



## **Testimony: Parks and Recreation Joint Legislative Public Hearing on the New York State Fiscal Year 2027 Executive Budget Proposal**

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Chairperson Kreuger, Chairperson Pretlow, Chairperson Serrano, Chairperson Kim, 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 serve as Deputy Director of PTNY.

Parks & Trails New York is *the* statewide advocate for New York's public lands. We believe public lands are for all. We champion and protect our parks and greenways by advocating for resources, connecting communities, strengthening a network of stewards, and sharing the awe of nature. Over the preceding 40 years, we have striven to improve our health, economy, and quality of life through the use and enjoyment of green space. With tens of thousands of members and supporters across the state, our goal is to ensure *all* New Yorkers have access to high-quality outdoor recreation opportunities for generations to come.

I want to start by thanking the Senate and the Assembly for your firm and steadfast support for New York's public lands. PTNY appreciates Governor Hochul's continued recognition of the critical role public lands play in our state's economy, communities, and quality of life. At a time of record visitation and increasing usage of park and trail infrastructure, the Executive Budget proposal reflects an understanding that these spaces are not optional amenities, but essential public infrastructure that require sustained investment and thoughtful stewardship.

We encourage support from the Senate and Assembly for:

- A \$425 million Environmental Protection Fund, including a \$2.65 million Park and Trail Partnership Program, \$3.8 million for the Connect Kids to Parks program, and \$26 million for the Municipal Parks program—on the way to our goal of \$500 million
- \$340 million in capital funding for state parks and historic sites, and
- \$100 million for DEC's Adventure New York program

Supporting these vital initiatives will help ensure that New York's rich and diverse parks, historic sites, and open spaces are able to welcome and captivate the growing number of visitors each year.

### **Expand the Environmental Protection Fund to \$500 million**

New York's Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) remains the backbone of the state's environmental and outdoor recreation funding, supporting land conservation, parks and trails, clean water, and community-driven initiatives in every region of the state. We appreciate the Governor's proposal to maintain strong EPF funding while avoiding staffing offloads—or raids—to support agency operations, which undermine program effectiveness and the intent of the EPF.

The Environmental Protection Fund is not only a conservation tool, it is a proven economic engine generating approximately \$40 billion annually for New York's economy and sustaining hundreds of thousands of jobs across various sectors. These programs deliver returns far beyond their initial investment by protecting drinking water, reducing long-term infrastructure costs, and improving quality of life in communities large and small. The EPF is essential for addressing environmental justice and creating healthy, vibrant, livable communities.

Despite these demonstrated benefits, demand for EPF-funded programs continues to significantly outpace available resources. Competitive grant programs are consistently oversubscribed, leaving high-quality, shovel-ready projects unfunded in communities across the state. At a time when federal support for environmental protection and climate resilience is under threat, New York has a critical opportunity to reinforce its leadership, which is why we join dozens of coalition partners in *calling for the Environmental Protection Fund to be increased to \$500 million*, up from the \$425 million proposed by the Governor.

Increasing the EPF to \$500 million would build on the fund's strong track record and ensure New York can continue to meet pressing needs related to climate adaptation, public access, and community resilience. We urge the Legislature to view this expansion as a strategic investment, one that protects prior gains, responds to growing demand, and positions New York to deliver long-term environmental and economic benefits for generations to come.

### Fund the Park and Trail Partnership Grant at Minimum of \$2.65 million

This highly successful, competitive grant program strengthens and supports grassroots nonprofit organizations affiliated with New York State Parks (OPRHP) and the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC). Since its launch in 2015, the program has awarded \$12 million to 271 projects across the state, leveraging \$4.5 million in private matching contributions. Friends groups and nonprofit partners provide essential stewardship, programming, and capital improvements at State Parks and DEC lands, helping the agencies meet rising visitation and demands for expanded access.

However, the program remains oversubscribed, leaving \$5.5 million in high-quality projects unfunded despite demonstrated readiness and community support. Continued legislative

attention to this program regarding our *goal of reaching \$4 million in available annual funding*, will help ensure that local partners can meet the growing demands placed on our public lands while strengthening civic engagement and volunteerism across the state.

