



**Testimony of Parks & Trails New York
Presented by Laura DiBetta,
Director, Parks Program & Government Relations**

**Joint Legislative Public Hearing on the
2013-2014 Executive Budget Proposal**

February 4, 2013

Good afternoon. My name is Laura DiBetta and I am Park Program Director at Parks & Trails New York. In 1985, Parks & Trails New York was founded to support the state park system, and in the more than 25 years since, we have been the state's leading organization working to preserve and enhance a network of parks, trails and greenways for all New Yorkers for generations to come. Our influential reports and advocacy efforts have been critical to keeping parks and historic sites open and protecting New York's natural, recreational, cultural and historical resources. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the proposed Executive Budget for Fiscal Year 2013-2014.

New York State Parks—A 5-to-1 Return on Investment

New York's state park system is the nation's oldest, dating to the creation of the Niagara Reservation in 1885, and one of the most heavily visited. Today, our 214 state parks and historic sites are significant economic drivers, while also strengthening New Yorkers' health and fitness, enhancing their quality of life, and preserving invaluable landscapes, ecosystems and historic and cultural treasures.

The tourism dollars generated by parks are critical, especially to local Upstate economies. According to a 2009 independent study¹ commissioned by Parks & Trails New York, the NYS Park System boosts the state's economy to the tune of nearly \$2 billion annually—that's a 5-to-1

¹PERI Institute. *The NYS Park System: An Economic Asset to the Empire State*. March 2009. Prepared for Parks & Trails New York.

return on investment. Plus, the state park system creates and supports 20,000 jobs—exclusive of state parks employees.

Parks also generate significant additional benefits to the state, including maintaining the natural environment, protecting communities from the impacts of extreme weather events and mitigating the impacts from climate change, providing an escape for millions of New Yorkers and others from around the world, and protecting the state’s heritage for future generations. Because of these additional benefits, most assessments of the economic impact of parks underestimate their true economic contribution.

Most New Yorkers, however, do not think about these benefits. All they know is they love their parks. When parks were threatened with closure, thousands of New Yorkers rallied to their support. Last May, at the first-ever I Love My Park Day, thousands of New Yorkers took time out of their busy weekend to volunteer and help clean up, improve and beautify state parks and historic sites across the state. It is thanks in large part to this outpouring of support—including support from many of you—that parks have remained open and are beginning to thrive again.

Preserve and Enhance the NYS Park System

Over the past two years, Governor Cuomo has put parks in the forefront of his efforts to rebuild the state’s infrastructure and economy. Thanks to the leadership of the Governor and the Legislature, state parks received an historic infusion of capital funding through the New York Works initiative to restore and rebuild state parks’ aging and dilapidated infrastructure. The \$89 million commitment in last year’s budget—leveraged to \$143 million—is breathing new life into a park system that has suffered from decades of underfunding while creating thousands of local jobs and helping to grow the state’s economy.

Visitors are clearly noticing the improvements, too. With visitation now up to more than 60 million people annually, our state parks and historic sites are primed to anchor the state’s regional tourism efforts, particularly in Upstate communities. The Parks & Trails New York study I mentioned earlier also showed that about \$744 million of park visitor expenditure—that is, around 40% of total visitor spending—comes from visitors living outside the communities in which the parks are located. This is money local businesses would not have without the presence of the parks to attract visitors to the area.

With an estimated \$1.1 billion² backlog in health, safety, and infrastructure projects, state parks and historic sites still face a tremendous need. In November 2006, Parks & Trails New York

²New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, 2010. *New York State Parks & Historic Sites: Capital Needs Assessment, October 12, 2010.*

released its *Parks at a Turning Point* report in which we highlighted the many challenges facing the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP), particularly the agency's enormous capital projects backlog. These challenges remain; according to a recent report³ by the Office of the Comptroller, almost every park and historic site in the system has some infrastructure need, from crumbling buildings and bridges and leaky swimming pools, to outdated water, sewer and electrical systems and deteriorating roads.

Support Proposed \$90 Million for State Park Infrastructure Needs

The Governor's 2013-2014 budget proposal for state parks reflects his recognition of the important role these treasured places play in local economic growth, in the protection of important natural areas, and in providing affordable recreational opportunities for New Yorkers and out-of-state visitors, alike.

The Executive Budget provides \$45 million in new capital funding through the New York Works program, along with \$45 million in previously unallocated appropriations, for a total of \$90 million for capital needs at state parks and historic sites this year. In addition, the Governor's five-year capital plan commits to providing \$90 million annually for state parks capital projects for each of the next five years. We urge you to support the Governor's budget proposal for parks and keep the momentum going. Through the commitment of the Governor and the Legislature, OPRHP will be able to sustain its progress in addressing the more than \$1 billion in infrastructure needs and critical safety repairs, restoring and reinvigorating the state park system.

