



Parks & Trails
NEW YORK

December 11, 2008

Congressman Gary Ackerman
U. S. House of Representatives
2243 Rayburn HOB
Washington, DC 20515

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Re: Federal Funding for NYS Park and Trail Outdoor Recreation
Infrastructure Projects

Dear Congressman Ackerman:

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.

For this reason I urge you and all members of New York's Congressional Delegation to reach out to President-elect Obama, his transition team, and the leadership of both houses of Congress, to ensure that the capital needs of New York's recreation infrastructure are well represented when monies are made available for infrastructure improvements as part of a federal economic stimulus program.

As the economic stimulus package takes shape, it is critical that the federal legislation allows New York State to direct a portion of the infrastructure monies to state park and trail projects. This could be accomplished by including parks as a direct funding purpose, or by ensuring that the transportation, water, and sewer state revolving funds, and other categories, have the necessary flexibility for New York State to allocate a portion of the federal funds to park and trail projects.

Revitalizing New York State Parks

The state Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP) has compiled a list of capital projects that have an estimated total cost of \$100 million. The list includes 48 shovel ready projects totaling almost \$55 million that are already designed - and could be put out to bid within 60-90 days. The remainder of the \$100 million project list could be put under state contract during the fiscal year beginning April 1, 2009.



Investing federal economic stimulus monies for state parks projects in the coming fiscal year will result in the creation of 2,000 private sector construction and engineering jobs. Located in 25 counties, including a number of upstate communities, the 48 high visibility, shovel-ready projects will likely attract positive media coverage and help bolster support for future infrastructure funding.

New York State is fortunate to have an unparalleled state park system, comprised of 178 parks and 35 historic sites, totaling 325,000 acres. New York State parks and historic sites provide opportunities for recreational and cultural activities, preserve some of the state's most treasured natural resources and historic landscapes, and provide vital habitat for countless species of fauna and flora - improving the quality of life for New Yorkers and the millions of visitors who choose to spend their vacation time in New York.

Equally important are the economic benefits that parks and historic sites provide to the state and local economies. The New York State park system attracts more than 55 million visitors each year. And, as people choose to vacation closer to home this number is likely to rise. These visitors spend money not only within the confines of our state parks, but also in communities near our parks - many times in areas of the state that have few other economic drivers.

All of this notwithstanding, New York's state parks are suffering the effects of years of underinvestment and lack of resources that have resulted in a \$650 million backlog in capital projects. These projects range from those that impact public health and safety to those that provide for the protection of natural resources.

Governor Paterson, and the New York State legislature, recognizing the enormous challenges the OPRHP is facing, provided a total of \$132 million in capital funding for the agency in the state budget for state fiscal year 2008-2009 - including \$75.5 million in new bonded capital. This was the largest infusion of capital funding in the history of the agency. And, while this was a step in the right direction, it was just the first step in what must be a multi-year effort to revitalize New York's state parks. Unfortunately, because of the state's worsening economic situation, getting a second installment of significant capital funding in the state budget for state fiscal year 2009-2010 remains an open question.

The work made possible by this year's investment in capital projects can be seen at nearly 200 parks and historic sites across New York. To date, the ongoing revitalization at state parks has created over 1000 construction and engineering jobs, with work taking place in 57 of the state's 62 counties - clearly providing statewide economic benefits. And, with just over one-half of the state's fiscal year elapsed, OPRHP has spent or encumbered 96% of the \$75.5 million in new capital monies. Clearly, OPRHP has demonstrated the ability to put capital funds to work in a timely manner.

Completing the Erie Canalway Trail – New York’s premier cross-state trail

When complete, the Erie Canalway Trail, running from Buffalo to Albany, will be one of the longest multi-use trails in the nation. Recently, citing declining toll revenues, the New York State Thruway Authority, the entity responsible for construction and maintenance of the Canalway Trail System, has deferred further construction of the remaining 101 miles of trail between Buffalo and Albany.

The attached chart lists ready-to-go trail construction projects, located in five counties and totaling almost \$12 million, that will advance the trail 37 miles further to completion. Design and advance detail plans are complete for each one.

Extending 366 miles across New York, the Erie Canalway Trail, which follows the historic Erie Canal corridor from Buffalo to Albany, brings economic, public health, tourism, and quality of life benefits to more than one million New Yorkers living in upstate canal communities. The Erie Canalway Trail is 75% complete and on its way to becoming a premiere tourist destination for cyclists and other outdoor enthusiasts while connecting numerous villages and towns and cities such as Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, Utica and Albany as well as serving as the backbone of a statewide trail system.

A user count conducted in 2007 and 2008 in the Rochester area indicated there may be as many as 200,000 annual visitors to the Erie Canalway Trail in just this one 15-mile section alone. This figure only hints at the appeal the Canalway Trail will have when the remaining sections are built and the Canalway Trail stretches unbroken from Buffalo to Albany.

The projects cited herewith are all important infrastructure projects that not only create construction jobs but boost local economies through tourism and provide close-to-home and affordable recreational destinations. We urge you to join with the other members of the New York State Congressional Delegation and invest in these capital improvements to some of New York’s most treasured recreational resources - its parks and trails.

Thank you for your assistance with this important issue, and for your continued service to the people of the State of New York. If you have any questions or need more information please call me at (518) 434-1583.

Sincerely,



Robin Dropkin
Executive Director

Parks & Trails New York is a statewide not-for-profit organization working to expand, protect and promote a network of parks, trails and open spaces throughout the state for use and enjoyment by all.