### **Support \$340 million in Capital Funding for State Parks**

Capital funding for the Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation (OPRHP) is essential to revitalizing the park system, addressing a substantial multi-billion-dollar backlog of critical infrastructure repairs while creating more opportunities for recreation in both urban and rural communities. Over the past decade, park utilization has surged by more than 40%, necessitating increased investment to ensure safe, quality amenities for visitors.

The Executive Budget proposes a robust capital plan for the park system, totaling more than \$340 million from multiple funding sources. Anchored by continued New York Works funding at \$200 million, these investments address long-standing infrastructure needs while advancing accessibility, community connectivity, historic preservation, and system-wide resilience. Including \$7 million for historic preservation efforts related to the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution is essential for expanding the Our Whole History initiative and centering marginalized voices from our state's history.

We are particularly encouraged by the focus on large-scale rehabilitation of heavily used parks such as Denny Ferrell Riverbank State Park, the development of new parks in communities long disconnected from public green space including High Falls State Park in Rochester, and investments that position parks as year-round hubs for recreation and community engagement. Together, these proposed capital expenditures reflect a clear understanding that parks are essential civic infrastructure that must evolve to meet the needs of a growing and increasingly diverse park-going public.

This robust funding will deliver profound benefits statewide. New York's public lands are economic powerhouses, with every \$1 million invested yielding \$10 million in sales, \$4 million in labor income, and \$7 million in state GDP. Investments extend well-beyond the boundaries of our parks: they safeguard critical habitats, enhance community resilience, and improve quality of life for millions.

### **Increase Adventure NY Funding to \$100 Million**

Adventure NY funding for the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) has remained at \$90 million annually for a decade. This funding has been effectively utilized to address critical capital needs, including public access improvements, critical health and safety repairs, and infrastructure that underpins outdoor recreation across five million acres of state land.

As the DEC places greater emphasis on accessibility and fostering inclusive outdoor experiences for all New Yorkers, *the time has come to expand the state's annual investment in Adventure NY to \$100 million.* This investment is essential to maintain safe access for hunters, anglers, hikers, and other outdoor enthusiasts, while also supporting climate resilience,

environmental monitoring, and long-term stewardship. Continued legislative support for DEC capital funding will help ensure that these lands remain accessible, well-managed, and capable of meeting rising demand.

### **Consider Dedicated Funding for the Empire State Trail Network**

New York is home to the nation-leading Empire State Trail (EST), a network of greenways and multi-use trails that support outdoor recreation, tourism, active transportation, and community connectivity. These corridors link downtowns to destinations, connect residents to nature, and deliver significant economic benefits to local communities—particularly those seeking to strengthen livability and attract investment.

Despite their growing importance, there is currently no dedicated state funding to maintain, connect, and expand this critical infrastructure. As communities look to complete missing links, improve safety, and maximize the economic potential of trail networks, the need for a coordinated, statewide approach has never been clearer.

This spring, Parks & Trails New York will release an Economic Impact Study of the Empire State Trail, which will provide quantitative data to support what municipalities, businesses, and partners already know firsthand: greenways are powerful economic drivers and quality-of-life assets. We urge the Legislature to view greenways as essential infrastructure and consider opportunities to empower more communities to connect to and benefit from this world-class system. Our goals are two fold: *include a \$10 million competitive planning grant program in the EPF this year, while working to secure a 5-year, billion dollar investment in this network* as the next evolution toward a greener, more connected New York State.

### **Conclusion**

In closing, we appreciate the Governor's proposed budget and her continued recognition of the importance of parks, trails, and public lands. As the budget process moves forward, we look forward to working with the Legislature to build on this proposal—strengthening investments that expand access, support local economies, and ensure New York's public lands are prepared to meet the challenges of today and the opportunities of the future.

Thank you for your leadership and for the opportunity to testify. We are grateful for your partnership and remain a resource as you continue your deliberations.