be competing with more basic and essential operational expenses.

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 several 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.

We are pleased to see continued funding for 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. Since 2016, the program has awarded 2,344 field trip grants and has served over 108,000 public school students. We encourage you to continue to fund this initiative at \$1 million.

### **Include \$1 million for the Park and Trail Partnership Program in the EPF**

The Executive Budget includes an increase to \$1 million for the NYS Park and Trail Partnership Program, a capacity-building grants program for grassroots organizations that support, strengthen and improve the state's parks, trails, historic sites and public lands. By doubling the amount of available funds, this competitive grants program will enable State Parks and Department of Environmental Conservation Friends groups to expand their impact and strengthen the state's outdoor heritage of public-private partnership.

Often, these grassroots Friends 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 and Adventure NY plans. 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.

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). Stewardship projects run the gamut from painting the exteriors of buildings, to constructing and maintaining trails, to developing programs for youth. Capacity building grants help Friends groups through training programs, website and other technical upgrades, program development, and 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 importantly, their ability to steward state parks and historic sites. To date, 60 grants totaling \$1.4 million have been awarded, with funds going toward innovative educational programs, capital projects, and capacity-building undertakings, and these grants have leveraged more than \$585,000 in private investment. We are proud to be administering this matching grant program in partnership with OPRHP and look forward to announcing the fourth round of grant awardees in March. We respectfully ask that you support the increase in the Park and Trail Partnership Program to \$1 million which will enable state park and DEC Friends groups to support and strengthen the state's legacy of outdoor recreation and shared greenspaces.

### **Trails and Active Transportation**

We appreciate the Governor and the Legislature's ongoing support of the Empire State Trail. When complete in 2020, this 750-mile trail will be the envy of every other state in the country, connecting communities from Manhattan to the Canadian border and from Albany to Buffalo. This trail will bring economic, environmental and health benefits to people across the state, and will build upon the Erie Canalway Trail's already stellar international reputation.

However, now is the time to start thinking about what comes next for the state's recreational trail network. New York needs a coordinated, statewide plan to guide future investments in multi-use trails

and dedicated state funding for ongoing development and regular maintenance to support and build on the economic boon brought by trails.

Additionally, New York State needs to be a leader in supporting active transportation options like biking and walking, which help achieve health and environmental goals. The state should protect New Yorkers who choose emission-free transportation modes and encourage more to do so in the future.

Unfortunately, the state is last in the nation in terms of pedestrian and bicyclist safety. To address this, we encourage the expansion of the state Complete Streets law to include maintenance and resurfacing projects and adoption of a 3 foot passing standard for overtaking cyclists.

#### **Bottle Bill Expansion and Plastic Bag Ban**

Parks & Trails New York supports efforts to reduce the negative environmental impact of plastic bottles and single-use plastic bags. These plastic products have polluted our parks, trails and waterways for decades and efforts are needed to reduce their usage and encourage recycling efforts, making New York greener for all. Expanding the current bottle redemption law to include additional types of plastic containers will help reduce plastic refuse levels and increase waste diversion rates. Plastic bags are not biodegradable and require greenhouse gas emissions from cradle-to-grave, posing long-term threats to health and to the environment.

#### **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.