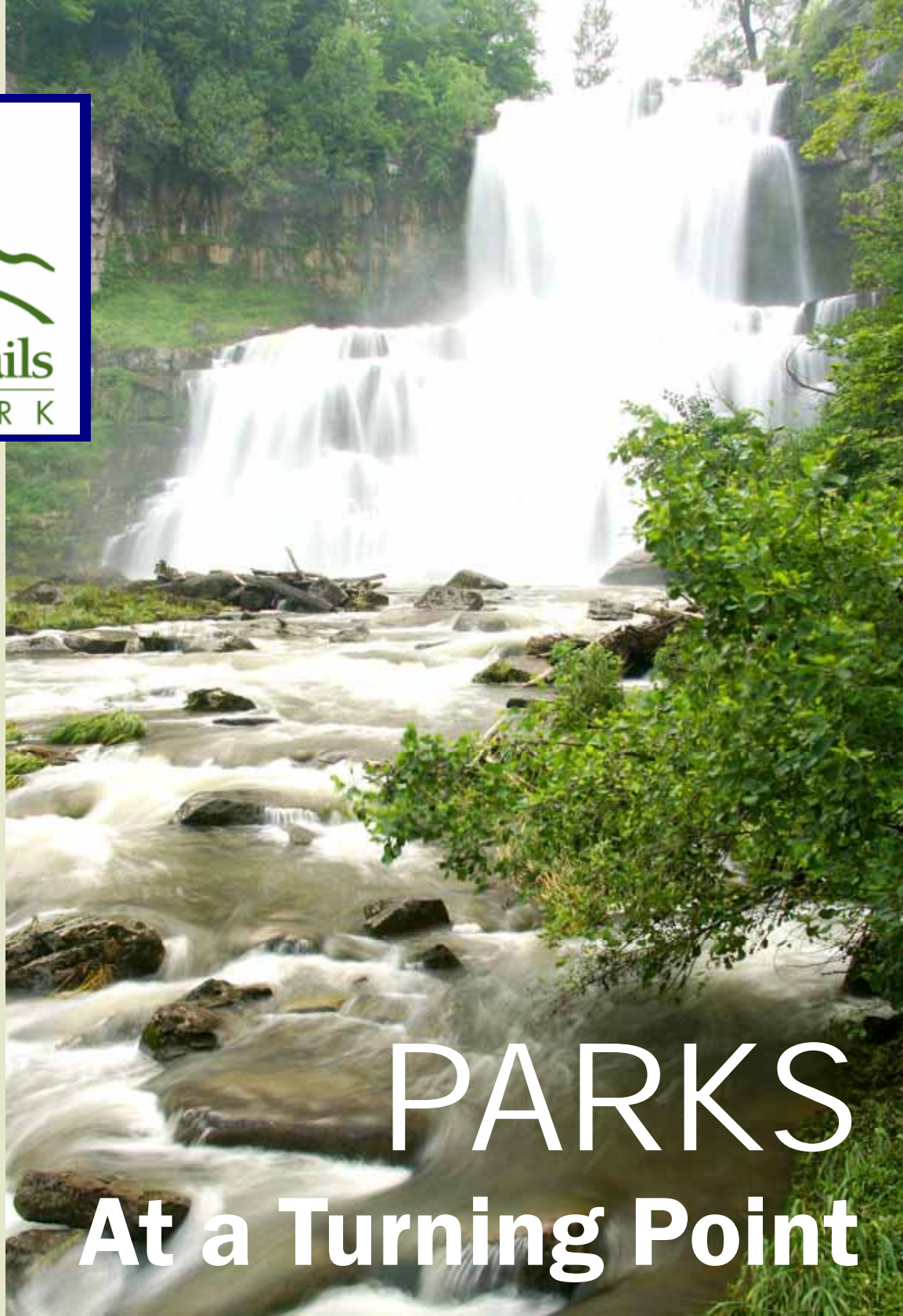




**Parks & Trails**  
NEW YORK



# PARKS At a Turning Point

**Restoring and enhancing  
New York's state park system**

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## *Parks at a Turning Point* Restoring and enhancing New York's state park system

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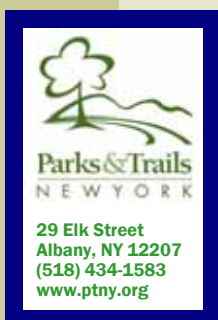
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### Acknowledgments

Parks & Trails New York gratefully acknowledges the assistance of the following in this project:

- ◆ Rockefeller College, University at Albany, State University of New York, for providing two graduate students as interns to work on the project.
- ◆ Jeffrey Smith and Ian Brown, the Rockefeller College students, who made invaluable contributions to the design and implementation of our research.
- ◆ The New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, and the New York State Division of the Budget, which supplied budgetary and other information to assist us.
- ◆ The Business Council of New York State, which supported the work of our interns, and provided other assistance.
- ◆ And Claire Hazzard, who created our on-line survey compilation tool and assembled the resultant data for our report.

