



Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation

ANDREW M. CUOMO
Governor

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Commissioner

Testimony before the Joint Budget Hearing of the State Legislature on the FY 2021-22 Executive Budget

**Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation
Commissioner Erik Kulleseid
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Good morning, 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. My agency oversees New York's 250 state parks, historic sites, golf courses, boat launches and recreational trails. These facilities are essential to societal health and well-being for people from all communities – perhaps never more so than during the past year.

Amid widespread fear and uncertainty at the onset of the COVID pandemic, Governor Cuomo saw the need to keep State Parks open so New Yorkers could find a measure of relief from the crisis. Our parks and -- our incomparable parks staff -- welcomed a record 78 million visitors, while implementing an array of new health and safety measures and playing key roles in the statewide COVID response effort. Several parks are hosting COVID testing and vaccination sites, and 350 State Parks employees volunteered to serve on COVID response missions. This occurred as we experienced a surge in visitation throughout the year as the shutdowns left many people with more free time and fewer things to do. The record attendance follows nine years of steady visitor growth and represents an overall increase of 34 percent since 2011.

We expect this robust visitation to continue in 2021, and the Executive Budget provides a solid foundation to address the challenges ahead. It provides stable funding to maintain core agency functions, continues the Environmental Protection Fund at its historic high, and provides \$110 million for capital projects. However, it's crucial that the federal government delivers the assistance New York State needs to fully fund the budget proposals.

Fortunately, we've made progress over the last decade to welcome the surging number of visitors to our parks. The Governor's NY Parks 2020 initiative has invested \$1.25 billion since 2011 in more than 800 projects across more than 200 facilities. Even with the COVID challenges, we made far-reaching enhancements to outdoor recreation this year, including.

- Completing the second phase of Shirley Chisholm State Park
- Opening new visitor centers at Minnewaska State Park Preserve and the Purple Heart Hall of Honor;
- Cutting the ribbon on the Jones Beach Energy and Nature Center
- Opening the Empire State Trail, a 750-mile bicycling and walking trail spanning New York State

To build on this momentum, the Governor has proposed NY Parks 100, a \$440 million capital investment over four years to mark the centennial of the State Parks Act in 2024. This investment will focus on addressing overcrowding, promoting visitation by underserved communities, enhancing local recreation and tourism, and protecting environmental and historic assets.

Additionally, this year New York will make the next great public pier in Hudson River Park a reality. Located west of the Javits Center and 36th Street, the State will transform Pier 76 from a NYPD car impound to a 5.6-acre expansion of Hudson River Park. In the short term, it can become a magnificent public space while the Hudson River Park Trust develops plans for the Pier's long-term future.

This past year also underscored that much work remains in ensuring equality for all. The great outdoors and New York's State parks and historic sites belong to all New Yorkers and should reflect the diversity of our culture — to ensure that all feel welcome enjoying our natural world, but also to tell the full story of our history. Renovations this year will dramatically improve the experience of visitors to Marsha P. Johnson State Park in Brooklyn, dedicated to honor the LGBTQ+ civil rights activist. We're excited to launch the "Our Whole History" Initiative to ensure that our historic sites tell the untold stories that reflect the true diversity of our history.

In 2021, we will designate the first New York State Historic Site dedicated to Black history by reprogramming Philipse Manor Hall State Historic Site in Yonkers to become a museum and cultural site for educating the public about the 400-hundred-year experience of African Americans in New York. The museum will include exhibits on enslavement, the Underground Railroad, emancipation, the Great Migration, and the civil rights movement, and it will celebrate the countless ways in which African Americans have contributed to our shared culture. In addition, we will expand our work to tell the untold stories of Indian nations and indigenous cultures residing in New York.

As part of our work to create experiences that everyone can enjoy, we will open the Autism Nature Trail at Letchworth State Park, a public-private partnership to create a unique experience in nature. This trail invites those with Autism Spectrum Disorder and other developmental disabilities to push boundaries, explore outdoor activities, and develop new skills.

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. The EPF includes funding for such programs as the "Connect Kids" program, an initiative to bring more youth to our parks and the Friends Groups Capacity Grants program, providing grants to friends groups that support state parks.

As always, I welcome you to visit our state parks in the coming year, and to see in person the amazing public service we provide. 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.