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## The piper comes calling for our great parks system

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Of all the recreational services and venues the state provides, the one that touches more of us than any other is our terrific park system.

Last year, our 178 state parks and 35 historic sites had 55.7 million visitors. Most of those visitors were New Yorkers loving New York.

And according to a study by the University of Massachusetts commissioned by advocacy group Parks and Trails New York, all that traffic generated \$1.94 billion spent right here at home, mostly going to private businesses close to the parks, and supported 20,000 jobs. For every dollar we spent on the park system, we got \$5.50 back. That's a pretty good return.

Just think of the quality-of-life assets we have locally in Thacher up in the Helderbergs, Grafton on the Rensselaer plateau and, of course, the queen of them all, Saratoga Spa.

And also think the unthinkable, of what it would be like without them, because our state parks are in trouble.

Not imperiled, or about to close. But troubled, badly in need of continued capital improvements to stave off disaster over time. Some parks have outdated and inadequate electrical systems, or out-of-compliance septic and sewer systems, or approach roads that are crumbling, or landfills that need closing, or unsafe dams that need replacing. The list of needs is as long as the state.

One prime example of how badly out of whack the parks system is relates to the extremely popular Harriman State Park in Rockland and Orange counties. This park is one of the great breaths of fresh air for millions of downstaters and serves as a summer camp experience for many New York City kids.

Drinking water for the group camps at Harriman has to be brought in by tank car because there isn't enough money to fix and upgrade the existing piping system.

During the 12 years of the Pataki administration, great gains were made in acquiring new parks, but funding for capital improvements and maintenance costs did not keep up with acquisitions. Now the piper is at the door and he's tapping his foot.

When Carol Ash became commissioner of the state Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation with the arrival of the Spitzer administration, an astounding \$650 million to \$750 million in needed capital repairs were identified. Parks got a good start last year with an infusion of \$132 million to begin addressing the worst of it, notes Timothy Sweeney of Parks and Trails. More than \$75 million of that came courtesy of state-issued bonds approved by the Legislature, an appropriate use of long term financing.

Which brings us to the uncomfortable place we're at this year.

Governor Paterson's proposed budget included \$19 million each for Parks and the Department of

Environmental Conservation for capital improvements, with the funds coming from the Environmental Protection Fund. But the Legislature is disinclined to use the embattled EPF for this purpose, having other uses for those revenues. There's a battle royale, in fact, shaping up over attempts to extract all manner of stewardship funds from the EPF. But that's another story.

Still, this leaves critically needed funding for capital improvements in our park system in limbo.

Not that the Legislature is about to leave our beloved parks system high and dry, but the alarm needs to be sounded anyway. A figure being buzzed by some in the Legislature is \$40 million in state bonding for parks in the budget.

Bonding is the way to go, more reliable than depending on plummeting state revenues.

Commissioner Ash says she has \$100 million in shovel-ready projects, so the \$40 million will be put to immediate use.

You'd think the \$26.1 billion federal stimulus package for New York would be just the perfect bank for parks rehab money.

But Ash says there isn't a dime for state parks in the stimulus package.

Capital improvements are one thing, the operating budget another entirely. There isn't enough money there, either, but that's the economic reality of the moment. We got a taste of where that's going with the partial closure of the Schodack park for the winter and the use of volunteers to keep it limping along.

"We are not going to close any park completely," says the commissioner.

Instead, the length of upcoming season may be shortened, and so may operating hours. And yes, some fees are bound to go up. Not the entrance fees, but camping permits will rise from \$13 to \$15, for example.

"We trying to limit the impact as much as we can. We realize the huge amount of happiness our parks bring," says Ash.

Right she is, and this is no time to pull the plug on that.

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