



**Testimony of
Parks & Trails New York
Before the NYS Assembly Committees on
Tourism, Arts and Sports Development, Ways and Means,
Oversight, Analysis and Investigation and Environmental Conservation
On
The Capital Plan for Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation
for fiscal year 2008-2009**

November 18, 2008

Hello, 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 not-for-profit 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.

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. In conducting research for the report, Parks & Trails New York board members traveled to parks across the state, identifying more than \$300 million in capital funding needs.

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 \$700 million.

In addition to identifying the capital needs, OPRHP also developed a list of projects that were already designed and ready to go once the necessary funding was in place. The project list OPRHP put forth addressed four categories, including:

Health and safety projects, including; drinking water and sewage treatment systems, fuel storage tanks, dams and bridges of questionable integrity, deficient electrical systems and improperly closed landfills.

Remediation of existing facilities, including; the rehabilitation and maintenance of plumbing and heating systems, pools, visitor centers, restrooms, and roads and parking areas.

Development of new facilities, including; improvements to recently acquired properties.

Natural resource stewardship, including projects to protect the vast array of natural resources found within the park system.

Parks & Trails New York commends the Assembly, the Senate 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 the benefits of this investment are already being realized at parks and historic sites across the state.

To date, OPRHP has either spent or encumbered 94% of the \$75.5 million in capital funding, and we are little more than half way through the fiscal year. 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.

New York's state parks 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. And, with more than 55 million visitors annually, the state park system plays a vital role as part of the state's economic engine.

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. To date, there have been over 1000 jobs created as a direct result of the ongoing parks revitalization. OPRHP has contracted with over 150 contractors who in turn have hired more than 400 sub-contractors. The work these contractors are doing is taking place in 57 of the state's 62 counties. Clearly the revitalization of the state park system is creating statewide economic benefits.

Over the past several weeks I have had the opportunity to travel to each of the state park regions, and I have seen firsthand some of the revitalization work that is either ongoing, or already completed. I have also had an opportunity to speak with many members of park and historic site Friends organizations and park users who are excited by the improvements they are seeing, but are also aware that much more needs to be done.

Without doubt, the \$75.5 million in bonded capital funding for OPRHP in the 2008-2009 budget was a significant first step toward overcoming the years of underinvestment and lack of resources that have plagued our state parks and historic sites for far too long. It was, however, just the first step in what must be a multi-year effort to overcome the \$700 million capital backlog.

Investing in our future by providing bonded funding for capital improvements is precisely the type of work for which bonds are intended. Therefore, I strongly urge you to support a second installment of capital funding for OPRHP in next year's state budget to correct minor problems before they become major problems and major problems before they become insurmountable.

The citizens of the State of New York love their parks, and have every right to expect them to be open, clean and safe. In the span of just a few weeks, Parks & Trails New York has received over 4000 postcards, which we will deliver to Governor Paterson later this week. These postcards are in response to our *Postcards for Parks* campaign and they urge the Governor to continue his support of OPRHP by including in next year's budget the second installment of \$100 million in capital funds and sufficient operational funding to assure the agency has the staff and resources needed to operate the state's parks and historic sites in a way the public expects and deserves. If we lined up all of the postcards received thus far they would stretch for well over ½ mile.

This incredible response in such a short period of time is a good indication of the important role the state park system plays in the lives of New Yorkers from every region of the state. I urge all members of the legislature to take this into consideration during budget negotiations on the state budget for fiscal year 2009-2010.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.