



MAKE THE SWITCH »

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## Advocates call for more NY parks funding

Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. — Advocacy groups are calling for a new source of revenue to revitalize New York's parks and historic sites, suggesting state leaders consider a surcharge on vehicle registrations, a deposit on plastic grocery bags or other measures used by other states.

A report by the Alliance for New York State Parks and Parks & Trails New York says budget cuts have left the parks system understaffed and in need of repairs.

The report, released Thursday, calls for restoring the park agency's budget, investing \$1 billion over the next decade for repairs, and establishing a new, dedicated funding stream to ensure the future of the state's parks.

As examples of potential new funding streams, alliance Director Erik Kulleseid points to Montana's \$4 fee on vehicle registrations and Washington, D.C.'s nickel deposit on grocery bags.

Montana's vehicle fee, enacted in 2004, has kept that state's park system in better financial shape than many other states during the recession. Faced with closing 40 of 121 state parks to save money, Washington state followed Montana's lead in 2009 and enacted its own \$5 vehicle registration surcharge. In both states, drivers can opt out of the fees.

In Michigan, a new system for funding parks began in October. It gives residents the option of paying \$10 for a "recreation passport" when they register a vehicle. The one-year passport grants access to all 98 state parks and recreation areas, plus boat launches.

California's Proposition 21 on last month's ballot would have increased vehicle registration fees by \$18 a year to raise about \$500 million a year in a dedicated fund for the state's 278 parks. The proposition was defeated.

Last spring, Gov. David Paterson announced that dozens of New York's 178 parks and 35 historic sites would have to close and others would have to reduce services because of the state's budget deficit. After a public outcry, Paterson and the Legislature restored \$11 million to keep all the parks open.

Carol Ash, who resigned recently as New York's parks commissioner and now serves as an adviser to the alliance, said attendance at state parks has been rising as the economy forces people to seek recreation closer to home. Attendance is expected to reach 60 million visitors next year, she said.

The state parks budget has been cut from \$195 million in fiscal year 2008-09 to less than \$160 million for the current fiscal year, Ash said, and staffing has been reduced by more than 1,400 permanent and seasonal workers. Facilities are critically in need of repair — roofs, heating and plumbing systems, electrical systems, recreational fields, pools, roads, drinking water supplies and buildings — she said.

In his "Cleaner, Greener NY" plan, Gov.-elect Andrew Cuomo notes that open spaces support industries that generate billions of dollars in annual revenue for the state, including the \$54 billion outdoor recreation and

tourism industries. He says the state's park system creates nearly \$2 billion in revenue annually and supports more than 20,000 park-related jobs.

To ensure that state parks stay open, Cuomo said, the state parks office must rely on public-private partnerships with not-for-profit organizations that raise money for parks and help maintain them.

Cuomo has ruled out raising taxes and fees once he takes office in 2011, but parks boosters stress that investing in parks is good for the state's economy. New York's parks create \$5 in economic activity for every dollar the state invests, said Robin Dropkin, executive director of Parks & Trails New York.

Erik Kriss, budget spokesman for Paterson, said it's too soon to say whether park closings will be proposed for the next budget. But he said more cutbacks can be expected because the state faces a \$315 million deficit in the current fiscal year and a projected \$9 billion deficit in 2011-12.

Kriss noted that the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation has agreements with dozens of organizations, including large nonprofits that fully operate parks and historic sites as well as all-volunteer groups that operate a discrete building or program. It also has agreements with local governments to operate sites.

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Online:

Parks & Trails New York: <http://www.ptny.org/>

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