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Greening of public works

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Green jobs now — that's a key focus of the stimulus package that President-elect Barack Obama and the leaders of Congress are working on.

Well, New York has a list of repair and renovation projects in its state park system that would fit the bill — and put thousands of people to work almost immediately. The trick is to make sure that our representatives in Washington are able to get these green projects included in the massive public works effort that's about to come.

More than 55 million people visit New York's state parks each year. As the economy contracts even more, they will be taking "staycations" and planning visits to local and state parks. What many will find when they visit our parks are rutted roads and parking areas, unsafe trails and bridges, and closed facilities. There is a backlog of more than \$650 million in parks infrastructure projects, a legacy of years of underfunding.

Last year, the state Legislature approved a record \$100 million in new bonded capital for state parks infrastructure projects. So far, more than 200 projects in 80 parks and/or historic sites, in 57 of the state's 62 counties, are underway or completed, creating 1,000 construction and engineering jobs. Projects include roads, bridges and dams, sewage and water infrastructure, pool renovation, cabin rehabilitation, improvements to comfort stations, and park facilities on land previously acquired for public use.

In the Capital Region, projects underway or completed include replacement of aged water and electric lines at Moreau Lake State Park and rehabilitation of Thompson Lake State Park's septic system.

Another \$100 million in capital projects could be undertaken during the next 12 months, including \$55 million in projects that could start construction in 60-90 days on 48 parks projects around the state. In the Capital Region, we would see immediate results in water supply and pool rehabilitation at John Boyd Thacher State Park and the repair of Geysers Dam in Saratoga Spa State Park. But in this state budget climate, will there be the funds to go ahead? The federal stimulus package can help ensure that the answer is "yes."

History tells us that many of our park facilities were created in the first place by a public works effort during the Depression — the Civilian Conservation Corps. Today's projects will require contractors hiring workers on their own payrolls. But the benefits will be the same.

Parks infrastructure revitalization doesn't just create construction jobs; it boosts local economies as park visitors spend tourism dollars, and provides close-to-home and affordable recreation destinations. For all these reasons, parks and other green infrastructure should be an integral part of any federal stimulus plan.

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