*NOTE: The assistance of the above persons and entities does not imply any endorsement of our findings and recommendations, which are solely the responsibility of the Board of Directors of Parks & Trails New York.*



# Executive Summary

New York's state parks are its crown jewels – from the seascape at Montauk to the thunder of Niagara, from the forests of Allegany to the explorer's paradise of the Thousand Islands, from the panorama of High Tor to the cascade of Chittenango.

Now, more than ever, these are gems worth caring for. They draw nearly 55 million visits a year, giving us some of the best days of our lives. They preserve priceless landscapes and ecosystems, strengthen our health and fitness, and enhance a quality of life that is one of this state's key economic assets.

## **Yet today our parks are at a turning point.**

State tax support for the system has been virtually flatlined for more than a decade, resulting in a shortfall of more than \$140 million needed for infrastructure projects. Our parks are generally well-maintained, and there have been significant capital improvements in recent years— many made possible by the fact that our parks agency and its leadership have proven extraordinarily adept at finding *non*-taxpayer sources of funding. But the Legislature's failure to fully fund infrastructure spending has led to visible, emerging problems that could easily get out of hand, if repairs and upgrades are continually deferred. And some of the new parks that have been announced or acquired in recent years have not actually been opened.

Our park system is a profoundly valuable legacy for this state – created for us by civic leaders, philanthropists, public servants and taxpayers from generations past. Like any legacy, it carries to succeeding generations the responsibility of sound stewardship. **It is time for us to make the essential investments needed to restore and enhance our state park system.**

## **A close look at conditions in our parks**

Parks & Trails New York is the statewide, non-profit advocate for parks, and a catalyst for park and trail projects. To help inform public understanding about the needs of our state parks, we undertook a year-long study of the system.

We made field visits to 36 parks. We analyzed budget data, including reports on infrastructure needs that have, and have not, been funded. We compared New York's support for its parks with the practices of other states.

We did all this with a strong point of view: We believe deeply in the purpose and mission of our state park system. Good parks are vital to the quality of life of individual citizens and families, and they deliver broad economic and other benefits to the state as a whole.



Yet we approached the task with a sense of realism, as well – conscious that the fiscal resources of the state of New York are not unlimited, and that the demands on those resources are many.

We emerged with admiration for New York’s parks agency, the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP). Staff members at almost all of the parks we visited are clearly putting in the extra effort required to keep our parks clean and attractive. New sources of revenue – including corporate contributions and user fees – have helped support park operations and maintenance even in the face of fiscal difficulties.

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**We found emerging problems that could easily get out of hand — if fixes are continually deferred.**

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But we emerged with a sense of frustration, as well, that all this effort has coincided with missed opportunities – with the new revenues often being used to supplant, rather than supplement, traditional state budget support for the park system. This has already created a backlog of necessary but untended work, a situation that will only grow worse over time, unless New York accepts the challenge of investing wisely

in its park system.

New York State cannot afford to squander the priceless legacy that its state park system represents. With our growing understanding of the importance of environmental protection and of healthy lifestyles – and with the state leveraging quality of life as one of its key assets in the effort to grow our economy – the park system matters today more than ever before.

**Parks & Trails New York therefore proposes new policies that will:**

- ◆ **Strengthen the operating resources of the park system.**
- ◆ **Get ahead of the system’s maintenance and infrastructure backlog.**
- ◆ **And protect its environmental resources.**

### **Our field visits**

To assess the state of the state’s park system, we began with on-the-ground examinations of the parks themselves. We visited 36 parks around the state, from Niagara Falls to eastern Long Island, in urban as well as rural areas. Between them, the parks we visited account for 64 percent of all annual visits to New York State parks.

Bear Mountain State Park



Each of these visits provided a satisfying outdoors experience. We found nearly 100 specific problems or issues; and the causes of, and solutions to, those problems are the primary focus of our concern. But we would not want anyone who reads this report to come away with the feeling that a nearby state park is not worth a visit. On the contrary, almost all of the parks we visited – even those with a problem or two – were in good condition overall.



