



## **Governor Spitzer's proposed parks budget:**

### **Giant step in right direction**

3/5/07

Parks & Trails New York lauds Governor Spitzer's proposed Executive parks budget as a giant step in the right direction, and we call on the Legislature to support it. We are very pleased that the Governor has recognized the need for increased public investment in parks. Our state park system here in New York is a treasure, with world-class attractions – beaches, waterfalls, lakes, forests, plus many historic and cultural sites. The 176 parks and 35 historic sites are extremely important to New York's families. Especially now with gas and transportation prices so high, it's critical to have good, close-to-home recreational opportunities and places to pursue healthy activities. With 55 million visits a year, our state parks are also economic generators and contribute greatly to the quality of life in the state.

The budget directly addresses several of the priorities outlined in our recent report on state parks, *Parks at a Turning Point—Restoring and Enhancing New York's State Park System*: stabilizing taxpayer support for parks, increasing the level of Environmental Protection Fund resources for park infrastructure, and strengthening environmental stewardship.

As our report demonstrates, our state parks have been chronically underfunded yet face increasing demands for resources and stewardship. Indeed, that's why we published the report, which reveals a magnificent park system that is tired looking and fraying at the edges, with a myriad of problems, both small and large—from bathrooms with peeling paint and broken stall doors to water systems that have been shut down due to health problems. If not addressed soon, these maintenance issues will turn into major problems requiring significantly greater expenditures.

When we examined state park finances, we found that state support for the park system has been essentially flat for more than a decade, resulting in a backlog of at least \$142 million in essential infrastructure projects.

Also, the parks agency's capital budget has been growing more slowly than its operating budget – just the opposite of what you would expect in an expanding system that over the last 12 years has added 27 new parks, comprising more than 60,000 acres. This capital funding squeeze has meant that many of these new parks have not yet been opened to the public.

In addition to deteriorating infrastructure, our *Parks at a Turning Point* report cites poor marketing, poor visitor information, and too few programs for visitors. So we hail the Governor's proposed "Outdoor Agenda," a comprehensive plan for promoting enjoyment of outdoor activities

and tourism in upstate New York — and we trust he will make parks and trails the centerpiece of these efforts.

We commend several specific items in the proposed budget. First, we support the 8 percent increase in General Fund support for operations and the \$3 million increase in appropriation from the State Park Infrastructure Fund (SPIF). In addition, the 52 new staff positions for OPRHP fill critical needs. The 10 new environmental stewardship positions are especially important at this time. The extraordinary and, in some cases, threatened natural resources found within our diverse park system are a big part of why people visit parks in the first place. If we fail to preserve them, even the most modern bathroom facility or state-of-the-art visitor center will prove pointless.

Parks & Trails New York also urges the Legislature to support the Governor's proposed \$100 million increase in the Environmental Protection Fund over the next two years. We fully support and pledge to work for the passage of the Bigger Better Bottle Bill, which will provide the increased funds for programs within the EPF and make communities cleaner and healthier places to live. This year's projected EPF increase of \$25 million offers more good news for New York's parks. An additional \$6.5 million from the EPF is slated to go to parks and land stewardship—a good start but nowhere near the, at a minimum, \$300 million we believe is needed to eliminate the backlog of capital projects and open the many new parks to the public.

The expanded EPF also adds to support for trails—our state's very popular “linear parks”—and for traditional parks by providing an additional \$8 million for land acquisition and an additional \$4.7 million for the municipal park grant program. The monies will help local communities across the state acquire and develop the trails and parks that add so much to the quality of life in New — the quality of life that is so attractive to business.

The Governor's proposed parks budget is, indeed, a giant step forward but the needs of the park system are great and to get ahead of the maintenance and infrastructure backlog will take a major infusion of capital funds, as well as a commitment to making sure that more park fees stay in the State Park Infrastructure Fund to ensure adequate money for stewardship.

We look forward to working with the new administration and the legislature, as well as the NYS Parks Council and park friends groups throughout the state, to build upon this excellent year-one budget to restore and enhance our magnificent park system and expand the state's network of greenways and trails so that our children and grandchildren can continue to experience the joys of the outdoors.

Thank you.