



Testimony of Parks & Trails New York

at the

Joint Legislative Public Hearing on the
2011-2012 Executive Budget Proposal

Respectfully submitted by Robin Dropkin, February 8, 2011

Good afternoon and thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify today. I would like to start by telling you a bit about Parks & Trails New York and about myself. Parks & Trails New York has been the leading statewide advocate for New York's parks and trails for more than 25 years, and I have been the Executive Director of the organization for eight years. I was drawn to this organization because although I'm originally a Jersey girl my special place growing up was not in New Jersey but in New York. It was Bear Mountain State Park. All week I dreamed of and looked forward to our Sunday outings at the park, each week hoping that this would be the week I would actually see a bear.

Today that dream is still alive. If you visit Bear Mountain...or Harriman...or Jones Beach on any weekend in nice weather you will find families of all ethnicities and all socio-economic levels speaking dozens of languages. You will find the heart of New York.

New York's park system is one of its enduring legacies. But today we know that that legacy is in danger.

The park agency's budget has been cut 18% over the last few years – more than most agencies – and it is operating today with 1500 fewer staff than it was in 2008. The Governor's proposed

budget calls for a \$13 million General Fund reduction in the parks budget. We're pleased that the parks agency and the other environmental agencies were not cut disproportionately this year but the toll of the last few years will continue to weigh heavily. Although the parks agency says it will achieve the majority of its mandated reduction through the annualized savings of actions taken in the current fiscal year, including the Early Retirement Incentive and Layoffs implemented last fall and the cancellation of the Empire State Games, there still will remain a gap that will have to somehow be bridged. It remains to be seen how those savings will be accomplished. I think what we can say for sure is that the reduction of services – less mowing, less cleaning of restrooms, less nature programs – will certainly be felt by park visitors.

The Governor has said that this parks budget won't lead to parks closings. We commend the Governor for realizing the importance of parks to the people of New York and to the state's economy. According to a 2009 study, the NYS Park System boosts the state's economy to the tune of nearly \$2 billion annually – that's a 5 to 1 return on investment.

However, despite the last minute agreement before Memorial Day last year to keep parks open by restoring \$11 million to the budget, the state has been forced to forsake management of three parks, one historic site and two golf courses. To the father in Lackawana who wants to take his kid to Knox Farm it doesn't really matter under whose watch the park was closed. All he knows is that the park is closed. And to the small businessperson in Little Falls who will lose business and whose revenues will fall and who will perhaps have to lay off workers because tourists aren't coming to visit Herkimer Home, it doesn't really matter who or why the site closed. It just matters that it's closed.

It's hardly as if parks were flush at the beginning of this recession. Our state parks have been chronically underfunded for decades. The result is a magnificent park system that is unraveling at the edges, with a myriad of problems, both small and large—from bathrooms with peeling paint and broken stall doors to water and sewer systems that have been shut down due to health reasons. The state park operations budget has been on a downward slide for more than 15 years.

And let's not forget that during that same period of time the system expanded by 27 new parks and 60,000 acres.

On the capital side, things are just as or even more dire. Today, there is a documented backlog of more than \$1 billion in park capital infrastructure needs – almost half of which is health and safety related. While we're pleased that the parks capital budget was not reduced further from last year, it is at an historical low and conditions will continue to slip backwards each year unless a commitment is made to address the system's deteriorated facilities and pressing health and safety issues.

People who work for State Parks are some of the most creative and most dedicated state workers around. No doubt, the parks agency will find a way to continue to limp along and keep the parks together with spit and duct tape (although hopefully they have a large back supply of duct tape since parks' non-personnel services budget is decimated).

But is this the kind of park system we want here in New York? Is this the kind of park system we want for New York families still struggling from the economic downturn? Is this the kind of park system we want visitors from around the nation and the world to experience? I don't think so. The death by 1,000 cuts to the legacy of our magnificent state park system is a huge price for the people of New York to pay for a miniscule savings to the state budget.

Of course, we understand the Governor's number one priority is the huge budget deficit and we appreciate his single-mindedness in this regard. But in every crisis there are opportunities and perhaps there are opportunities here to explore new ways to revitalize our park system, such as fostering a more robust park friends and volunteer program and a new dedicated funding stream for parks. It doesn't so much matter the source of that funding stream – a penny or two fee for disposable plastic bags or a license plate supplement – but that there is a united commitment to finding a way to turn around the decline of our park system. Models for public-private partnerships and dedicated park funding exist in other places. We should study the experience of

other jurisdictions, combine it with New York spunk and creativity, develop the model that best suits New York, and get going.

Let's find the opportunity in crisis this time that leaves our finest assets, such as our magnificent park system, intact and flourishing. Parks & Trails New York looks forward to rolling up our sleeves and working with the Senate, the Assembly and the new administration on protecting and preserving the legacy of our great park system.

Before I go I do want to thank the Governor for preserving the budget of the Environmental Protection Fund at last year's level of \$134 million and maintaining the Fund's integrity. The EPF is the lifeblood of environmental funding in New York. We are especially gratified that funding for state land stewardship and the municipal park grant program remained steady.