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Supporting Parks and Trails in Challenging Economic Times: Lessons from State Parks

By Robin Dropkin, Executive Director, Parks & Trails New York

In recent weeks the potential impact of New York State's budgetary crisis on state parks, and the public outrage over plans to close many parks and historic sites, has captured media attention statewide. Clearly, citizens deeply value these magnificent parks and their access to the trails and other facilities within them.

Less conspicuous than the "crown jewels" of the state park system, however, are the many county and municipal park and trail systems that typically lie within or close to the communities where New Yorkers live. These resources are important to communities in many ways. They provide public space where people can relax, connect with nature and their heritage, commune with one another, and be physically active. Increasingly, trails also serve as alternative transportation routes within and between communities. In short, these parks and trails contribute significantly to public health and quality of life in our cities, villages and towns.

Parks and trails also can be an economic boon to nearby communities and businesses. A study completed for Parks & Trails New York found that the state park system returns five dollars in economic benefits for each dollar invested. The economic contributions of local parks and trails are less well documented, but certainly are substantial in the aggregate.

Yet, with counties and municipalities also experiencing severe fiscal constraints today, parks and trails often are among the first casualties or bear a disproportionate share of the burden when budget cutbacks are necessary. How can park and trail managers respond and prepare now for the inevitable next economic downturn?

Building constituencies, forming partnerships

One answer is to build strong constituencies that will both defend these community resources against budgetary reductions or other threats and generate additional resources needed to keep them in top condition. Again, we can look to the recent issue of state park closures for evidence of the value of constituency building and a model for success.

The fact is that for many years state park budgets have been insufficient for providing all

desired services and maintaining or upgrading facilities. Recognizing this, individuals close to many parks have formed park “friends” groups as a way to attract volunteers and raise private funding for specific park needs. Through their outreach efforts, these groups also have helped many other people fully appreciate what parks offer and better understand what is required to maintain facilities. Perhaps most importantly, by engaging people in supporting parks they have created cadres of individuals who feel they have a personal stake in the future of parks.

Consequently, when the decision to close parks was announced, groups like Friends of Thacher Park in the Albany area were prepared to mobilize hundreds of grassroots advocates to oppose the closures and turn out dozens of residents to visit state legislators.

Similar groups focused on local parks and trails are less well known, but they are out there and hold great potential for supporting and defending county/municipal systems. Parks & Trails New York has identified approximately 700 organizations in NYS that support trails in some way.

In New York City alone, an estimated 200 friends’ groups work to protect and enhance particular city parks. Across upstate NY, a multitude of groups, from the Frear Park Conservancy in the Hudson Valley to Friends of the Clarence Arboretum near Buffalo, is bringing the energy of volunteers and financial backing of supporters to the aid of local parks.

In some instances, the role of such groups has risen to the level of full-fledged partnerships with public agencies in managing parks and trails. For example, the Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy became the first nonprofit organization in the nation to manage and operate an entire historic urban park system under an agreement with the City of Buffalo and Erie County. In NYC, Friends of the High Line provides 70% of the operating budget for the High Line, an elevated former railroad now being transformed into a public space.

Recognizing the future value of these local groups, Parks & Trails New York has undertaken several initiatives to encourage and strengthen them:

- **Park/trail capacity-building grants** that help groups become more effective by developing outreach materials and websites, building membership, improving fundraising, and hiring or training staff.
- **Healthy Trails, Healthy People**, a program of technical assistance to community organizations seeking to build or promote multi-use trails.
- **Parks & Trails E-news**, an electronic newsletter of information related to park and trail issues across the state.

Regardless of its size and focus, each of these park and trail organizations is building a constituency that can influence public decision-makers when needed. And one more lesson we can draw from the current debate over state park closures is that, when faced with informed and impassioned supporters of parks and trails, public officials will listen.

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