

## Daily Gazette article

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### Report: State parks generate \$2B yearly

By Stephen Williams

**CAPITAL REGION** — People visiting New York's state parks have an annual economic impact of nearly \$2 billion, with \$249 million generated by visitors to the 10 parks in the Saratoga-Capital District region, according to a new study.

That impact is about five times what the state spends on parks, according to Parks & Trails New York, the private, nonprofit advocacy group that commissioned the study.

"Everybody's talking about return on investment, and we think parks are a pretty good investment," said Robin Dropkin, executive director of Parks & Trails New York.

The study, which was conducted by the Political Economy Research Institute at the University of Massachusetts, comes at a time when park budget cutbacks are proposed as part of efforts to close a multi-billion-dollar state budget gap.

Gov. David Paterson's 2009-10 executive budget proposes \$16.9 million in cuts from the park budget — cuts Parks & Trails New York opposes.

"We look at this [study] as a tool to show parks are a really good investment, even in lean times," Dropkin said.

Decisions about where cuts would take place, if the Legislature approves them, are still being made, said Dan Keefe, a spokesman for the state Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation.

"Nothing is final. We continue to look for ways to minimize the impact on patrons," Keefe said.

The study found that statewide, the 178 parks and 35 historic sites operated by the state Parks Department generate \$1.9 billion in sales for nearby private businesses.

The estimated economic impact of the facilities in the Saratoga-Capital parks region, which covers an 11-county area from the southern Adirondacks to Greene County, is \$249 million.

The cost of those parks in 2007-08 was \$58.6 million, which included \$47.6 million in operating costs and \$11 million in capital investment.

Those parks include Saratoga Spa and Moreau Lake in Saratoga County; John Boyd Thatcher in Albany County; Grafton Lakes in Rensselaer County; and Max V. Shaul and Mine Kill in Schoharie County.

Together, the 10 parks in the region had about 3.3 million visitors last year, according to the study. There were 55.7 million park visitors statewide, with Long Island parks seeing the most people, followed by the Niagara Frontier parks.

The Saratoga-Capital parks have 120 full-time employees and last summer peaked at 260 seasonal employees, but the study said park visitor spending supports nearly 3,000 private sector jobs.

The study estimates about 36 percent of visitors had traveled from other communities.

"These visitors spend money on food, shopping, transportation, recreation and lodging, all of which contribute significantly to New York's local and state economies," the report concludes.

Dropkin said the report shows a need for continued capital investments in the park system. Parks & Trails New York did a study two years ago that identified \$650 million in deferred maintenance and infrastructure needs at the state's parks.

However, none of the federal economic stimulus money was authorized to be used for improvements at state parks.

Dropkin noted that reservations for state park campgrounds are up from last year, a development parks officials link to

people's concerns about the economy.

"People are going to be relying on state parks more and more," Dropkin said.

Keefe said past experience is that economic downturns cause more people to visit state parks for recreation. He said the information provided by the study is helpful.

"It does underscore the fact that state parks provide a strong economic boost to their communities," he said.