

Campaign: Parks worthy of another \$100 mil.

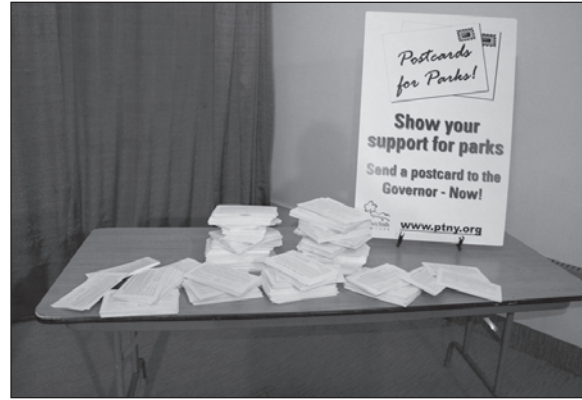
By **KAITLYN DMYTERKO**

Gazette staff writer

Representatives from environmental organizations urged the governor on Nov. 24 to include a second installment of \$100 million in capital funding in next year's budget to help subsidize restoration projects in 178 parks and 35 historic sites that encompass 325,000 acres across the state.

Organizations participating in Parks & Trails New York's campaign include The Adirondack Council, Audubon New York, Scenic Hudson and the Sierra Club. Together, they are pushing for the inclusion of \$100 million in the 2009-2010 state budget to make up for what they say was the state's lack of investment in the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation.

The lack of funding for that agency, the campaign argues, resulted in a \$650 million backlog of important park improvement projects.



LEFT: Citizens sent more than 4,000 postcards to the governor's office demanding that the state budget \$100 million for the revitalization of the state park system. RIGHT: Tim Sweeney, director of Parks & Trails says the state has overlooked the Office of Parks in previous years and the lack of funding has backlogged \$650 million in important park projects.

"Many of these projects are ones that cannot be ignored any longer," said Tim Sweeney, who serves as director of Parks & Trails' campaign for parks.

The capital funds would be used to repair failing sewer systems, electrical systems, roads and highways and other pieces of infrastructure that are in



Gazette photo by Chris Mueller

collapse, according to Sweeney.

For this year, the governor and Legislature provided \$132 million in capital funding to restore parks and historic sites within the state. The groups are worried that due to tough fiscal times, future budget cuts will negate past progress. Sweeney said last

year's capital was just the "first step in what must be a multi-year revitalization process for the agency."

One project covered by the \$132 million was the \$3 million repair of the dilapidated Staatsburg School located in the Mills Norrie State Park in Dutchess County. The once decrepit building was redone and now serves as regional park offices for employees.

According to a 2006 report released by Parks & Trails, New York's park system, now overseen by the Office of Parks, is the nation's oldest, established in 1885.

According to Parks & Trails, the state park system includes: 28 golf courses, 53 swimming pools, 76 beaches, 27 marinas, 40 boat launches, 18 nature centers, 817 cabins, 8,355 campsites and 1,350 miles of trails.

Next to California, New York parks have the highest operational budgets, at \$162,907,900 in November 2006,

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according to Parks & Trails.

According to Sean Mahar, director of government relations and communications of Audubon New York, 55 million people visit parks in this state each year.

Due to rising gas prices, state residents are looking to find recreation locally, said Mahar. In order to “meet the growing demand of increased visitation,” he said, it is “critical to ensure that these century-old facilities are maintained and improved to make them safe and attractive destinations for all state residents.”

Visitors give the economy a boost by spending money at restaurants and

on recreational equipment used in park areas, said Sweeney. “The impact that park visitors have on the economy is truly remarkable.”

According to a 2006 report released by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 3.8 million bird and wildlife watchers added \$1.6 billion in spending to the state economy, \$250 million in sales tax alone.

“State parks play a vital role as part of the state’s economic engine,” Mahar said.

“We are not oblivious to the economic challenges in our state and in our nation but further delaying these vital health and safety projects and other capital needs will only result in great liability exposure down the road,” Mahar said.

The Office of Park’s budget is half of what it was in 1992, according to a report released by Parks & Trails.

Since then, 29 parks have been added to the state.

“This strategic investment will enable the revitalization of New York state parks and historic park sites, a critical aspect of the state infrastructure as well as smart economic stimulus,” said Andy Bicking, director of public policy for Scenic Hudson. “What we need is a strategy to revitalize and to celebrate,” he said.

According to Sweeney, the additional capital would result in more than 1,000 jobs in the state being created by hiring 150 contractors in 57 of the state’s 62 counties. “Clearly this is a statewide economic development revitalization project,” he said.

The added capital the campaign is requesting for next year to rebuild and revitalize would have multiple benefits, according to Bicking, and would aid

in “building a healthy economy, great jobs, public health and protecting the environment.”

According to Sweeney, the \$100 million would not come directly from the state’s general fund, it would be from bond funding, which the groups believe helps create jobs and improve the economy.

“The ball is really in the governor’s court right now. We have to make sure that this second installment of \$100 million makes it into the proposed Executive Budget,” said Sweeney.

Parks & Trails sent more than 4,000 postcards received from citizens across the state to the governor’s offices. The postcards call for the governor and lawmakers to provide the funding next year for the continued revitalization of New York parks.
