

Senate Finance Chair Kruger and Assembly Ways & Means Chair Weinstein; Chairs Harckham, Glick, Serrano, and O'Donnell; distinguished legislators – thank you for the opportunity to discuss Governor Hochul's proposed budget as it relates to New York's state parks, open space protection, and the environment.

My name is Kathy Moser. I am Chief Conservation Officer for Open Space Institute.

OSI is among the leading land conservation nonprofits in the eastern United States, having protected more than two million acres of land for clean water, recreation, carbon storage, flood mitigation, and wildlife habitat from southern Canada to Florida. Still, New York remains our home and I welcome the opportunity to be here today.

The Open Space Institute views Governor Hochul's proposed state budget as a first step toward furthering the state's commitment to protecting the waters, land, and clean air that sustain all New Yorkers. The proposed budget builds on New York's passage of the Clean Water, Clean Air, and Green Jobs Bond Act and includes critical, dedicated staffing to administer the various programs it will fund.

In addition, OSI enthusiastically endorses Governor Hochul's proposal to maintain the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) at its historic \$400 million funding level. This fund has been New York's most important source of funding for a range of critical environmental protection projects, such as meeting the needed demand for parks and greenspace for people and wildlife, safeguarding New York's clean air and water, and protecting working farms.

Knowing the Legislature's long-term and enthusiastic commitment to supporting and protecting the EPF and for last year's Bond Act, I would be remiss if I failed to thank members of both houses for all you have done for environmental funding over the decades. Whether it be supporting increased EPF funding, preserving its long-term integrity, or increasing the total investment in last year's bond act, we fully understand and appreciate all you have done to protect and expand these critical funding sources.

Still, there are several components of the governor's proposed EPF allocations that require additional scrutiny.

First, OSI urges the restoration of a proposed reduction for land acquisition in the EPF. The Open Space line item of EPF should be set at a minimum of \$40 million. Strategic land conservation supported by the EPF plays a critical role in protecting New York's drinking water sources, fighting climate change, safeguarding wildlife habitat, and providing New Yorkers with places to spend time in the outdoors. Improving the public's access to parks and other protected land is among the great achievements and lasting legacies of the EPF.

OSI advocates for the restoration of funding dedicated to the Adirondack and Catskill Forest Preserves in the State Land Stewardship section of the EPF. Last year's state EPF budget devoted \$8 million to visitor safety and wilderness protection in the forest preserves. With increased visitation, these dedicated funds are needed now more than ever.

In addition, while OSI wholeheartedly supports increased staffing levels at both NY State Parks and DEC, the governor's proposal allowing for the offloading of agency staff costs to the EPF undermines the integrity of the Fund. Additional employees will allow the agencies to reverse staffing level trends that have, for years, resulted in a diminished ability to properly serve the tens of millions of New Yorkers who love and rely on our parks and public land. This staffing level turnaround is both warranted and welcome – but adding staff at the expense of the EPF and its intent is unacceptable. As such, we urge the legislature to, once again, reject this proposal.

To meet the ambitious goals of NYS Climate Action Plan and the NYS 30x30 legislation, state agencies must protect and conserve significantly more land. For example, if NYS is to achieve its 30x30 target, the state and its land trust partners together will have to conserve, protect, and acquire approximately 225,000 acres per year over the next eight years. In 2020 DEC acquired 5,413 acres; the total acquired in 2022 was only 4,416 acres.

Currently the land trusts of NY collectively are holding more than 95,000 acres of land for the State of NY at a value exceeding \$110 million.

DEC Real Property staffing across the state is at an all-time low of thirty-eight employees; two of these are seasonal and 25% are eligible to retire tomorrow. Why does staffing matter? In 1999 DEC protected 183,434 acres of land and there were 60 Real Property professionals at the agency. The average acres protected in the early 2000s when there was adequate staffing (between 55- 60 employees) was over 70,000 acres a year.

We are asking DEC, OPRHP and the Attorney General's Office to work with the land trust community to streamline the land acquisition process in NY so more land is protected for climate mitigation, biodiversity habitat, and public use. Suggested actions include hiring more real property staff at all three agencies and accepting title insurance for state-purchased properties.

We also remain supportive of the funding for the Municipal Parks Grants pool, the State Land Stewardship Fund, the Parks and Trails NY Grant Program, the Land Trust Alliance Conservation Partnership Program, and the Environmental Justice line. The Environmental Justice section of the EPF underwrites the highly successful Connect Kids program allowing children from economically distressed and underserved communities to experience state parks and historic sites, and OSI fully endorses the governor's increase in funding for this important initiative.

And because OSI's land mission extends from conservation to making parks and protected land available and welcoming to all, OSI is asking for the legislature to restore the level of funding for parks infrastructure to \$250 million. Last year's commitment to capital improvements at both Parks and DEC lands dramatically raised the bar for improving public access to nature and the outdoors. Especially in the wake of the pandemic and the public's reliance on parks, trails, and other public lands, New York cannot reverse its commitment to making our parks safe, welcoming, and accessible for all.

Indeed, keeping pace with efforts to make parks and open spaces more easily available and inviting is one of the key recommendations of the Open Spaces for All report issued by OSI in the Fall of 2022. The report aims to create a more inclusive, accessible, and equitable Open Space system in New York State. And I am happy to share copies of that document with you or your staffs.

Over the past decade, OSI has invested millions of private dollars for new trails, trailheads, and visitor centers with the hope of connecting more people to the land and demonstrating that all New Yorkers are welcome in our state parks and public lands.

In 2022, OSI partnered with State Parks to restore a 9.5-mile loop trail at Fahnestock State Park and worked with students from the Military Academy at West Point to design and construct a new trail bridge at Harriman State Park. We are also creating a new multi-use trail and trailhead at Schunnemunk State Park constructing a new trailhead and park space at the eastern end of the Adirondack Rail Trail in the Village of Lake Placid. OSI is also in the process of restoring fifteen miles of carriage road at Minnewaska State Park.

These types of projects, along with our decades of land protection here in New York State serve the public in countless ways. In fact, we are all especially proud that through our conservation efforts, OSI has had a hand in protecting more than ten percent of New York's state parks.

As the 2022 legislative session gets underway, we look forward to working with Governor Hochul, her administration, and members of the Legislature to enact a budget that moves New York State forward as a national leader in addressing the climate crisis, improving and creating access to nature and the outdoors, and ensuring that the water and air we need are protected for generations to come.

In closing, I thank the governor and members of the Senate and Assembly for working together in support of parks, open space, and the environment. Your ongoing commitment to protecting and enhancing New York's precious environmental and recreational resources is now more important than ever.

Thank you.