Grafton Lakes State Park

It is precisely because we see our state parks as such outstanding assets that Parks & Trails New York calls for urgent action to address the significant problems we did find – to keep the problems of today from turning into the crises of tomorrow.

Among the findings that concerned us were these:

- ◆ Damaged and/or inadequate bathrooms at some heavily used parks.
- ◆ Some major visitor facilities that have been shut down because of health or other problems.
- ◆ Numerous buildings that were clearly overdue for a painting, or a new roof – needed repairs that will become more costly the longer they are put off.
- ◆ Deteriorating pavement in parking lots at numerous parks – the kind of problem that gets more expensive to fix, every year that work is postponed.
- ◆ Some poorly kept playing fields, and deteriorating basketball and tennis courts in some parks.
- ◆ Significant shortcomings in visitor information and interpretive materials and programs, at many of the parks we visited.
- ◆ Problems with wheelchair access to some facilities that could be made more accessible.
- ◆ Inconsistent and confusing arrangements for trash disposal in some parks, resulting in a few unsightly messes.
- ◆ And a general feeling that assets at numerous parks – ranging from the paddle tennis courts at Jones Beach, to the picnic facilities at Verona Beach – have an outdated, almost tired look about them.

On the positive side, the parks we visited were almost all clean and trim, with litter gone, bathrooms tidy, lawns mowed, tree debris picked up, hedges trimmed. This kind of result comes only from a dedicated staff of employees, regardless of the size of the budget for capital improvements – and the people of the state of New York can be grateful to the workers who care for our parks.



Chittenango Falls State Park

## The story the numbers tell

The rough edges and emerging problems identified by our field surveys are no accident. They are an outgrowth of fiscal strains on the park system that have developed over 15 years, or longer. As detailed in Part 2 of this report, state taxpayer-funded support for the park system has basically been flat for more than a decade. Overall staffing levels have remained flat, as well. Capital funds – the monies that upgrade and repair basic visitor facilities like roads and trails, bathrooms and nature centers, swimming pools and playing fields – have grown even more slowly than the operational budget.

In response to this crunch, the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation has worked creatively to increase the revenues generated by fees, sponsorships, concessions and other sources. But the agency's very success at revenue-raising has made it all too tempting for state budget-makers to hold back on taxpayer-funded support for the

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### **Parks account for less than one-fifth of one percent of the total New York State budget.**

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parks. And this has happened even though New York's spending on parks is hardly a strain on the taxpayers; it's less than one-fifth of one percent of the state budget, at a per-capita level not much higher than the national average for state parks.

Meanwhile a new funding mechanism created in the expectation that it would provide a dedicated stream of revenues for parks infrastructure projects

has, in practice, allowed the diversion of tens of millions of dollars from infrastructure to operations.

The result of all this is **a backlog of infrastructure projects that adds up to at least \$140 million;** an agency that is too strained to actually develop all of the new parks that the state is proud to have acquired; and an emerging threat that the condition of our parks could seriously deteriorate, if the situation is not addressed quickly.

