



## Joint Legislative Public Hearing on the New York State Fiscal Year 2022 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 on behalf of Parks & Trails New York (PTNY). My name is Will Coté and I am the Parks Program Director. Since our founding in 1985, PTNY has been fighting to improve our health, economy, and quality of life through the use and enjoyment of green space. With the support of our members and supporters, as well as advocates and partners from across the state, PTNY champions the protection and enhancement of New York's magnificent state park system and multi-use trail network, ensuring all New Yorkers have access to the outdoors, for generations to come.

I want to start by thanking members of the Senate and the Assembly for your firm and consistent support for New York's state park system. The Governor's Executive Budget Proposal for 2021-2022 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, historic sites, and the Empire State Trail through the NY Parks 100 initiative, \$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, and \$75 million in outdoor recreation and environmental protection at the Department of Environmental Conservation. These important programs create a legacy for generations to come that shows a commitment to the environment, public health 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 100 capital funding for the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP) in the FY 2022 budget, as proposed by the Governor. Thanks to the commitment of Governor Cuomo and the Legislature, for ten straight years, budgets have included significant capital funding for state parks to build and restore visitor centers, bathroom facilities and other critical infrastructure to renew the nation's oldest state park system. The NY Parks 2020 program leveraged more than \$1.2 billion in public and private funds to revitalize more than 900 improvement projects in over 200 parks, trails, and historic sites across New York State.

This new opportunity for continued investment comes at a crucial time when our public lands are experiencing record visitation, as residents from across our state seek solace and opportunities for

physical activity in the wake of the COVID-19 public health crisis. As our parks and trails have proven to be a critical aspect of our public health infrastructure, the pandemic has highlighted the need for additional investment to create places where we can recreate locally, relieve overcrowded parks, welcome new visitors, and protect New York State’s environmental and historic legacy— all key aspects of the proposed NY 100 initiative. The funding will also support the state’s historic investment in the Empire State Trail by ensuring that all parts of the trail are well-maintained and can function as high-quality recreation facilities.

### **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>1</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 cited 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.

### **Support the Environmental Protection Fund**

The Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) is more than simply a critical source of funding to protect New York’s precious natural resources and achieve climate resiliency, it is a sound investment in an environmentally just economic recovery, which is fundamental to the health of our communities. This is why we ask the Legislature to maintain the EPF at \$300 million and continue to show our state’s understanding and appreciation of the value of parks, open space and climate adaptation.

The 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 businesses generate approximately \$40 billion every year and provide a 7-to-1 return on investment. New York must continue to use all of its 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 and land conservation, parks and recreation, 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 those in underserved communities.

We are happy to see continued funding for the Connect Kids initiative and encourage you to further this program, which has provided transportation to parks, nature and environmental education centers to more than 300,000 students in K-12 education programs, at \$2 million. This gives school children—

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

particularly those in Title I communities—the chance to experience nature and creates an opportunity to engage the next generation in the stewardship of our shared resources.

Programs such as Connect Kids, coupled with other initiatives led by State Parks, including the First-Time Camper program and Vital Brooklyn, are helping to ensure that our public lands and historic sites are welcoming and accessible for all New Yorkers. These will be furthered by the proposed “Our Whole History” Initiative which tells the untold stories that reflect the true diversity of our history, particularly those of Black communities and indigenous cultures. At a time when social and racial justice is being reexamined, fostering opportunities for education about traditionally overlooked stories of our multiracial history are important investments.

### **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 100 and Adventure NY initiatives. Their efforts will enhance stewardship of our 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, significantly increasing the positive impact Friends can have on the state parks and historic sites they steward. Since 2015, 111 grants totaling \$2.7 million have been awarded, with funds going toward innovative educational programs, capital projects, and capacity-building undertakings. These grants have leveraged more than \$1.5 million in private investment, which has directly benefitted park communities.

As we look forward to announcing the sixth round of awardees in June, we recognize the value and importance this opportunity has for grassroots groups; our previous round saw 53 applications, extending the trend of a record number of submissions. Moreover, a total of nearly \$2 million was requested by groups, despite the \$1 million budget for awardees. This 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.

### **Fund OPRHP Operations at a Sustainable Level**

We appreciate that OPRHP’s operations budget has held relatively steady, despite difficult fiscal situations. Unlike many other agencies, OPRHP interacts with both New Yorkers in their communities and tourists during their travels and the agency has also played a vital role in our state’s response to the

COVID-19 pandemic, putting staff on the front lines as essential workers. The park users who have been relying on our public lands for refuge see the results of 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 the visitor 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.

Investing in state parks has proven to provide significant return on investment, and maintaining adequate support for day-to-day operations will allow the agency to better fulfill its mission to provide accessible, quality outdoor recreation, environmental education 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.

### **Greenway Trails Network**

We congratulate the Governor and all involved agencies on the successful completion of the Empire State Trail. With an anticipated 8.6 million annual users, this mega trail provides additional outdoor recreation opportunities and offers economic, environmental and health benefits to people across the state. Parks & Trails New York looks forward to building off this momentum by leading efforts to further develop our statewide trail network, cementing New York's position as the nation's leader in multi-use, greenway trails. While New York's trail network has seen tremendous growth over the past 20 years, there are still many communities and regions of the state, including Long Island, that are significantly underserved by greenway trails. As the pandemic has underscored the importance of our parks, trails, and open space, we must continue to protect and enhance these valuable assets and treat them as an essential part of our public health infrastructure.

The Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, in partnership with PTNY, recently released a draft Statewide Greenway Trails Plan that provides a framework to expand and enhance New York's network of greenway trails by identifying and prioritizing new connections while providing information and resources for effective future development. While the final plan will be released in the spring of this year, a process to fully implement the goals and recommendations is still unclear. Without dedicated, ongoing state support, the plan cannot deliver upon its great promise. We need to ensure that dedicated state funding is made available for ongoing trail development and regular maintenance to support and build on the economic boon brought by greenway trails.

### **Conclusion**

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide testimony 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 and public lands, solidifying New York's conservation legacy, and strengthening the network of parks, trails and open spaces 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.