

Cuts to parks cost us all in long run; State's small annual investment is worth the revenue and enjoyment Llers reap

BY ROBIN DROPKIN. Robin Dropkin is executive director of Parks & Trails New York, a nonprofit advocate for the state's parks.

If you love Jones Beach, Heckscher, Hempstead Lake, Connetquot River, or any of the 209 other state parks and historic sites from Nassau and Suffolk up to Niagara Falls, the alarm has been sounded. Gov. David A. Paterson recently proposed to lay off 90 additional staff at the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation.

This would be a tremendous blow to New York's parks. While the maintenance, security and service workload at state parks have been going up, budgets and staffing have been going down. The office lost 17 percent of its permanent staff and almost 20 percent of its seasonal staff since 2008 - a total of more than 1,400 permanent and seasonal workers. During the previous decade, the operating budget declined steadily, although the state created 26 new state parks.

Long Island parks are particularly at risk. Earlier this year the governor threatened to close 10 parks on Long Island - more than one-third of the region's state parks - as well as close swimming pools at Heckscher, Montauk Downs and Jones Beach West (Jones Beach East was closed in 2009), and reduce educational services regionwide.

In the past three years, Long Island parks have lost a greater percentage of staff than the parks agency as a whole, including 20 percent of permanent staff and 25 percent of its park police. These cuts have already meant diminished security, seriously deferred maintenance and a deteriorating park experience for everyone.

There is no denying that the state is in fiscal trouble, but parks are being disproportionately hit. The parks jobs the governor proposes to cut by Dec. 31 represent almost 5 percent of the workers at the agency. Compare this with proposed cuts at the Department of Motor Vehicles of 2.6 percent, or the Department of Transportation of 1.4 percent. Parks, key to our quality of life, should be seen as no less essential.

Plus, unlike other agencies, the vast majority - more than 85 percent - of the parks agency's staff works directly on operations, out in the field. So these cuts will mean dirtier, less safe parks and historic sites, and the destruction of irreplaceable habitats. And, inevitably, they will mean park closings.

Attacking parks makes no sense as public or fiscal policy. Park attendance is up by 1.4 million this year - perhaps an indicator that in these hard times, people are spending more leisure time closer to home - and every dollar spent by visitors returns \$5 in revenue to the state, according to an independent report commissioned by Parks & Trails New York last year. Our report showed that spending by parks visitors returns almost \$2 billion to the state economy annually. Cutting parks threatens a significant revenue stream for the state.

This past spring, the threat to close parks was greeted with public outrage. More cuts will certainly result in park closures, infuriate the public and won't improve - will in fact worsen - the state's fiscal situation. Never before in New York's history have parks been closed for budgetary reasons, not even during the Great Depression.

The parks agency's \$160-million annual operating budget is minuscule: less than one quarter of 1 percent of the total state budget. The price of keeping open the 90 parks that had been slated for closing last summer - and protecting irreplaceable natural and historic resources for public use and enjoyment - was a mere \$11 million.

Do the math: It is incredibly penny-wise and pound-foolish to keep cutting the state parks budget. It's also a violation of the public trust. This is an alert to everyone who has ever enjoyed Long Island's majestic public beachfront, beautiful parks and unique historic sites: We must keep our state parks open and adequately funded, for ourselves and for our children.