



Parks & Trails official says Herkimer Home is slated for closure

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Danube, N.Y. — The state Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation announced last week that attendance at state parks and historic sites was up one million over the previous year while, at the same time, parks and historic sites have been closing and cutting back services and open hours.

The steady decline in the state parks budget (18 percent over the last three years), mandated layoffs and early retirements mean sites like Herkimer Home near Little Falls — closed through at least April 1 due to state budget concerns — are again on the chopping block. And across the system, shortened days, hours and seasons of operation have become the norm.

“This death by 1,000 cuts to the legacy of our magnificent state park system is appalling,” Robin Dropkin, executive director of Parks & Trails New York, a statewide advocacy group, said Thursday. “Plus, given the significant economic impact of the state parks system, it is counter-productive.”

Dropkin said in an e-mail she could not divulge the source of her information that Herkimer Home is slated to be closed for the 2011 season, but did say the source “is a reliable one.”

She said these closings have left park supporters scrambling in eleventh-hour efforts to keep their parks open. They are hoping for corporate sponsorships, public-private partnerships or local government management, she said, but many New York businesses and municipalities are struggling with their own budgets and hard-pressed to muster the resources to take on management of a state park, never mind an historic site with valuable buildings and artifacts.

“State parks are very special public places, held in trust for all New Yorkers,” said Dropkin, adding recent testimony given at a state Assembly hearing by state Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation Acting Commissioner Andy Beers referenced the inevitability of more cuts and closures given the agency’s dire budget situation. “No matter who opens the gates and mows the grass, these parks and sites must be open to every New Yorker and the extraordinary landscapes and natural and cultural resources they contain must be protected for future generations.”

Assemblyman Marc Butler also said there are signs that Herkimer Home, which was closed in 2010 for a week by then Gov. David Paterson, may not open for the 2011 season. One of those signs, he said, is that the site manager position formerly held by Tom Kernan has already been eliminated.

Butler has called on the state to work with local officials to keep the former home of American Revolutionary War hero Gen. Nicholas Herkimer open and operating. He said if the state makes its plan clear, the Friends of Herkimer Home and other sponsors could work to help keep the site open.

“We would do whatever it would take to open it,” Friends President Barbara Mielcarski said during a telephone interview last week, adding the nonprofit organization would be willing to sponsor and cover expenses for special events like the annual Sugaring Off. “It’s very unfortunate because this site is our national history. It’s a destination for visitors from all over the state and country.”

An independent study commissioned by Parks & Trails New York revealed the state park system contributes \$1.9 billion annually to the state’s economy, a five to one return on investment.

Plus the system supports 20,000 jobs, not including parks employees, the study revealed.

Dropkin said closing parks and sites actually costs the state and nearby communities millions of dollars in economic benefits. This is especially true for upstate communities for which state parks and historic sites are often the primary economic engines, she said.

Last spring, 88 parks were threatened with closure to save \$11 million, a proposal that was greeted with outrage and uproar from the public and local and state legislators. Dropkin said further cuts to the parks budget will result in more closures that will only exacerbate the state’s fiscal situation.

“Parks can not again be a casualty of Albany’s political gamesmanship without hurting the state’s economy and the 57 million visitors to New York’s parks last year. A healthy park system is a vital part of a healthy economy. The state parks budget is less than one-fifth of one percent of the total state budget. It is penny wise and pound foolish to keep cutting the state parks budget,” she said.

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