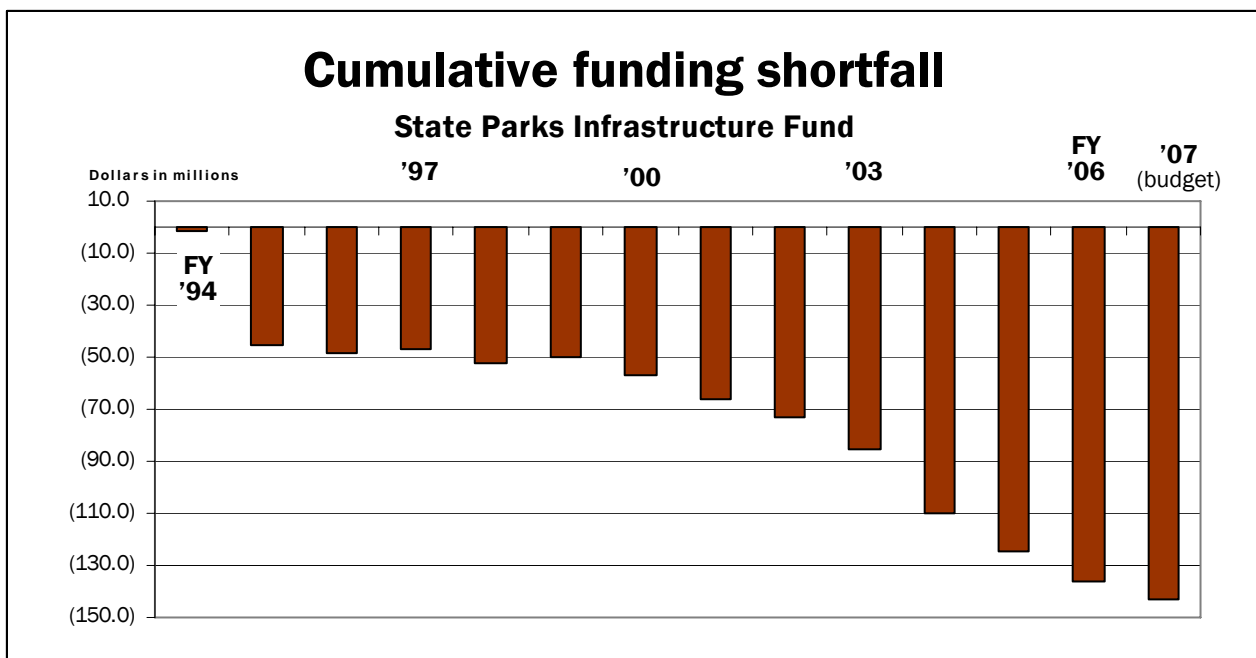
Our parks are, truly, at a turning point – one New York State must address in the years immediately ahead.



## An action agenda for New York's state parks

This report concludes by detailing a series of recommendations that will provide the resources to get ahead of the infrastructure backlog, protect the environmental heritage and strengthen the operating resources of the park system. In summary, these are:

- ◆ Develop and fund **a five-year, \$300 million capital plan** for the parks – of which \$50 million should be used to open recently acquired parks to public use.
- ◆ Mandate that at least 10 percent of the state's **Environmental Protection Fund** must be devoted to the EPF's Parks and Lands Stewardship Fund.
- ◆ Strengthen the park agency's mandate and ability to **incorporate environmental stewardship** into planning, park operations and infrastructure improvements.
- ◆ Provide more educational materials and programs that will enrich visitor appreciation of the environmental, historical and cultural values the parks represent.
- ◆ Require that in the future, **state taxpayer support for parks must grow** at least in pace with the rest of the General Fund budget. Use income raised by the parks to supplement taxpayer funds – **not supplant them.**
- ◆ Develop a **comprehensive parks marketing plan** that will increase attendance, thereby increasing park revenues for operations and infrastructure.
- ◆ Develop, nurture and support a **network of non-profit support organizations**, or "friends groups," to help raise funds and provide programs that will supplement what's available from the state budget.



# New York's state parks today

## An overview of the park system

New York's state park system is the nation's oldest, dating to the creation of the Niagara Reservation in 1885. Today it is operated by the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP), which is responsible for some 211 sites and facilities, including 35 historic sites. Twenty-seven of the parks have been acquired since 1995, although a number of those are not yet open to the public, generally because no facilities have been developed.

## Our state park system harbors some of the state's most significant natural treasures.

Despite the expansion of the last decade, OPRHP staffing has stayed flat, and now hovers around 1,900 full-time employees, plus about 5,000 seasonal workers hired mostly during the summer.

The park system gets nearly 55 million visits a year. It covers 325,000 acres and includes more than 5,000 buildings, 28 golf courses, 53 swimming pools, 76 beaches, 27 marinas, 40 boat-launching sites, 18 nature centers, 817 cabins and 8,355 campsites – plus 1,350 miles of trails, hundreds of miles of roads, 106 dams and 604 bridges.\* Many of these features have historical and/or cultural significance.

Our state park system also harbors some of the state's most significant natural treasures. The system is critical to the long-term protection of numerous rare species and of distinctive ecological communities. Fully 91 of our state parks support at least one occurrence of a rare species population or significant natural community.

The park system as a whole harbors more than 900 occurrences of 359 different rare species and natural community types. The parks are home to 504 separate populations of plants and animals that are listed as state endangered or threatened. They support the only known occurrences on public lands of 104 rare species and natural community types, and they include 191 occurrences of globally rare species and natural community types.

