



29 Elk Street
Albany, NY 12207
518-434-1583
518-427-0067 FAX
www.ptny.org

Parks & Trails New York
Preliminary Comments on the Development
Of the Master Plan
For Minnewaska State Park Preserve
Submitted August 11, 2008

Please accept the following comments from Parks & Trails New York on the development of a Master Plan for Minnewaska State Park Preserve.

Parks & Trails New York commends Commissioner Ash and the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP) for undertaking a concerted effort to address the Master Plan backlog that currently exists in the State Park System. By proposing to annually complete five Master Plans over the next five years, OPRHP is undertaking an aggressive planning campaign that will help ensure the health and vitality of the State Park System for future generations. We also applaud Governor Paterson, the State Senate and State Assembly for their leadership in providing the largest infusion of capital funding in the history of OPRHP, as well as much needed additional staff for the agency, which includes the planners and biologists required to take on the ambitious master planning schedule.

At the recent public information meetings on the development of a Master Plan for the Minnewaska State Park Preserve, OPRHP outlined a list of priority themes and initiatives that have been developed to guide the agency's decision making as the master planning process moves forward. Among those priority themes are: Revitalizing our Parks and Historic Sites, Natural Resource Stewardship and Interpretation, Creating Connections and Sustainability. Parks & Trails New York agrees with OPRHP's assessment of the priority issues that must be addressed, not only in the Master Plan for the Minnewaska State Park Preserve, but in every Master Plan the agency develops. We also recognize that one of OPRHP's greatest challenges is balancing the stewardship of our natural resources with providing opportunities for a wide range of recreational activities. We believe, however, when developing a Master Plan, particularly for a State Park Preserve, that responsible stewardship of our natural resources must be OPRHP's primary concern.

The designation as a State Park Preserve is an indication that Minnewaska is an extraordinary holding among the many natural treasures that make up the New York State Park System. This special designation, one we believe the Park should retain, requires that an added degree of care be taken when developing a Master Plan. OPRHP must ensure that each of the Park's resources

are managed in a way that will protect and preserve them for generations to come as required by Article 20 of New York's Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation law (PRHPL) – the law governing State Park Preserves.

The information packet distributed by OPRHP at the public information meetings contains a good summary of the characteristics of the Minnewaska State Park Preserve (hereinafter the Park) and the issues of concern that planners must address in the Master Plan. Parks & Trails New York shares many of the same concerns, and offers the following recommendations.

Natural Resources – The designation of the Park as a Park Preserve under Article 20 of the PRHPL includes several oversight responsibilities. Among these responsibilities are maintaining the integrity of park land, flora, fauna, and scenic vistas and providing for the management of all unique, rare, threatened or endangered species of flora and fauna within the Park. As mentioned in the information packet, the Park supports more than 35 natural communities and is home to more than 30 rare plant and animal species including five species that are considered globally rare. Among them are three species that are listed as endangered in New York State, five species listed as threatened, and one species of special concern – the individual species are not specifically identified in the information packet. The Master Plan being developed for the Park must include specific provisions to ensure the protection and preservation of the Park's rare plants and animals. The plan should also include provisions to eradicate or manage invasive species in a way that will prevent or control their encroachment into other areas of the Park.

Also, because of the steep slopes and shallow soils found in the park, the Master Plan should be developed with an eye toward minimizing soil erosion. This can be accomplished by using select plant materials in specific areas and reducing or eliminating public access in especially erosion prone areas.

Parks & Trails New York also recommends that OPRHP's planners and bio-science experts continue their relationship with the Mohonk Preserve and the several organizations in the Shawangunk Ridge Biodiversity Partnership that conduct research in the Shawangunk region. These partnerships provide access to invaluable information that will enable OPRHP to develop a Master Plan that is truly protective of the Park's lands and waters while at the same time providing opportunities for recreational activities.

Interpretation/Education – With people spending less time outdoors in their formative years it becomes increasingly important that the stewards of our natural resources provide education and guidance to the public as to how we can best protect and enjoy our environment. All Master Plans for State Parks should address how visitors will be educated about the features of the park that make it special. This can include signage, interactive displays, or a nature center. The Master Plan should also provide opportunities for education and interpretation of the natural world as a whole, a big picture approach to learning about the environment and global environmental issues.

