



State Parks Commissioner Erik Kulleseid's Testimony at the Joint Legislative Budget Hearing - Environmental Conservation

Good morning, Chairmember Krueger, Chairmember Weinstein, Senator Serrano, Assemblymember O'Donnell and members of the State Legislature. Thanks for inviting me to appear today.

I'm honored to represent Governor Hochul on behalf of our state park system, which includes 250 state parks, historic sites, golf courses, boat launches, and recreational trails. Your longstanding support for our operational and capital funding has benefitted so many New Yorkers. We continue to modernize and improve our facilities and programming in every corner of the state.

And our visitors are noticing what's happening thanks to this support. We hosted a record 79 million visitors in 2022, reflecting more than a decade of solid attendance growth.

The Governor's proposed budget for the agency will help us welcome these visitors, play a positive role in local economies, and address the challenges of a changing climate. The proposal includes \$200 million in capital funding to invest in enhancing and improving state parks. This substantial level of funding will continue the ongoing transformation of New York's flagship parks, support critical infrastructure projects, and help meet Governor Hochul's goal to power all of our facilities with renewable energy by 2030.

Let me give you just some of the highlights of how we have deployed these resources last year.

- Opening of the new Sojourner Truth State Park in Kingston, our first new State Park since 2019,
- Completing our first Hudson Eagles project in Coxsackie, enhancing access to the Hudson River,
- Transforming Marsha P. Johnson State Park in Brooklyn,
- Improving access and upgrading natural and engineered stormwater management infrastructure at Hempstead Lake State Park on Long Island,
- Rehabilitating 17 miles of the Genesee Valley Greenway from Rochester to Avon with funding from DOT and a foundation,
- Reopening the Philipse Manor Hall State Historic Site following the largest investment in a historic site in our history – a part of our commitment to more fully tell the story of the diversity of our state. I was grateful to be joined at the opening by Governor Hochul, Senate Majority Leader Stewart-Cousins, Assembly Parks Committee Chair Danny O'Donnell, Senator Shelly Mayer, and Assemblymembers Gary Pretlow and Nader Sayegh.

And more work is in the pipeline, including major investments in Niagara Falls State Park, Denny Farrell Riverbank State Park in Harlem, the Olana State Historic Site in the Hudson Valley, and John Jay Homestead State Historic Site in Westchester County.

It takes a dedicated and committed team to make such work possible, and I am grateful that the executive budget proposal enhances our agency workforce to support a new and expanded Park Police Academy class, the Environmental Bond Act, the Empire State Trail, park administration and site operations.

These positions will build on our work to recruit and retain a skilled workforce. Last year, Governor Hochul increased pay to attract ever-harder-to-find lifeguards, which allowed us to get through last swimming season successfully. And we are also holding our first Park Police Academy since 2018 to ensure Parks can offer a safe and secure experience to our visitors. We added a wage premium for Park Police serving in the higher-cost downstate region; successfully expanded our reimagined Park Ranger program; and increased our seasonal staff pay rates.

The budget proposal protects and enhances our state's historic heritage. Over the last decade, the state has approved rehabilitation commercial tax credits for more than 1,200 historic properties, driving almost \$15 billion in private investment. Projects spurred by the credit help lift local economies, expand housing, promote sustainability and preserve the heritage of our communities. The state share of this tax credit expires after 2024, but the Executive Budget extends it through 2029 – giving investors the confidence they need to develop future projects.

Our Historic Preservation staff last year also awarded more than \$9 million in historic preservation grants, processed more than 800 applications for homeowner tax credits, and reviewed 95 nominations to the state and national registers for historic places. We also hired our first-ever interpreter of Native American History. And we launched New York State's Historic Business Preservation Registry – thank you Assemblymember O'Donnell - which allows members of the Legislature to recognize and honor businesses that are 50 years or older. There are currently 116 businesses listed on the registry and we are looking at ways to accommodate expansion of that list.

Still, our park system faces significant challenges ahead, including ongoing, human-induced climate change, which is causing more extreme weather across New York. This summer was one of the warmest and driest on record, which manifested itself in several ways at State Parks – such as numerous wildfires and the growth of harmful algal blooms in our lakes and waterbodies. Our facilities experienced 94 beach closures due to HABs, including a summer-long outbreak that closed all swimming areas at Lake Welch at Harriman State Park, a key location for outdoor recreation by metro New York City residents.

Losing the swimming season at Lake Welch underscores how climate change exacerbates unequal access, particularly for voiceless or marginalized communities, to outdoor recreation and places to cool off. Projections call for this only to become worse.

That is why it was so gratifying to see overwhelming public support for the \$4.2 billion Environmental Bond Act – some of which will go toward making our facilities more resilient to climate change and sea level rise. That is particularly important for Parks, which is the largest owner of shoreline in the state. Our staff is deeply involved in an inter-agency working group established by the Governor to identify environmental funding needs across the state. The group is making great progress developing program logistics, including how projects will be selected and how funds will be delivered through a transparent and collaborative process.

In between all this, staff is planning for the upcoming 2024 centennial anniversary of the State Parks Act, the legislation that forged the New York State Park system. We have another amazing century ahead of us. Together, and with your support, we will continue these initiatives to make New York's parks, historic sites and other facilities into a system that serves the needs of all of our communities, while protecting our natural environment and historic heritage. I invite you all to come out and see for yourselves what we're doing. Thank you.