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Parks In Trouble

Gov. Paterson Budget Puts State Recreation Areas On The Lookout

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Some state parks will have no option but to close if Gov. David Paterson's proposed budget is enacted without change.

According to Parks & Trails New York, the not-for-profit advocate for New York's parks system, the passage of Paterson's budget proposal will mean a total cut in funding of 40 percent by the governor in the last two years.

As explained by Robin Dropkin, Parks & Trails New York's executive director, the decision as to how many parks will close and which ones will shut down is up to the state Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation. Regardless, Dropkin said, a cut in funding of the magnitude proposed by Paterson will certainly result in "significant" closings.

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In December, the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation warned that it had already suffered about 25 percent in cuts and that any additional serious cuts would force them to close parks.

"Historically, the legislature is a little bit more forgiving than the governor," said Shawn McConnell, Campaign for Parks director, about the likelihood of changes to Paterson's proposal. "They, in the last few years, have been good about at least partially putting some money back in. But, if they put just a little bit of money back in, the parks will still suffer. We still will likely see some parks closing.

Park closings will exacerbate New York state's economic woes, according to McConnell.

Citing a 2009 report, McConnell explained that the state's parks system generates \$1.9 billion for private businesses and supports 20,000 jobs. As a result of the parks system, the state receives \$5 in benefits for every \$1 it invests in its parks. To enhance New York's economic recovery, McConnell suggested the governor should be committing to state parks - not cutting from them.

"Especially for Upstate New York, we need to protect and invest in these parks," McConnell said. "In just your region, the Allegany region brings in about \$62 million to the state parks system alone. That also accounts for helping provide 860 jobs. And these, unlike a lot of job prospects in the region right now, these jobs will be here for as long as we put money into our state parks. These aren't state park jobs, but jobs created because the tourists come in and spend money at restaurants, wineries and whatever they do around the parks. These are long-term jobs. These are jobs that will go away unless we stop funding them, which we're looking at as a reality for this year."

The Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation oversees 214 state parks and historic sites, which encompass 325,000 acres of lands and waters and are visited by over 55 million people each year. Last year, the agency received \$263 million - accounting for less than one-quarter of one percent of the overall state budget. The 2010-2011 proposal allocates \$230 million to the agency, reducing funds by \$33 million.

"It will be tragic if any parks are forced to close this year," said Dropkin. "They provide New Yorkers with affordable, nearby recreation, and they provide our communities with sustainable, long-lasting jobs. New York absolutely cannot afford to lose any of its state parks." She noted also that the cost of reopening a park, once closed, is substantial - meaning it is likely that at least some of the coming closings will be permanent, not temporary.

"What needs to happen is the legislators need to hear from their constituents," McConnell said. "They need to hear from people around Jamestown and around the Allegany region. They need to hear from these people and hear about what the state parks bring to their community and let them know that they do not want any parks closed or even the services to be set back because of the budget. They need to fund these parks. They need to invest in state parks. It's in their interest."

Parks & Trails New York is a statewide advocacy organization that works to expand, protect and promote a network of parks, trails and open spaces throughout the state for use and enjoyment by all. For more information, visit www.ptny.org.

Article Photos



Allegany State Park was not specifically mentioned in Gov. Paterson's executive budget proposal.
File photo

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