

State looks to avoid park closures

Written by

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ALBANY -- State parks will stay open, for now.

Acting state Parks Commissioner Andy Beers testified Tuesday at a budget hearing that no park closures are planned this year, despite orders from Gov. Andrew Cuomo to cut spending by 10 percent at state agencies.

Beers told lawmakers that he believes his agency can make cuts without closing any of the state's parks. The 125-year-old park system is the oldest in the nation with 178 parks and 35 historic sites.

"I am confident that the 10 percent reduction can be achieved without requiring new closures of state parks or historic sites by reevaluating our operations to identify additional efficiencies, eliminating redundancies and examining how savings from actions taken in the current fiscal year will help us in the next fiscal year," Beers said in his testimony.

Last year, Gov. David Paterson planned to close 55 parks and historical sites because of the state's money woes. The move led to a public outcry, and the Legislature

ultimately added back the \$11 million to keep parks open, just in time for the Memorial Day weekend.

In recent months, some parks and golf courses have been slated for closure because of staff shortages due to the state's 900 layoffs last year, which included 76 jobs at the parks department.

But state officials said they either are seeking private operators or working with local governments to run the facilities.

Beers is expected to be replaced by Gov. Andrew Cuomo's nominee Rose Harvey, an adviser on parks for a private firm, for parks commissioner.

Cuomo's proposed budget cuts nearly \$18 million from the parks department budget, a decrease of 6.2 percent when federal aid and revenue from parks fees are counted in. The total budget for the agency would be \$270 million, including \$119 million from the state.

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"Park users and lovers kind of made parks a third rail so nobody wants the reaction from last year," said Robin Dropkin, executive director of Parks & Trails New York, an advocacy group. "The governor listened to the people."

But Dropkin and other park groups warned that although parks may not close, their services and maintenance may suffer from a state aid cut. Some parks in recent years closed swimming pools and other facilities because of funding woes.

The Alliance for New York State Parks said Tuesday that the state should impose a 1-cent tax on grocery store plastic bags to fund park improvements.

Gannett Albany Bureau staff writer Jacob Fischler contributed to this report.

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