



Environmental Conservation Joint Legislative Public Hearing on the New York State Fiscal Year 2025 Executive Budget Proposal

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Chairperson Harckham, Chairperson Glick, 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 Senior Director of Public Lands. 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 members, supporters and partners from across the state, PTNY is a prominent voice for the protection and expansion of New York's magnificent state park system and multi-use trail network, including more than 1,500 miles of greenways, bike paths, and river walks. Our goal is to ensure *all* New Yorkers have access to the outdoors, for generations to come.

I want to start by thanking the Senate and the Assembly for your firm and consistent support for New York's public lands. While the Governor's Executive Budget Proposal Fiscal Year 2025 outlines a thoughtful investment in New York's public lands and shared greenspaces, there are critical components that need to be bolstered. We encourage support from the Senate and Assembly for: \$250 million in capital funding for state parks and historic sites; \$100 million for a special capital infusion for State Park's Centennial Celebration through the 'NY Swims' Initiative; and \$400 million for the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF), including \$2 million for the Park and Trail Partnership Program and \$90 million for DEC's Adventure New York program. Supporting these vital initiatives demonstrates a commitment to the environment, our public health, economic resiliency, and shared greenspaces, leaving a lasting legacy for generations to come.

Increase Proposed Capital Funding for State Parks to \$250 Million to Address Infrastructure Needs

We encourage the Legislature to increase New York Works capital funding for the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP) to \$250 million, over the Governor's proposed FY 2025 budget of \$200 million.

Restoring and enhancing the nation's oldest state park system, with a renewed investment of \$250 million for budget year FY25, builds upon a decade plus of crucial previous investment. This critical funding has created new opportunities for visitors to access the outdoors, provided updates and repairs for vital park infrastructure, and facilitated a drastic increase in visitation to our premiere state park system—a growth of 40% since 2010 to nearly 80 million visits in 2023 alone. Our public lands—as vital economic drivers—are a smart investment, contributing more than \$3.7 billion per year to the state's economy. That 10-to-1 return on investment also creates tens of thousands of jobs statewide.

To maintain this value for New York, it is crucial we continue fortifying our state park system. A failure to address the massive capital infrastructure backlog—now at \$3.5 billion and growing—will only exacerbate capital costs in the long term. Parks & Trails New York will continue to advocate for increased Parks capital funding to meet the more than \$300 million in annual capital needs our state park system faces. We look forward to sustaining our work with the legislature to meet that goal.

Support Proposed \$100 Million for the Centennial Celebration

We strongly encourage the legislature to support the \$100 million in new funding as part of the Centennial NY SWIMS Initiative. This funding is critical for signature projects like reopening Lake Sebago Beach in Harriman State Park and converting the East Bathhouse at Jones Beach State Park into a world-class water recreation facility.

The centennial affords us a unique opportunity to clearly define the future of our parks system. Reversing many decades of disinvestment will ensure our public parks offer state-of-the-art swimming facilities to the tens of thousands of visitors frequenting our most popular water recreation locations every year. Enhancing equitable access to public lands now, specifically by building out these iconic facilities for the next century of users, is paramount to safeguarding the future and accessibility of our public lands system.

At Jones Beach, the Governor's proposed critical capital infusion will convert an abandoned, dilapidated pool complex into a regional destination that will include an accessible spray park and state-of-the-art green technology. The Lake Sebago swimming facility in Harriman State Park—shuttered from extensive damage from dual tropical storms in 2011—will once again be able to welcome thousands of visitors each summer weekend, providing relief from urban heat islands. The updated swimming facilities at Lake Sebago will include new bathing facilities, storm resilient design elements, and a reimagined beach to better meet the needs of all New Yorkers and visitors alike.

Restore the Environmental Protection Fund to \$400 Million

The Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) is more than a critical source of funding to protect our natural resources and work toward climate resiliency; it is fundamental to the health and vitality of our communities and a sound, necessary investment in the future of our state. For these reasons, we ask the Legislature to restore the EPF to a complete \$400 million, demonstrating

New York's commitment to the importance of our public green space as critical infrastructure for the health of all New Yorkers.

We call on the legislature to reject the proposed \$25 million cut to the Environmental Protection Fund. This cut, in the form of a new line enabling agencies to raid the EPF to fund staffing costs, would weaken the EPF's critical environmental programs. We join our partners from around the state in calling on the legislature to completely repudiate all offloads and restore the EPF to a full \$400 million dedicated entirely to projects.

The EPF is a primary 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. 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 endeavors generate approximately \$40 billion every year and provide a 7-to-1 return on investment. Parks & Trails New York appreciates the impact EPF funding continues to have in expanding public access to parks and open spaces, particularly for those in historically and currently underserved communities.

Maintain \$2 Million for the Park and Trail Partnership Program in the EPF

The Executive Budget calls for sustaining the Park and Trail Partnership Grant program at \$2 million. These capacity-building competitive grants—administered by Parks & Trails New York in partnership with State Parks and the Department of Environmental Conservation—enable nonprofit, grassroots Friends groups affiliated with these agencies to expand their impact and strengthen the state's heritage of public-private partnerships. The Park and Trail Partnership Grants support a wide array of efforts, from raising funds for capital projects and performing maintenance and beautification tasks to providing innovative educational programming and hosting special events.

Since the grant program's inception in 2015, 222 awards totaling \$8.1 million have been provided to 91 nonprofit organizations, leveraging nearly \$3.1 million in private investment that directly benefits park communities. This relatively modest initiative propels these organizations to a higher level of effectiveness while creating deeper synergy with the state's key initiatives, including: addressing diversity, equity, and inclusion; fostering community-level partnerships; and addressing barriers to accessibility.

Maintain Adventure NY Funding at \$90 Million

The Department of Environmental Conservation manages millions of acres of open space across New York State. Adventure NY funding is essential in ensuring these natural places are accessible, welcoming, and safe. With a continued rise in usage, maintaining the Governor's proposed \$90 million allocation is vital. This funding addresses a variety of capital needs to facilitate access to state lands, ensures the safety and durability of infrastructure like campgrounds, and upgrades a variety of widely-used recreational facilities. This funding also provides critical repairs to public property, including wetlands, trails, waterfronts, and fish hatcheries. Similar to other programs within the proposed budget, Adventure NY funding

dovetails with the broader conservation and accessibility objectives being advanced, including the Environmental Bond Act and the aforementioned budget proposals.

Conclusion

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide testimony. Parks & Trails New York looks forward to working with the Senate, the Assembly, and the Governor to boldly invest in the future of our state parks, greenways, and public lands. Through our partnership, we can solidify New York's conservation legacy and foster a future that is welcoming to a diversity of users, provides residents and visitors with accessible facilities, and further enhances the livability, economic vitality, and health of our communities into the next century and beyond.