



Testimony
Of
Parks & Trails New York
On
The Clean Water, Clean Air & Green Jobs Bond Act of 2009
Before
New York State Assembly Committee on Environmental Conservation
May 27, 2009

Good morning Chairman Sweeney and members of the committee. My name is Tim Sweeney; I am the Director of the Campaign for Parks at Parks & Trails New York - a statewide advocacy organization with more than 5,000 members and supporters. We work to promote and protect a network of parks, trails and open spaces throughout New York State. I want to thank the Chair for convening this hearing and for affording me the opportunity to testify in support of the Clean Water, Clean Air & Green Jobs Bond Act of 2009.

I would also like to thank the Chairman and members of the committee for your hard work in enacting a state budget for fiscal year 2009-2010 that funded the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) at \$222 million, maintained the Real Estate Transfer Tax as the primary source of funding for the EPF, protected the fund from a further sweep of money and provided \$19 million in bonded capital for the State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP). Given the state's current fiscal situation, the enacted budget was truly a victory for the environment.

The issue today, however, is not the budget that was enacted, but the need for another environmental victory, namely, the Clean Water, Clean Air, & Green Jobs Bond Act of 2009 (Bond Act). Each year New York's environmental funding needs greatly exceed the amount of available funding. The Bond Act will go a long way toward filling the gap between available and needed funding. The Bond Act is essential to begin to get the upper hand on our failing environmental infrastructure as well as providing opportunities to bolster the state's economy through the creation of green jobs. It is estimated that the Bond Act will create 100,000 jobs statewide.

This year and next we are fortunate to have funding from the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act (federal stimulus) that can be used for variety of environmental projects, sadly, no federal

stimulus monies were directly provided for needed improvements to state parks. If enacted, the Bond Act will be an important source of environmental funding that can be used for parks projects, and it will be available for years after the federal stimulus dollars have been exhausted.

New York State has a long and proud tradition of being a leader in environmental protection and our state parks system is second to none. Over the past several years, however, New York's environmental and parks infrastructure has been deteriorating, and the health and safety of all New Yorkers is increasingly threatened as a result. We need look no further than the \$650 million capital projects backlog OPRHP is grappling with, the dozens of waste water treatment facilities across the state in need of major upgrades, or the alarming rise in asthma to realize just how bad the situation has gotten.

Equally important for New York State are the economic benefits we enjoy because of the state's wealth of natural resources and scenic beauty. Tourism is one of New York's leading industries and it has as its foundation the richness of the state's environment. To ensure that New York State continues to reap the economic benefits made possible by our natural resources we must make certain that there is adequate funding available to protect those resources.

State Parks Capital Projects Backlog

As was revealed in a report entitled *The NYS Park System: An Economic Asset to the Empire State*, commissioned by Parks & Trails New York, and written by the Political Economy Research Institute of the University of Massachusetts, the State Parks System brings the state and local economies nearly \$2 billion annually in economic benefits, and accounts for the creation of 20,000 jobs exclusive of OPRHP employees. I have attached to my testimony a copy of the Executive Summary of the report.

Unfortunately, OPRHP's overwhelming capital projects backlog includes many projects that directly impact public health and safety and others that make our parks and historic sites less appealing to visit. Our state parks system is plagued by failed sewage systems, drinking water systems in need of upgrades, dams of questionable integrity, failing electrical systems and landfills that have not been closed in accord with Department of Environmental Conservation requirements. Here are a few examples of OPRHP's backlogged capital projects that directly impact public health and safety, but which the agency is not able to undertake due to a lack of funding:

- Niagara County - Niagara Falls State Park - \$25 million to replace the Goat Island Bridge that is used by millions of visitors to Niagara Falls each year
- Bronx County - Roberto Clemente State Park - \$16 million to rehabilitate a failing seawall bulkhead
- Orange County - Harriman State Park - \$15 million to upgrade outdated water and sewer systems and \$8.8 million to upgrade Sebago Lake Dam to meet current standards
- Suffolk County - Caleb Smith State Park - \$3.2 million for Dam and Spillway upgrades to bring them into compliance with safety requirements

- Nassau County - Hempstead Lake State Park - \$2.5 million for Dam and Spillway upgrades to bring them into compliance with safety requirements
- Broome County - Chenango Valley State Park - \$2.4 million for upgrades to electric and water systems
- Rockland County - Bear Mountain State Park - \$2.15 million to replace failing drinking water lines

These projects I've listed are just the tip of the iceberg of OPRHP's \$650 million capital backlog, but I think they are a good indication that problems exist statewide, in every parks region. I also want to stress that the projects listed are among those that impact public health and safety. There are myriad other improvements on OPRHP's projects list that are necessary to keep our state parks and historic sites attractive to visitors.

If OPRHP's capital backlog is allowed to go unchecked it is likely that we will begin to see a decline in the use of our state parks and coincident loss in revenue for the state. It is our hope, and we anticipate, that should the Bond Act be enacted some funding will go toward eliminating a portion of OPRHP's capital projects backlog.

Bike and Pedestrian Paths, Trails and Greenways

Parks & Trails New York also enthusiastically supports the use of Bond Act monies for Clean Air/Green Transit projects, particularly transportation enhancements including bike and pedestrian paths, trails and greenways (trails). These transportation enhancements provide easily accessible outlets for New Yorkers of all ages to be more physically active and as a result, healthier. In addition, trails contribute significantly to local economies.

There is little argument that New Yorkers need to be more physically active. In 2006, 58% of New York adults were overweight or obese. Moreover, obesity-related medical conditions add more than \$6 billion annually to health care costs in New York State. And, medical research has shown that being overweight or obese can contribute to high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, and an increased risk for some forms of cancer.

Simply walking is one of the easiest ways to become more physically active and control weight. And what better place to walk than on a local trail. Close to home, multi-use trails provide free or low-cost opportunities for everyone, irrespective of age or fitness level, to increase their level of daily physical activity. People who report having access to sidewalks and trails are 28-55% more likely to be physically active.

In addition to their value for healthy lifestyles, trails can also help protect valuable open space, preserve natural and historic resources; increase tourism and recreation-related business activity provide safe off-road links to parks, schools, libraries, shops and neighborhoods; and foster public-private partnerships, community investment, and civic pride. The presence of trails can also reduce the amount of air pollution and need to build or expand highways as people using the trail rely less on their cars. In a 2002 survey of recent homebuyers sponsored by the National Association of

Realtors and the National Association of Home Builders, trails ranked as the second most important community amenity out of a list of 18 choices.

Evidence is clear that the presence of trails in and near communities increases the number of people who engage in regular physical activity, thus improving public health, contributes to the local economy, increases property values, and enhances the overall quality of life.

Using Bond Act monies for infrastructure projects is an investment in both New York's environment and its economy and is precisely the type of investment for which bonds are intended. Parks & Trails New York urges you to support legislation that would place the Clean Water, Clean Air & Green Jobs Bond Act of 2009 on the ballot in the coming General Election in November.

Once again, thank you for the opportunity to testify. I'd be happy to try to answer any questions you have.