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## Parks & Trails New York Preliminary Comments on the Development Of the Master Plan For Saratoga Spa State Park Submitted July 18, 2008

Please accept the following comments from Parks & Trails New York on the development of a Master Plan for the Saratoga Spa 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, which includes the planners and biologists required to take on the ambitious master planning schedule.

As was highlighted at OPRHP's public information session for the Saratoga Spa State Park Master Plan (Plan), held on June 16, 2008, new priority themes and initiatives 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 that must be addressed not only in Saratoga Spa State Park, but in every Master Plan the agency develops. We also recognize that one of OPRHP's greatest challenges is balancing stewardship of our natural resources with providing opportunities for recreational activities. Parks & Trails New York believes that ultimately responsible stewardship is paramount.

The Saratoga Spa State Park offers an extraordinary combination of natural beauty, man-made improvements and historic and cultural amenities that result in a truly unique park experience. This wide array of attributes, however, can present challenges when seeking to develop a Plan that will meet the needs of all of the populations served by the Park while at the same time remaining true to OPRHP's guiding principles as set forth in Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation Law – Article 3, § 3.02

*The office shall operate and maintain the state park, recreation and historic site system to conserve, protect and enhance the natural, ecological, historic, cultural and recreational resources contained therein and to provide for the public enjoyment of and access to these resources in a manner which will protect them for future generations.*

The Information Packet distributed by OPRHP at the Saratoga Public Information Meeting contains a comprehensive Preliminary List of Potential Issues and Concerns. By in large, Parks & Trails New York agrees with OPRHP that these are the priority issues that must be addressed in the Plan, but we will take this opportunity to discuss a few of the issues in detail.

**Natural Resources** – Despite the fact that much of the land that comprises the Saratoga Spa State Park has been altered by human activities, the conservation, protection and enhancement of the park’s natural resources must be a primary theme that cuts across all Plan components. To fully assess the impacts to natural resources from any proposed activity, park planners must have access to a complete list of all species of flora and fauna found in the Park. Therefore, Parks & Trails New York recommends that a thorough biological inventory of the Park be conducted. A biological inventory 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.

Care must also be taken to develop a Plan that will ensure that the Park’s previously identified populations of the endangered Karner Blue Butterfly and the threatened Frosted Elfin Butterfly are afforded the protections necessary to ensure their survival.

The two creeks running through the Park, the Geyser Brook and Kayaderoseras Creek, are showing signs of significant stream bank erosion and undermining which could pose a threat to water quality and public safety. It would be advisable for the Plan to include a strategy for stream bank stabilization and erosion control. Ideally this would include natural stabilization and erosion control methods wherever possible.

**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 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.

**Connections** – As was stated earlier, making connections is a priority that OPRHP has established for all park Master Plans. With an ever-growing population and increased development pressure in and around the Saratoga Springs area, the state should vigorously pursue acquiring any land abutting the Park that becomes available. It would also be useful for the Plan to address the possibility of linking trails in the Park with those outside the Park. Parks & Trails New York recommends establishing a formal connection/extension for the Railroad Run, between the YMCA and the Park. This extension would require a safe crossing of Ballston Road, a trail along the side of the road, and a connection to bring trail users into the Park. Trailhead parking could also be developed.

**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 Plan include an accurate assessment of all of the infrastructure needs in the Park including buildings, roads, bridges, dams, swimming pools, 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 Saratoga Spa State Park, but all State Parks for which Master Plans are being developed, that consideration be given to the re-use and retro-fitting of existing structures as a way of keeping capital costs down.

**Sustainability** – The principles of sustainability should be incorporated into every component of the 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 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 golf courses and other grounds to determine if less toxic, yet effective, means of weed and pest control may be used.

**Dog Park** -- At the public information meeting a number of people supported the idea of establishing a fenced area within the park to be used as a dog park where dogs would be allowed to run unleashed. Parks & Trails New York believes that establishing a designated area for dogs to run freely may be more appropriate in municipal parks.

**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 Saratoga Spa State Park.