

Testimony by the Open Space Institute

2026 Joint Legislative Budget Hearing
January 28, 2026
Environment/Energy

Thank you, Senate Finance Chair Krueger, Assembly Ways and Means Chair Pretlow; Environmental Conservation Committee Chairs Harckham and Glick; and members of the committees for the opportunity to speak today and for your steadfast commitment to protecting New York's lands and waters. My name is Eileen Larrabee, and I am Executive Vice President and Chief of Staff at the Open Space Institute.

Founded in the Hudson Valley in 1974, OSI has grown from a locally focused land trust into one of the nation's most effective and trusted conservation organizations, now active in more than a dozen states throughout the eastern U.S.

Here at home, we are proud to have protected more than half a million acres in New York State — much of it in partnership with state agencies and other land trusts. In fact, OSI has added more than ten percent to the total acreage of New York's state parks system. Within those parks, we leverage private support and public partnerships to improve infrastructure and create welcoming places that everyone can enjoy.

I will jump right in by expressing support and gratitude for the New York State Environmental Protection Fund and all that it achieves on behalf of all New Yorkers and in every corner of the state.

The EPF has long enjoyed strong support from both the Senate and Assembly. From its inception, your leadership has both protected the integrity of the EPF and grown its funding level – and with that, its impact.

OSI is grateful for Governor Hochul's recommendation to maintain the EPF at its current historic \$425 million level in her proposed executive budget, and we strongly urge that--at a minimum--this investment be maintained.

Within the EPF, we are gratified by the Governor's continued commitment to open space and land protection, which delivers tangible benefits for all New Yorkers – including clean water, recreational opportunities, and climate change mitigation.

We also applaud the governor's support for stewardship of the state's public lands, as well as grant programs for the Land Trust Alliance, Parks & Trails NY, and municipal parks. These, along with the continued support for the DEC and OPRHP capital budgets, are commendable.

Indeed, with the Governor's leadership and that of the legislature, we have seen great strides in recent years for the protection of clean water, the creation and upgrades of recreational assets, conserved wildlife habitat, and climate resilience. While we laud a strong budget proposal for conservation and parks, we also draw attention to the opportunity and need to continue to build, improve, and expand conservation resources and tools.

Last year saw major breakthroughs in this regard. Thanks in part to support from the legislature, Governor Hochul, Attorney General James, and Commissioner Lefton entered into a historic agreement to allow use of title insurance in certain state land conservation transactions, with the potential to shave months or even years from the process. In addition, under Commissioner Lefton, the DEC has taken giant steps to streamline its internal processes.

And finally, at the end of the year, the DEC introduced a new Bond Act conservation program, which for the first time in history is offering 100 percent capital grants to municipalities and nonprofits to protect land in our communities. Each of these developments will enable OSI and its partners to accelerate the pace of their own conservation efforts in communities across the state.

These advances are wonderful examples of how compromise, flexibility and a fresh look at process can serve the public interest. And there is more to be done. We look forward to working with the governor, the legislature, and agencies to identify additional efficiencies within state processes; doing more to leverage available federal funding to support conservation; streamlining state grant processes for land protection and park development to empower communities to achieve locally important conservation and park objectives -- especially in urban and under-resourced areas that lack the financing capacity of larger nonprofits and municipalities.

We should be exploring ways to strengthen the capacity of communities in thoughtfully and comprehensively planning the creation of new housing, economic development activities, and open space protection.

New York has an opportunity to look to other states for examples of public and private land protection. Across the nation, people and governments are developing creative, collaborative approaches to saving and restoring natural places. New York can and should draw inspiration from them—and further build its reputation as a national conservation leader.

Land conservation offers benefits we can all appreciate: public parks where families gather and kids learn to love nature; rail trails and greenways that can be enjoyed by people of all

ages and abilities—investments OSI strongly supports and the state has championed; and access to nature for fishing, paddling, hiking, and more.

OSI and our partners look forward to continuing to work closely with the state, local governments, and community leaders to bring the benefits of nature to everyone. We remain deeply committed to delivering high-impact projects, advancing policy improvements, and supporting smart planning across New York.

But we—and the communities we serve—cannot do it alone. With your partnership, we will continue to protect the landscapes that define New York, safeguard clean water for people and businesses, strengthen our ability to withstand flooding and severe weather, and ensure that future generations inherit a state as extraordinary as the one we cherish today.

Thank you for your time, your leadership, and your unwavering commitment to the people and places of New York.