



Joint Legislative Public Hearing on the New York State Fiscal Year 2021 Executive Budget Proposal

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Chairperson Kaminsky, Chairperson Englebright, 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 Will Coté and I am the Parks Program Director. In 1985, Parks & Trails New York was founded to support the state park system, and in the 35 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 2020-2021 includes important funding for New York's park system, trails and shared greenspaces. We thank the Governor, and encourage continued 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 in Capital Funding 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 FY 2021 budget, as proposed by the Governor. Thanks to the commitment of Governor Cuomo and the Legislature, for nine straight years, budgets have included significant capital funding for state parks to build and restore visitor centers, bathroom facilities and other critical infrastructure and revitalize modernize the nation's oldest state park system. The more than \$800 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. The proposed \$110 million investment in state parks infrastructure will continue to strengthen the role state parks and historic sites play in sustainable economic development and tourism in communities across the state.

This investment has brought billions of dollars to New York State's economy through capital funds leveraged through private support, and increased tourism. A record-setting 79 million visits were recorded at state parks and historic sites in 2018, and we expect 2019's figures to be even higher. Now nine years into Governor Cuomo's NY Parks 2020 initiative, our parks have seen astounding results and we applaud the Governor's and Legislature's continued commitment to ensuring our parks are vibrant and engaging resources for residents and visitors alike.

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 study¹ 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.

With visitation at record levels, 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.

¹PERI: *Economic Benefits of the New York State Park System*. August 2017. Prepared for Parks & Trails New York.

We are very pleased to see the support the Governor's proposed addition of 22 new Full-Time equivalent staff for the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation in the Executive Budget. It's a great first step to restoring the Parks operations budget to a more sustainable level. While visitation levels are reaching unprecedented levels at parks and historic sites across the state, staffing resources have not kept pace, leaving an increasingly stretched agency to do more with less funding. Adding these FTE's would help Parks staff continue to provide the world-class outdoor recreation opportunities that New York has become world-renowned for. We strongly encourage the Legislature to support this essential investment.

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

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 an important change. While we appreciate the commitment to a \$300 million EPF, we hope that the budget situation in years to come will allow for the continued growth of this essential funding source. . New York must continue to use all of our available resources to ensure 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.

Parks & Trails New York continues to believe that EPF funds should not be used to expand New York State agency staffing; rather focusing these crucial funds into projects and initiatives that will protect our natural environment, ensure clean air and clean water are available, and provide New Yorkers with the opportunity to connect with and develop an appreciation for the great outdoors. We thank the Legislature for your past commitment to prevent this use of funding and ask that this continues in the future, ensuring that additional staffing is provided through agency funds instead of this crucial resource for our natural environment.

We are pleased to see expanded funding proposed 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 children 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 approve this proposed funding expansion to \$2 million, ensuring that even more young people are exposed to the beauty of nature and importance of conservation of our state's resources.

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

The Executive Budget maintains \$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. This competitive grants program will continue to 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. 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. Two examples of successful grant-funded projects include:

- The Friends of Minna Anthony Common Nature Center, located in the Thousand Islands region, which used their award to construct two new, state-of-the-art exhibits which highlight Minna Anthony Common's contributions in the nature center, along with an interactive trail map exhibit which details the 13 nature trails on site
- The Friends of Ganondagan, located in the Finger Lakes region, used award funds to create interpretive and educational programming that offered visitors a taste of traditional Haudenosaunee food through a series of programs within their Iroquois While Corn Experience. These innovative programs resulted in a 15% increase in membership, as well as an increase in volunteer participation

It is clear that the Park and Trail Partnership Program has the ability to transform Friends organizations and, more importantly, their ability to steward state parks and historic sites. Since 2015, 83 grants totaling \$1.8 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.

As we look forward to announcing the fifth round of awardees in March, we recognize the value and importance this opportunity has for grassroots groups; this round saw a record 53 applications, nearly double the number received in prior years. Moreover, a total of nearly \$2 million was requested by groups, despite the \$1 million budget for awardees. This record volume of requests demonstrates the

effectiveness of the program, which is why we are proud to be administering this matching grant program in partnership with OPRHP and DEC, and look forward to supporting and strengthen the state's legacy of outdoor recreation and shared greenspaces.

Restore Mother Nature Bond Act

We were excited to see the Governor's proposed \$3 Billion Restore Mother Nature Bond Act. We hope that the Legislature will approve the proposal to put the issue before voters this November. If approved by the voters, this important infusion of funding will help ensure that our natural environment is resilient in the face of climate change. Funding will help preserve open space, conserve forested areas and create exciting new outdoor recreational opportunities for New Yorkers; while simultaneously revitalizing New York's waterways, increasing resilience to flooding threats and restoring wetlands to enhance fish and wildlife habitats.

We are extremely excited that the proposal for the bond act includes funding for the establishment of two new State Parks. The investment of \$152 million would allow for the establishment of a new park on formerly industrial land in Kingston and a linear, water-based park along the Hudson River from Rensselaer to Hudson. These new protected resources will not only create recreational opportunities for future generations to enjoy, but also help increase storm resiliency and enhance the historic Hudson River corridor. Additionally, the acquisition of over 4,000 additional acres of land to enhance seven existing parks will ensure that these pristine natural environments are preserved for future generations.

Reimagine the Canals

Parks & Trails New York also commends the Governor's plan to execute The *Reimagine the Canals* Task Force report, which lays out an ambitious plan to repurpose the canalway corridor for the 21st century, but one with the potential to have a transformative impact on the upstate economy. Through an investment of \$300 million over the course of 5 years, The *Reimagine* proposal will build on the success of the Empire State Trail to connect communities in a sustainable, resilient manner that celebrates our state's history and environmental diversity, while also investing in the economic wellbeing of those communities.

Trails and Active Transportation

We appreciate the Governor and the Legislature's ongoing support of the Empire State Trail. When completed this year, this 750-mile trail will be the envy of every other state in the country, connecting communities from New York City north through the Hudson Valley and the Adirondacks to the Canadian border and from the state capital in Albany west along the historic Erie Canal corridor to the shores of Lake Erie in Buffalo. This trail will bring economic, environmental and health benefits to people across the state.

Now is the time to plan for what comes next for the state's recreational trail network. Last session, the legislation that directs the state to complete a coordinated, statewide plan to guide future investments in multi-use trails was passed by both houses and signed into law that directs the state to complete a coordinated, statewide plan to guide future investments in multi-use trails. Parks & Trails New York is looking forward to working with OPRHP to ensure that this Greenways Plan lays out a vision for a statewide trail network that connects communities in a manner accessible to all residents and visitors, serving as an economic development engine while improving public health.

Without dedicated, ongoing state support, however, the plan will not deliver upon its great promise. We need to ensure that dedicated state funding is made available for ongoing development and regular maintenance to support and build on the economic boon brought by trails. We encourage the

Legislature to provide funding for trail development and enhancement as part of either a future expansion of the Environmental Protection Fund or as part of the proposed Restore Mother Nature Bond Act.

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 has much still to do to ensure that all roadway users are able to do so safely. To address our significant shortcomings in pedestrian and bicyclist safety, we encourage the expansion of the state Complete Streets law to include maintenance and resurfacing projects.

Styrofoam Ban

Parks & Trails New York supports efforts to reduce the negative environmental impact of Styrofoam single-use packaging. These products have polluted our parks, trails and waterways for decades and efforts are needed to reduce their usage, making New York greener for all. Styrofoam is not biodegradable and requires 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.