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Parks called a sound investment

Group urges Paterson to allocate \$100M in budget for improvements

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ALBANY — A consortium of environmental groups is calling on Gov. David Paterson to include \$100 million in capital funding for New York's state parks in his 2009-2010 budget.

Representatives from Parks & Trails New York, Scenic Hudson, the state chapter of the Audubon Society and others held a press conference Monday morning to make the case for a broad program of revitalization — most of it administered by the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation.

Setting aside the environmental arguments for the upgrades, the advocates focused on the economic benefits to be derived from investment in the parks system. Individual projects cited by the group ranged from the new "Walkway Over the Hudson" pedestrian bridge — slated to open next year outside of Poughkeepsie — to more pressing work on dams, landfills and water and sewage systems serving parks.

The state committed \$75.5 million in bonded capital for park improvements in the 2008-2009 budget. Those funds and additional state monies went to 201 current projects, including everything from improvements at the Peerless Pool in Saratoga Spa State Park and the reconstruction of the boardwalk at Jones Beach.

Tim Sweeney of Parks & Trails said a similar commitment next year would be a "second installment" on more than \$650 million in proposed upgrades to state parks identified in a study completed by Parks Commissioner Carol Ash, who was appointed by former Gov. Eliot Spitzer.

Sweeney emphasized that many of these projects brought jobs to "areas of the state that have few other economic drivers."

Sweeney noted that the parks improvement initiative should continue to be a bonded effort as opposed to a direct obligation by the state's general fund, which is facing a widening deficit due to Wall Street's collapse and the general economic slowdown.

He added that parks improvements are the sort of infrastructure improvements likely to be favored in a federal stimulus package being designed by the incoming Obama administration. The nation's parks, Sweeney noted, still reflect the work done under the auspices of the federal Civilian Conservation Corps during the Great Depression.

Sean Mahar, legislative assistant for Audubon New York, said the downturn actually makes the parks improvements even more pressing due to the increasing number of cash-strapped New York families who are vacationing closer to home.

"The more we wait to make this investment, the more the costs increase and the benefits decrease," Mahar said.

Parks & Trails has collected more than 4,000 postcards asking Paterson to maintain the funding in next year's budget, which the governor is slated to release on Dec. 16.

Several state parks have already seen scaled-back services due to the governor's request for all state agencies to trim 10 percent from their operating budgets.

The state Office of Parks, Recreation and Historical Preservations oversees 178 parks and 35 historic sites.

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