



**New York State  
Parks, Recreation and  
Historic Preservation**

**KATHY HOCHUL**  
Governor

**ERIK KULLESEID**  
Commissioner

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

Good morning, Chairperson Krueger, Senator Serrano, Assemblymember O'Donnell and members of the State Legislature. Thank you for inviting me here today. I wish a speedy recovery to Chairperson Weinstein.

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. This system is a result of a vision 100 years ago brought to life and sustained through continued investment by the State and commitment by our workforce. Its strength today reflects longstanding support from the people of New York State and the representatives they elect.

At the start of our second century, our park system is revitalizing, and momentum is strong. It's been my privilege these past five years to steward this agency through one of its greatest periods of growth and improvement. New Yorkers are responding to the reinvigoration of our system. Last year, a record 84 million visitors came to our parks and sites, a six percent increase from 2022. Our parks are doing what they should – serving as affordable destinations for all New Yorkers and our out-of-state visitors.

The Governor's proposed budget for the agency will enable us to celebrate this year's State Parks Centennial and capitalize on the opportunity it presents to shape the next 100 years. While maintaining our strong baseline of \$200 million in capital a year to continue the ongoing transformation of our system, the budget proposal would in addition advance the Governor's NY SWIMS program to address swimming equity by launching new grants programs, expanding the learn-to-swim program and providing free sunscreen at our pools.

The proposed Budget also allocates an additional \$100 million in funding in honor of the New York State Parks' Centennial. Major proposed projects include reimagining and re-opening the historic East Bathhouse at Jones Beach to include a destination spray park and unique Learn to Swim feature, building out and creating a swimming area at Sojourner Truth, and reopening Lake Sebago Beach at Harriman which has been closed since 2011. The proposed budget also includes up to \$53 million in funding for security infrastructure, including cameras and improved fencing that will help address concerns for the safety of our overnight visitors.

These funds will empower the agency to advance its record of achievement in stewardship and visitor service and build on the landmark moments of the past year, which included:

- Launching our Centennial celebration with my ten-stop tour of our parks and sites to showcase the breadth of our system – and inviting the public to engage in our Centennial Challenge.
- Improving access to outdoor recreation by expanding our Ladders to the Outdoors program at Green Lakes to better reach underserved youth; modernizing the track and field at Harlem’s Denny Farrell Riverbank State Park; and creating new trails at Sojourner Truth and Allegany State Parks.
- Investing in tourism destinations with a new visitor’s center at Niagara Falls; a new artistic gateway at Marsha P. Johnson; and a reimagined Roosevelt Drive at Saratoga Spa.
- Preserving historic landmarks at Old Fort Niagara, Grant Cottage, Montauk Point Lighthouse, and Schoharie Crossing.
- Improving resiliency with a new solar array at Hither Hills and completing our largest-ever wetlands restoration at Hempstead Lake.

In the midst of celebration, our park system continues to cope with the realities of climate change. Last year, wildfire smoke cancelled many outdoor plans and flood damage closed Bear Mountain for nearly two months – and cleanup is still ongoing. Our agency’s Climate Action Plan has provided a roadmap for improving our resiliency while reducing our own contributions to climate change. We continue to progress towards our goal of all renewable energy by 2030. As the largest owner of shoreline in New York State, we are focused on coastal resiliency, seeking nature-based solutions for shoreline stabilization, and protecting both coastal habitat and agency infrastructure.

Our achievements were possible because of the agency’s talented, dedicated and committed staff. I am grateful that the proposed budget enhances staffing so we can reach our ambitious goals. The agency will be able to hire more Park Police, fill skilled trades positions, improve safety, and enhance our stewardship unit.

The proposed budget will also protect and preserve our heritage. In 2023, our Division for Historic Preservation approved nearly \$50 million in investments in historic homes, and a nation-leading \$1.2 billion in tax credits for historic commercial properties, incentivizing the redevelopment of 116 sites. More than 138 businesses are now listed on the Historic Business Preservation Registry, which recognizes New York State businesses that have operated 50 or more years. We continue to prepare for major commemorations such as the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution and the 200th anniversary of Emancipation in New York.

The coming year will be a memorable one, as we open new visitor centers at Bayard Cutting Arboretum and Olana, welcome visitors for a Total Solar Eclipse on April 8, and establish a new park on Cayuga Lake in partnership with local municipalities. As I prepare to leave this agency in the hands of my remarkable team, I see the hard work and investments of the past five years coming to fruition. This system is among New York’s greatest environmental, recreational, and cultural legacies. I am proud to have worked with you to author a crucial chapter of its story.

In 2124, when our successors celebrate the bicentennial of Parks, I believe they will look back on the present day as its second golden age: an era in which New Yorkers came together to reinvest in our system, face the challenges of climate change, ensure true equity in access to nature, recreation, and history, and make New York State a recreation destination for generations to come. With your support, this vision will become a reality. I invite you to visit us and to celebrate the Parks Centennial in 2024. Thank you.