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Parks & Trails New York Preliminary Comments on the Development Of the Master Plan For Midway State Park Submitted July 30, 2008

Please accept the following comments from Parks & Trails New York on the development of a Master Plan for Midway State Park.

Parks & Trails New York commends Commissioner Ash and the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP) for undertaking a concerted effort to address the Master Plan backlog that currently exists in the State Park System. By proposing to annually complete five Master Plans over the next five years, OPRHP is undertaking an aggressive planning campaign that will help ensure the health and vitality of the State Park System for future generations. We also applaud Governor Paterson, the State Senate and State Assembly for their leadership in providing the largest infusion of capital funding in the history of OPRHP, as well as much needed additional staff for the agency, which includes the planners and biologists required to take on the ambitious master planning schedule.

At a recent public information meeting held on the Master Plan for Midway State Park, OPRHP outlined a list of priority themes and initiatives that have been developed to guide the agency's decision making as the master planning process moves forward. Among the priorities are: Revitalizing our Parks and Historic Sites, Natural Resource Stewardship and Interpretation, and creating Connections and Sustainability. Parks & Trails New York agrees with OPRHP's assessment of the priority issues and we recommend the application of these priorities to the Master Plan being developed for Midway State Park. Given Midway's unique character, that of an amusement park of considerable historical significance, it does not fit the typical mold of a State Park, but we believe it is still possible to apply OPRHP's overarching priorities as the Master Plan is developed.

Natural Resources - As is to be expected in an amusement park setting, much of the natural environment at Midway State Park has been altered by human activity. This, however, does not mean that the Master Plan should not ensure the protection of the altered landscape as well as those areas of the park that have not been altered. The Master Plan should look to incorporate the principles of sound environmental stewardship in concert with providing a meaningful non-traditional park experience.

As the public information packet describes, despite the developed nature of the park there are a number of wildlife species that are commonly seen in the area, and a complete analysis of the fauna and flora will be conducted. This analysis, which should include aquatic species found in the lake, will also provide valuable information about the presence of non-native and invasive species that may need to be eradicated or managed in a way that will prevent or control their encroachment into other areas of the Park and Chautauqua Lake. Parks & Trails New York supports OPRHP's decision to conduct a thorough biological survey of the Park.

Parks & Trails New York also recommends the creation of a Master Plan that will take full advantage of the park's lakeside location. This could be through continued and/or increased public access to Chautauqua Lake for fishing and boating and an examination of providing a beach for swimming. While we encourage the use of the lake for boating, we would recommend that the Master Plan focus on providing lake access for car top boats, and/or the possibility of offering rental kayaks and canoes at the Park as a way of getting people in touch with the water. Parks & Trails New York also recommends the establishment of best management practices to ensure that the operation of the Park and amusement attractions do not negatively impact lake water quality.

Education and Interpretation – With people spending less time outdoors it becomes increasingly important that the stewards of our natural resources provide education and guidance to the public as to how we can best protect and enjoy our environment. All Master Plans for State Parks should address how visitors will be educated about the natural features of the park that make it special. This can include signage, interactive displays, or a nature center. The Plan should also provide opportunities for education and interpretation of the natural world as a whole, a big picture approach to learning about the environment and global environmental issues. Given Midway's amusement park setting it may be possible to incorporate environmental education into the various amusements, or create new games with an environmental education focus.

Connections – As was stated earlier, making connections is a priority that OPRHP has established for all park Master Plans. Parks & Trails New York recommends that the Master Plan should include a vision for linking Midway State Park with Long Point State Park, which is located on the shores of Chautauqua Lake, just a couple of miles from Midway. We recommend examining connections both on land and via the lake. It is also important for the Master Plan to address the possibility of linking trails in the Park with those outside the Park. Additionally, consideration should be given to acquiring any land abutting the park as it becomes available.

Infrastructure – As is the case at many, if not all, of the state's 213 State Parks and Historic Sites, years of underinvestment and deferred maintenance have taken their toll on infrastructure. As OPRHP has embarked on a multi-year program to overcome its backlog of capital projects and revitalize the State Park System, it is imperative that the Master Plan for Midway State Park include an accurate assessment of all the infrastructure needs in the Park including buildings, pavilions, roads, bridges, water systems (both drinking and sewer) and any other man made improvements in the Park. The more hard evidence the agency can present to the public, the Governor and the Legislature regarding capital needs, the more likely it will be that the necessary capital funding will be provided in future state budgets. Parks & Trails New York also recommends that when assessing the infrastructure needs of not only Midway, but all State Parks for which Master Plans are being developed, that consideration is given to the re-use and retrofitting of existing structures as a way of keeping capital costs down.

Sustainability – The principles of sustainability should be incorporated into every component of the Master Plan. This includes employing sustainable building practices that conform to the requirements for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification for new buildings, and the use of energy conservation practices in existing buildings. The Plan should also provide for the use of energy efficient lighting and alternative fuel vehicles wherever possible. The Plan should also consider the current mowing practices employed at the park with an eye toward possibly reducing the amount of mowed area. Reduced mowing would provide significant savings in both fuel and personnel expenses, improve air quality, and allow areas that are currently mowed to return to a more natural condition –providing new habitat for a variety of birds and other wildlife. Finally, the Plan should evaluate the use of chemicals on the park’s grounds to determine if less toxic, yet effective, means of weed and pest control may be used.

Conclusion – Parks & Trails New York appreciates the opportunity to submit comments early in the Master Plan process. We look forward to working with OPRHP on this and many other projects. And, we look forward to the release of the Draft Master Plan and Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the Midway State Park.