\* New York State government operates a second system of park-type facilities under the aegis of the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC), which has 52 campgrounds and six day-use areas in the Forest Preserve – the 3 million acres the state owns in the Adirondacks and the Catskills. This separate system, which reports about 1.3 million visitors a year, is not covered by this report.

Nesting shorebird protection at Jones Beach





More than 70 of our state parks have significant geological features – including the Niagara Gorge, Shawangunk Ridge, the canyon at Letchworth, the waterfall at Taughannock. There are nearly 200 lakes and ponds, and several large contiguous forest tracts.

OPRHP’s official mission statement recognizes its responsibility both to the visitors and to the underlying resources – “to provide safe and enjoyable recreational and interpretive opportunities for all New York State residents and visitors, and to be responsible stewards of our valuable natural, historic and cultural resources.”



Jones Beach State Park

## How we conducted our field visits

To learn about the condition of our parks – and to assess the quality of stewardship now being delivered to them by state government – Parks & Trails New York undertook, first, to study conditions on the ground.

Rather than rely on hired consultants or state officials for the assessment, the organization divided up the field study responsibilities among members of its Board of Directors – volunteers who came to our organization in the first place because of their interest in and commitment to parks and trails. They undertook the visits on their own time, mostly on weekends during the summer of 2006.

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## We found problems — but we also had some wonderful experiences in our parks.

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The parks selected for our study were a geographically representative group of parks, from Hither Hills in eastern Suffolk County to Long Point State Park on Chautauqua Lake. We gave priority to the most heavily visited parks in each region, and we ended up reporting on 36 parks that together account for 64 percent of the park system’s total visitors, and 59 percent of its total acreage.

The visits were conducted from the point of view of ordinary visitors, using a uniform reporting protocol we developed for this purpose. Although some of our volunteers have experience as landscape architects, civil engineers and park managers, we were not seeking to make an expert infrastructure assessment. Instead, we tried to view the parks just as they would be seen by other visitors – swimmers, bikers, picnickers, campers, hikers.

**Table 1: New York State parks visited for this study**

Park name	Attendance (in 1,000s)	Park name	Attendance (in 1,000s)
Allegany	1,422	Lake Taghkanic	157
Bear Mountain	1,068	Letchworth	625
Beaver Island	235	Long Point (Chautauqua)	183
Chenango Valley	227	Margaret Lewis Norrie	236
Chittenango Falls	48	Minnewaska	338
Darien Lakes	58	Niagara Reservation	7,393
Evangola	98	Riverbank	1,715
Fair Haven Beach	265	Robert Moses (Thousand Islands)	259
Fort Niagara	467	Roberto Clemente	922
Grafton Lakes	154	Rockland Lake	1,982
Green Lakes	791	Sampson	191
Harriman	1,276	Saratoga Spa	947
Heckscher	792	Seneca Lake	183
Higley Flow	30	Sunken Meadow	1,283
Hither Hills	356	Tallman Mountain	334
James Baird	353	Taughannock Falls	313
John Boyd Thacher	292	Verona Beach	174
Jones Beach	5,931	Wellesley Island	205

*Attendance figures are those reported for state fiscal year 2003-04.  
Source: OPRHP figures in the 2005 New York State Statistical Yearbook, The Rockefeller Institute of Government.*

Each of our visitors used a questionnaire that asked about the park entrance; about the park’s roadways, parking lots, traffic and directional signage; about the full range of facilities from bathrooms to performing arts centers; about recreational and interpretive opportunities and activities; about safety and accessibility; and about such potential problem areas as erosion and natural resource protection. (The questionnaire is available for review on our web site, [www.ptny.org](http://www.ptny.org).)

### **Overall perspective from the visit reports: We love those parks!**

Though we found instances of deferred maintenance and other problems, for our visitors the bottom line in their reports was generally favorable. Most of our visitors rated most aspects of most of the parks – from picnic areas to trails to beaches to golf courses to campgrounds – as “good,” with a number of “exceptional” ratings.

In over 85 percent of the cases (31 of the 36 reports), our visitors said they would want to return again for another visit. Closing comments were almost all favorable. “This park is a true jewel. I will return as a visitor again and again,” was a typical conclusion on one visit report.

