

UNIVERSITY POLICE | ENCON POLICE



PARK POLICE | FOREST RANGERS

January 25, 2022

Good morning/Afternoon/Evening Madame Chairwomen and respected members of the panel,

My name is Troy Caupain, and I am the Director of the Park Police Officers Association within the PBA of New York State, a law enforcement union representing the State Park Police, State University Police and the Environmental Conservation Officers and Forest Rangers of the Department of Environmental Conservation. You will hear from my colleagues in these agencies over the coming weeks during their budget testimony, but today my testimony will focus on New York state's oldest state law enforcement agency the New York State Park Police which has served and protected New York's state parks and visitors since 1885.

I am a 22-year veteran of the Park Police and am here today on behalf of our 192 Park Police members statewide. Our 192 members protect 235 state parks from Montauk to Niagara Falls which are utilized by an average of 75 million visitor per year. The numbers have increased greatly due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the demands on our officers are greater than ever.

For the past several years our Park Police have operated under a dark cloud, kept in a state of limbo by a reckless Cuomo administration policy that prevented academy classes, hiring to offset attrition, transfers and promotions. This has created a vicious circle that accelerated our loses to the point that our staffing levels are down by 50% with more officers leaving our agency every month. Throughout this time the state legislature on both sides of the aisle have been stalwart allies and we thank you. Your support, and the positive and constructive approach to public safety undertaken by Governor Hochul's administration, give us hope that the Park Police cannot only be saved but restored to its former glory so that we can ensure the safety of the millions of people who visit our parks each year.

Two years ago, I addressed this panel after former Governor Cuomo, along with his former State Operations Director, announced a policy in December of 2019 that gave operational control of the Park Police to the New York State Troopers. The order spoke of a transition of Park Police members to the State Police. The order treated duly sworn, highly trained and experienced Park Police Officers with statewide jurisdiction as if they were rookies fresh out of the academy. This destroyed morale and created a vicious cycle of attrition with dedicated officers retiring or transferring to state and municipal agencies that treated officers with respect and fairly compensated them for their service and sacrifice.

Fortunately the state legislature pushed back in April of 2020 when it rejected legislation that would have initiated the transition of the Park Police to the State Police by not including it in 2021 State Budget -

effectively voiding the entire transition. The members of the Park Police thank you for this decisive action which has allowed us to continue to push for the staffing, compensation and retirement equity needed to complete our mission and provide our officers with the financial security to raise their families in the communities they love.

Over the last several months with the help of our champions in the State Legislature, Park Police members, and their families, we have brought much needed attention on the mismanagement and neglect of the Park Police resulting from the Cuomo era policies. We are happy to report this past Friday, January 21, 2022, the Office of Parks Recreation and Historic Preservation signaled a welcome and long-overdue change in policy thanks to the leadership of Governor Hochul.

OPRHP announced that in the Fall of 2022 the Park Police will offer their first academy class since 2019, with new Park Police Officers slated to join the ranks in the Spring of 2023. According to OPRHP, Governor Hochul's budget proposal includes enough financial support for the agency to begin hiring and training new Park Police Officers. With the leadership of our allies in the state legislature we are hopeful that an agreement can be reached within the state budget to provide clarity to the funding to ensure monies are earmarked specifically to meet the recruitment, training, retention and equipment needs of our officers.

In addition to these administrative changes, the Park Police are committed to securing enhanced compensation and benefits to retain our highly trained and specialized officers. This would include the 20-year retirement initiative, which passed both houses last session, to put our officers on par with the New York State Park Police and 97% of municipal officers throughout New York -- and geographic differential pay to take into account the cost of living and raising a family in Downstate regions.

Governor Hochul signaled her support for our 20 year retirement bill (S.4523 / A.6457 of 2021) but indicated that it must be addressed as part of the state budget process. See Veto Message 87 of 2021. We look forward to working with the state legislature and the Hochul Administration to achieve the compensation our officers deserve within the framework of the budget.

We have also respectfully requested that Governor Hochul formally rescind former Governor Cuomo's disastrous policy from 2019 that was clearly designed to eliminate our agency and would have the result of placing lives and precious natural resources at risk. By officially rescinding this policy Governor Hochul will signal a strong commitment to our members and the public we know she cares deeply about.

On behalf of my fellow officers in the Park Police and all of our members of the PBA of New York State I thank you for this opportunity to present our priorities and concerns, but most importantly our heartfelt thanks to the state legislature and Governor Hochul who have ushered in a new era of respect and civility that has long been absent from Albany due to the previous administration. Together we have the opportunity to create a new day for our venerable agency rather than witness its sunset.

Attachments:

2019 Executive Memorandum

Downstate geographic-OPRHP 11/2019

Commissioner's Memorandum dated 1/21/22

20-Year Retirement Bill S4523/A6457 (21)