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Group: Parks system funding can help state's economy

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Increased investment this year in New York's park system can help lead the state out of the recession, according to an economic analysis prepared for a parks advocacy group.

State parks generate \$1.94 billion annually for nearby businesses and support 20,000 jobs, says the report issued Monday by Albany-based Parks & Trails New York. It said that for every dollar invested in operating and repairing the system, \$5 is produced in economic benefits.

After decades of what Parks & Trails executive director Robin Dropkin called inadequate investment, last year the department received an infusion of capital money that enabled it to begin a revitalization. She added that continuing that work is "more important than ever as people stick closer to home for recreation."

The group said that the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation has more than \$100 million in revitalization projects ready to begin construction out of a backlog of more than \$600 million in needed work that could help spur the sluggish economy.

Last year, 55.7 million people visited the 178 state parks and 35 historic sites. The study by the Political Economy Research Institute at the University of Massachusetts said the park system employs or otherwise directly supports about 6,600 jobs, while visitors also sustain the salaries of about 13,500 private-sector jobs in nearby businesses, such as restaurants and sporting goods stores.

Long Island parks create 3,992 jobs and \$410 million in sales, second only to the Niagara region parks, the report said.

Parks Commissioner Carol Ash said the report "clearly points out that parks are ... important economic drivers in communities. With a capital needs list of more than \$600 million, it is imperative that we continue our efforts to revitalize our parks and in doing so, we will continue to provide jobs and contribute to the state's economic recovery."

Under Gov. David A. Paterson's proposed budget, the agency would have an operating budget next year of \$227.2 million, down 15 percent from this year. The proposed capital budget is more than \$64 million, down from \$132 million this year.

Assemb. Steven Englebright (D-Setauket), chairman of the tourism committee, said "the report should reinforce recommendations to continue the reinvestment in state parks."

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