



Testimony
Of
Parks & Trails New York
On
The Proposed Executive Budget
Fiscal Year 2009-2010
Presented by
Timothy Sweeney
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Good afternoon Chairman Kruger, Chairman Farrell and members of the committees. My name is Tim Sweeney I am the Director of the Campaign for Parks at Parks & Trails New York. Parks & Trails New York is a statewide advocacy organization with more than 5,000 members and supporters. We work to expand, protect and promote a network of parks, trails and open spaces throughout our state for use and enjoyment by all.

New York's state parks, trails and historic sites are its crown jewels. They provide opportunities for recreational and cultural activities that enable each of us to improve our physical well being, lift our spirits, and learn about both the natural world and our rich heritage. State Parks also protect some of our most treasured natural resources and historic landscapes. And, with more than 55 million visitors annually, the state park system plays a vital role as part of the state's economic engine.

In November of 2006, Parks & Trails New York released its *Parks at a Turning Point* report in which we highlighted the many challenges facing the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP), particularly the agency's enormous capital projects backlog. To her credit, OPRHP Commissioner Carol Ash embraced our findings and directed her staff to dig deeper, to develop a precise accounting of the scope of the problems facing the entire state park system, and devise a plan for correcting those problems. Based on OPRHP's detailed analysis we now know that the system-wide state parks capital projects backlog is more than \$650 million.

Parks & Trails New York commends the Senate, the Assembly and Governor Paterson for recognizing the challenges OPRHP is facing and for providing a total of \$132 million in capital funding for the agency in fiscal year 2008- 2009 including \$75.5 million in new capital funding. This was the largest infusion of capital in the history of OPRHP, and a good first step in what must be a multi-year revitalization of the state park system.

To date, OPRHP has either spent or encumbered 94% of the \$75.5 million in new capital funding. And, according to OPRHP's November 11, report to the legislature, the agency is on track to encumber the entire \$75.5 million by March 31, 2009 and complete the bulk of the construction work prior to the 2009 summer operating season. Clearly, OPRHP is capable of moving large sums of money in a timely and effective manner.

Parks Capital Budget

State parks and historic sites are economic drivers, often in areas of the state that have few others. And, the revitalization projects currently underway throughout the state park system are creating much needed jobs for local contractors and their employees. According to OPRHP, there have been over 1000 jobs created as a direct result of the ongoing state parks revitalization. Moreover, OPRHP has contracts for work in 57 of the state's 62 counties. Clearly the revitalization of the state park system is creating statewide economic benefits.

In the past, challenging economic times, and the need to put people back to work, have resulted in some of this nation's greatest achievements in infrastructure construction and improvement. From work done by the Civilian Conservation Corps on parks, roads, and bridges during the Great Depression, to the construction of the interstate highway system in the 1950's and 60's, hard times have been eased by investment in infrastructure, with much to show in the end.

While Parks & Trails New York has been advocating for a second installment of \$100 million for OPRHP capital projects, we are not oblivious to the state's current fiscal crisis. Given the state of the economy, Parks & Trails New York supports Governor Paterson's proposal to provide a total of \$65 million in capital funding for state parks. We are, however, hopeful that this number will be bolstered by the \$35.3 million in parks capital the Governor has requested as part of a federal economic stimulus package.

Failing to adequately fund OPRHP's revitalization efforts will mean a loss in the momentum the agency has built up, and will add years until the \$650 million capital projects backlog can be eliminated.

Parks Operating Budget

The proposed operating budget for OPRHP is \$227 million, \$139.6 million of which comes from the state's general fund. This figure is based on the agency's budget for this fiscal year after cuts totaling more than 10 percent were taken. Consequently, OPRHP will be reducing the hours of operations, cutting services and reducing programming at selected parks and historic sites. OPRHP will also be increasing the fees charged at OPRHP operated golf courses, marinas, campgrounds and for cabin rentals and the Empire Passport. These fee increases are expected to bring in an additional \$6.5 million in revenue for OPRHP operations.

We believe the budget reductions for OPRHP operations are a step in the wrong direction. At a time when people will increasingly depend on recreational opportunities that are both close to home and affordable, state parks need to be fully funded and staffed. The citizens of the State of New York love their parks, and they have every right to expect them to be open, clean and safe.

While the Governor's proposed budget does not call for any layoffs of OPRHP staff, the "hard hiring freeze" currently in place will continue through next year and as a result the agency will lose an estimated 57 positions through attrition. Additionally, the training program for new State Park Police officers previously scheduled for 2008 has been cancelled. This means that OPRHP will not have the services of the thirty officers who would have graduated in May of 2009. Additionally, fewer seasonal employees will be hired, and the Governor's budget eliminates the state's Green Thumb program for senior citizens who were hired as seasonal employees. These cuts at OPRHP are going to have serious impacts. The agency is still suffering the effects of nearly two decades of staff shortages.

In his letter to President-elect Obama, Governor Paterson mentions the need for a Youth Conservation Corps program. Given the cuts to OPRHP's operating budget and the elimination of many seasonal positions, Parks &

Trails New York recommends that serious consideration be given to the development of such a program. OPRHP already has a model in place to hire thousands of seasonal workers.

Parks & Trails New York urges the legislature to ensure that OPRHP has sufficient operational funding; to provide the agency with the staff and resources needed to offer clean and safe park facilities and high quality recreational programming.

Keep Parks Accessible to All

While Parks & Trails New York is disappointed that the state is proposing to raise some user fees, we believe it's better to increase fees on marinas, golfing and cabin rentals rather than on general admission. In these tough times we need to ensure that basic park services are accessible to all New Yorkers.

Environmental Protection Fund

The proposed Executive Budget includes \$205 million in funding for the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF). This is a reduction of \$50 million from the \$255 million in this year's EPF and a far cry from the \$300 million EPF that was statutorily set for fiscal year 2009-2010.

The proposed EPF severely cuts funding for municipal parks projects from \$21.2 million to \$8.4 million, a nearly two-thirds reduction, and calls for a reduction from \$6 million to \$2 million in parks funding for inner city and underserved communities. By shifting the financial burden from the state to the municipalities, these proposed changes could be devastating to municipal parks projects.

In addition to drastic cuts in the EPF, the proposed budget seeks to change the primary source of EPF funding from the Real Estate Transfer Tax (RETT) to the proceeds from the unclaimed beverage container deposits that would escheat to the state as part of an expanded bottle bill. It should be noted that the expanded bottle bill is also included in the proposed budget for fiscal year 2009-2010, and is, therefore, not a guaranteed source of funding for the EPF.

While Parks & Trails New York wholeheartedly supports the expansion of New York State's bottle bill, we believe the proceeds from any unclaimed deposits that escheat to the state should be used to supplement, not supplant, the RETT as the primary source of funding for the EPF.

Hudson River Valley Greenway

The Hudson River Valley Greenway (Greenway) facilitates a regional approach to planning and resources management in an area of the state that continues to face tremendous development pressure. Through their aids-to-localities community grants the Greenway encourages economic development while preserving and enhancing natural and cultural resources - emphasizing agriculture, tourism and the revitalization of community centers and waterfronts. In 2008, the Greenway disbursed over \$191,841 in funding for smart growth and economic development projects throughout the Hudson River Valley, leveraging \$415,036 in local matching funds.

Parks & Trails New York is concerned that abolishing the Greenway will result in a loss of program continuity and institutional knowledge and will reduce buy-in from the municipalities that currently play a significant role in guiding the Greenway's mission. All of this, we believe, will result in significant setbacks for these important efforts.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I'd be happy to answer any questions you may have.