



Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation

ANDREW M. CUOMO
Governor

ERIK KULLESEID
Commissioner

Testimony before the Joint Budget Hearing of the State Legislature on the FY 2020-21 Executive Budget

Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation
Commissioner Erik Kulleseid
January 27, 2020

Good Afternoon, Chairwoman Krueger, Chairwoman Weinstein, Senator Serrano, Assemblyman O'Donnell and distinguished members of the State Legislature. Thank you for inviting me to discuss Governor Cuomo's Executive Budget proposal.

I am honored to be here today representing Governor Cuomo on behalf of the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation. And, mind you, it is no small perk to be here during daylight hours, in contrast to past years when doing lonely evening testimony as advocate!

I believe I have the best job in state government, overseeing New York's 250 state parks, historic sites, golf courses, boat launches and recreational trails, visited by more than 74 million people each year. In a time of too much division, parks and public lands are our common ground. They are the lands, refuges, open spaces that belong to us all.

The Executive Budget provides for excellent stewardship for the lands entrusted to our care. It provides stable funding to maintain core agency functions – including 22 new park-level staff for maintenance and safety – continues the Environmental Protection Fund at its historic high, proposes a \$3 billion bond act for environmental projects, and provides \$110 million for our capital budget.

The capital allocation will continue the Governor's NY Parks 2020 initiative to reverse decades of decline and neglect in our parks, and transform and modernize them for the 21st century. While there is still much more to do, we have made amazing progress. Since the Governor launched this historic investment with your support, we have initiated more than 900 improvement projects across the state, completed more than \$1 billion in work with public and private funds, and built visitorship by 35 percent. Some highlights from last year include:

- Completing a \$100 million transformation of Roberto Clemente State Park in the South Bronx.
- Opening the largest state park in New York City, named after civil rights pioneer Shirley Chisholm.
- Opening Camp Junior in Harriman State Park.
- Revitalizing the marina at Sampson State Park; opening a new visitor center at the Walkway Over the Hudson State Historic Park, and revitalizing the amphitheater at the Saratoga Performing Arts Center.

This year, New York will also launch Restore Mother Nature, the nation's most aggressive program for habitat restoration, open space protection and flood reduction, funded in part by a \$3 billion environmental bond act. The initiative is crucial to the stewardship of our state park system, which encompasses more than 300 miles of shoreline along the Great Lakes, Atlantic Ocean and tidal estuaries. Significantly, the bond act would fund two new state parks – a 508-acre former quarry in Kingston offering dramatic Hudson River views, and an extraordinary restoration opportunity; and Hudson Eagles State Recreation Area that would upgrade five state boat launches to

create better water access between Albany and Hudson. If you've ever spotted eagles out the river side of a New York to Albany Amtrak train, you've seen this area.

The Governor's response to climate change also includes a proposed Solar Energy Corps to train young New Yorkers to build solar energy arrays and install solar energy equipment at State Park and DEC facilities. This will save operating dollars, provide green training to young students from underserved communities and support our goal of making our parks 50 percent electric energy neutral by 2025.

By fully funding the EPF, the Executive Budget will enhance our stewardship and protection of the State's natural and cultural resources; and connect parks and people with more education and access. This year's budget increases EPF funding for the very successful "Connect Kids" program, an initiative to bring more youth to our parks, and create the next generation of environmental stewards. Since 2016, approximately 295,000 students have visited state parks, historic sites and DEC facilities thanks to the program, with a 30 percent increase in 2019.

The budget includes EPF funding to continue the successful Friends Groups Capacity Grants program, providing grants to friends groups that support state parks, historic sites and DEC lands. A survey by Parks & Trails New York found our 76 friends groups in one year raised more than \$17 million for the state park system through individual and corporate contributions, grants, programs, and more; attracted an estimated \$3.2 million in volunteer labor, and hosted on average 35 programs annually which brought in nearly 700,000 visitors.

We are nearing completion of the Empire State Trail, a 750-mile bicycling and walking trail spanning New York State. State Parks, the Hudson River Valley Greenway, and many state and local government partners are undertaking 60 construction projects to complete the trail by this coming December, 2020.

Our Division for Historic Preservation leads the nation in the number and diversity of historic preservation listings; In 2019, we added nearly 4800 properties across 28 counties to the National Register of Historic Places, qualifying them for the New York State Rehabilitation Tax Credit program and state and federal grant programs. New York State leads the nation in encouraging private investment in revitalization of historic buildings. In total, since 2011 the program has incentivized more than \$6.5 billion in historic resource redevelopment, upstate and downstate alike.

State Parks is looking forward to a momentous year in 2020. We will:

- Complete the second phases of Shirley Chisholm State Park and Camp Junior;
- Open new visitor centers at Minnewaska State Park Preserve and the Purple Heart Hall of Honor;
- Cut the ribbon on the Jones Beach Energy and Nature Center; and
- Open the reconfigured main entrance to Niagara Falls State Park from the city of Niagara Falls.

I do encourage you to come out and visit our state parks in the coming year, and to see in person the amazing public service we provide. On summer weekends, many of our parks fill to capacity with family picnics, high spirits on the playgrounds, splashing in the waves, and laughter beside the campfire.

Thank you for your support for New York's magnificent natural and historic places – and the millions of people who benefit from them. I look forward to working with you in the coming year to make the park system the best it can be.