With an investment of \$90 million annually—leveraged with additional private and federal dollars—the backlog in capital needs can be addressed over a roughly 10-year period. Continuing to invest in these treasured places will keep people working to help grow New York's economy sustainably, boost tourism in communities across the state, and secure New York's parks and conservation legacy for future generations.

Support Executive Budget Proposal for OPRHP Operating Budget

The Executive Budget proposal also maintains the agency's operations budget. Given the state's continued fiscal challenges, we appreciate the Governor's support for parks and his recognition of the important link between well-maintained parks and economic growth.

I would be remiss, however, if I did not acknowledge that the toll of the last few years will continue to weigh heavily. The park agency's budget has been cut 23% over the last few years—

³NYS Office of the State Comptroller. *Safety of Infrastructure, Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation*. September 2012. Report 2012-S-29.

more than many agencies—and it is operating today with 1500 fewer staff than it was in 2008. The state park operations budget has been on a downward slide for more than 15 years and parks are being starved as a result, with reduced hours, days, and seasons, fewer programs and workers, fewer park police, and less maintenance, not to mention fewer resources dedicated to natural resource protection and the visitor experience.

Support a Reinvestment in Our Parks

In addition to investing in state parks infrastructure through the NY Works program, there are other creative ways to move forward and secure the future of the park system. To continue to be well-maintained and inviting places for the 60 million-plus visitors each year, parks must receive an appropriate level of funding to maintain an adequate level of service and address aging infrastructure. We urge the Governor and the Legislature to continue their commitment to revitalizing the state park system.

One option is to take a closer look at the role of park and historic site Friends groups in the future of our park system. These nonprofit organizations—oftentimes made up entirely of volunteers—clear trails, paint buildings, build kiosks, leading interpretive programs, and raise significant money for capital projects. While their success should not allow the state to shirk its responsibility to parks, greater investment in these organizations will serve to extend the capacity of the parks agency and put to good use already existing capacity in our state parks.

The best chance to adequately support our iconic state park system, for ourselves and for future generations, is by creating a new, dedicated funding mechanism. A viable proposal currently before the Legislature is “Pennies for Parks.” It is a proposal for a five-cent surcharge on disposable bags, which can provide more than \$70 million annually to state parks for capital needs. A recent poll⁴ shows 3 out of 4 New Yorkers support a surcharge if the money goes to parks. Plus, the surcharge is completely avoidable through the use of reusable bags.

It is estimated that the average adult in New York State uses 468 disposable shopping bags each year—for a total of 7.03 billion disposable shopping bags statewide (6.4 billion plastic and 630 million paper bags). Through this proposal—one that has proven successful in other parts of the country—we can make progress on many of the state’s goals. We can reduce litter in our communities and waste going to our landfills, and prevent stormwater infrastructure from getting clogged, all of which reduces the financial burden on municipalities which must bear the costs of this waste. We can protect wildlife and marine species which often ingest plastic, a fatal mistake. We can also reduce our state’s contribution to greenhouse gases and curb our dependence on oil.

⁴June 2011 public opinion poll of 812 voters conducted by Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates.

All of these environmental and economic goals can be achieved at the same time we generate funding to keep our parks open and safe. It is truly a win-win.

We encourage the Legislature to consider Pennies for Parks as a permanent source of funding to address capital needs at state parks and historic sites. By making a commitment today to turn around the decline of our park system we can preserve its integrity for future generations.

Support Executive Budget Proposal for the Environmental Protection Fund

Parks & Trails New York also commends the Governor for his commitment to the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF). The EPF is the lifeblood of environmental funding in New York. Like our state park system, the EPF not only protects our environment, it also generates significant revenue for the state; for every \$1 invested in the EPF, the state gets back \$7.⁵ The EPF supports a wide variety of programs that generate revenue and create jobs in many sectors throughout the state, as well as support disaster recovery and preparedness. This includes providing much-needed funding for stewardship of state parks and forests, as well as local community parks and trails that continue to struggle to stay off the chopping block.

After holding the EPF steady for the past two years, the Governor's proposal would boost the EPF with an additional \$19 million investment, for a total appropriation of \$153 million. While New York's economy is still rebuilding, we are encouraged that the Governor has proposed new investments in the environmental programs that will help move our state forward. We are especially grateful that this proposal includes small increases in funding for state land stewardship and public access and for the municipal park grant program.

The Legislature has shown staunch support for the EPF and helped maintain its integrity. We join with our partners in support of this critical investment in New York's environment and economy, and urge the Legislature and Governor to implement policies that support the EPF and enhance funding for these programs.

Closing

Parks & Trails New York looks forward to working with the Senate, the Assembly and the administration on protecting and preserving the legacy of our great park system, as well as strengthening the network of parks, trails and greenways across the state.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify.

⁵The Trust for Public Land. *The Economic Benefits of New York's Environmental Protection Fund*. January 2012.