Interpretation and education are particularly important in the Park Preserve setting. Once again, because of the Park's designation as a Park Preserve there are additional requirements that must be met to comply with PRHPL Article 20. Namely, providing personnel trained in the natural

sciences to staff the Park and manage educational and scientific programs within the Park, and establishing public environmental education classes to be conducted by naturalists in cooperation with other governmental agencies. Parks & Trails New York strongly supports the continued presence of staff trained in the natural sciences and education.

Visitor Management – The Master Plan for the Park must weigh providing a wide variety of recreational opportunities to large numbers of parks visitors (over 400,000 annually) with protecting the natural resources that make Minnewaska so popular. As we have mentioned above, the protection of the Park’s natural resources must be OPRHP’s primary concern. This is especially important in the context of a State Park Preserve such as Minnewaska. As provided in PRHPL Article 20 § 2.7, OPRHP has the responsibility to establish an admission control permit system to limit the number of visitors in certain areas as a means of ensuring that the ecological viability and balance of the Park Preserve is maintained. The permit system, which must be based on rules and regulations promulgated by the Commissioner of OPRHP can be for individuals or groups, but must not be discriminatory. Parks & Trails New York recommends including a park visitor admission control system as part of the Master Plan.

Connections – Parks & Trails New York urges OPRHP to continue its campaign to acquire lands abutting or near the Park. We also recommend creating links between existing trails in the park and those outside the park.

Carriage Road Restoration – Parks & Trails New York is a leading statewide advocate for the protection, expansion and promotion of New York State’s system of parks, trails and greenways. As such, in 2006 Parks & Trails New York, through a resolution of our Board of Directors, supported a public-private partnership among OPRHP, the Palisades Interstate Park Commission and the Mohonk Preserve. The purpose of this partnership was to obtain necessary funding and undertake the restoration of more than 60 miles of the historic and recreational Smiley Carriage Road network. Restoring the historic carriage roads will provide increased opportunities for hikers, bicyclists, equestrians, and cross country skiers to access the varied environments and scenic vistas of the park on a trail with a fairly wide and stable surface. The work that has already been accomplished in conjunction with the Mohonk Preserve is a fine example of a valuable public-private partnership that should continue to be supported by OPRHP. We recommend that the Master Plan include provisions for the organizations that have partnered on the restoration of the carriage roads to continue to work in concert to secure the necessary funding not only to complete the restoration but also to maintain the carriage roads for future generations.

Campground Installation and Management – Parks & Trails New York supports the three-way partnership among the Mohonk Preserve, the American Alpine Club and the Palisades Interstate Parks Commission to install and operate a low-impact tent campground in the foothills of the Shawangunks. The proposed campsite will replace the existing inadequate camping facilities and will better serve the camping needs of the more than 400,000 annual visitors to the Park and the Mohonk Preserve.

Infrastructure –As is the case at many, if not all, of the state’s 213 State Parks and Historic Sites, years of underinvestment and deferred maintenance have taken their toll on infrastructure. As OPRHP has embarked on a multi-year program to overcome its backlog of capital projects

and revitalize the State Park System, it is imperative that the Plan include an accurate assessment of all of the infrastructure needs in the Park including buildings, roads, bridges, water systems (both drinking and sewer) and any other man made improvements in the Park. The more hard evidence the agency can present to the public, the Governor and the Legislature regarding capital needs, the more likely it will be that the necessary capital funding will be provided in future state budgets. Parks & Trails New York also recommends that when assessing the infrastructure needs of not only Minnewaska State Park Preserve, but all State Parks for which Master Plans are being developed, that consideration be given to the re-use and retro-fitting of existing structures as a way of keeping capital costs down.

Sustainability – The principles of sustainability should be incorporated into every component of the Plan. This includes employing sustainable building practices that conform to the requirements for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification for new buildings, and the use of energy conservation practices in existing buildings. The Plan should also provide for the use of energy efficient lighting and alternative fuel vehicles wherever possible. Finally, the Plan should evaluate the use, if any, of chemicals the Park’s grounds to determine if less toxic, yet effective, means of weed and pest control may be used.

Conclusion – Parks & Trails New York appreciates the opportunity to submit comments early in the Master Plan process. We look forward to working with OPRHP on this and many other projects. And, we look forward to the release of the Draft Master Plan and Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the Minnewaska State Park Preserve.