Fair Haven Beach State Park



Everybody on the Board of Directors of Parks & Trails New York likes parks, of course, so a certain amount of enthusiasm was to be expected. Nonetheless, the pleasure our Directors found in their visits was palpable. For example:

“This is an underused jewel of a park about a half hour from New York City. Its setting is world-class. Even if the picnic areas and pool got crowded, there is enough acreage and wooded areas to find privacy and quiet. It is also right next to a very quaint, old Hudson River town (Piermont) allowing both a walk in the woods and a sit-down restaurant lunch in the same short trip.” **(Tallman Mountain State Park)**

“This is a great beach. And the facility as a whole is amazingly well-designed and built, capable of handling huge crowds. It was disappointing, in a way, to see a relatively small crowd there on a hot, humid Thursday in July.” **(Jones Beach)**

“This is a very nice park, with good facilities for swimming, camping, picnicking, walking, hanging out.” **(Lake Taghkanic State Park)**

“Both pools are exceptionally large and accommodate a large number of people without becoming crowded. The Victoria Pool [which has recently received a \$1.5 million rehabilitation] has the appearance of a resort.” **(Saratoga Spa State Park)**

“Well taken care of. It is something to be very proud of and all New Yorkers should make at least one visit just to see it.” **(Riverbank State Park)**

“This is a lovely place for visitors to the Thousand Islands. I was particularly impressed with the people, not just the staff, but also the visitors. They were so obviously careful to use the park conscientiously. They waved and smiled at me and at each other.... The hiking trails along Eel Bay and the Narrows offer some of the best river views in the Thousand Islands, and I doubt that I will ever tire of them.” **(Wellesley Island State Park)**

“Conditions here suggest a ‘best practices’ program for the whole park system – with effective and efficient stewardship, maintenance, interpretive and programmatic activities.” **(Letchworth State Park)**

Our visitor to **Niagara Falls State Park** saw visible, recent upgrades to visitor facilities. (A \$44 million improvement project was completed in 2003 that, among other things, rehabilitated the observation tower and improved public access to Niagara Gorge.) At **Bethpage State Park**, in 2002, the beautifully refurbished Black Course became the first publicly-owned golf course to host the U.S. Open, after a \$3 million rehabilitation project (and 2002 was so successful that the Open is returning in 2009).

Truly, these are gems worth caring for.



Taughannock Falls State Park





Bear Mountain State Park

## But we found problems in the parks, too

Our awareness of the enormous asset its state parks represent for New York made it all the more painful, unfortunately, when we found significant problems. Here are some examples:

- ◆ At **Chittenango State Park**, scene of the spectacular waterfall on the cover of this report, potable water is no longer available. The system was shut down in 2005 because of health problems, the origin of which has still not been determined. As a consequence, the campground has been closed (though OPRHP says all campers have been accommodated at Green Lakes State Park, about 15 miles away). Also, one half of the loop trail down to the base of the falls and back is closed because of erosion damage.
- ◆ At **Bear Mountain State Park**, located at perhaps the most spectacular spot in the scenic Hudson River valley, it appeared that maintenance and repairs are falling behind the pressures placed on the facility by large crowds. Fortunately, this park is in line for some major upgrades, including a projected \$6.9 million renovation of the Bear Mountain Inn. But our visitor reported finding two bathrooms on a busy weekend that “were between fair and poor – several toilets were broken, stall doors were off, toilet paper was strewn on the wet floor, there was mold around the sinks, no soap, no towels, and the electric hand dryer was broken. One woman said ‘this is disgusting’ and walked out.” The Perkins Memorial Tower, which affords a famous view, was closed.
- ◆ At **Hariman State Park**, our visitor reported similar issues. “At every location the bathroom facilities were totally inadequate and generally dirty. At Welch Beach they obviously get tremendous numbers of people but there are only a few toilets and sinks and in the men’s room, one shower.... Even at Tiorati Beach – which was by far the nicest, with brand-new bathrooms – there were still far too few facilities.”
- ◆ At **Minnewaska State Park**, our visitor reported that “the historic carriage-road system is in a terrible state of repair. Some spots are very dangerous and some roads are closed. This is one of the main features of the park and the roads are heavily used by walkers, bikers, equestrians and skiers. The park has spectacular scenic overviews, is generally in good shape and is certainly one of the finest in the state – except for the condition of the carriage roads.”
- ◆ At **Beaver Island State Park**, “The women’s restroom was not clean. There was toilet paper and other

Jones Beach State Park



trash on the floor. The floors were very wet, as if the drainage system from the showers was not working well. I would not want to use this facility.”

- ◆ At **Roberto Clemente State Park** in the Bronx, our visitor noted “the really sad shape and upkeep of (one of the two entrances), which was dirty, unkempt and falling apart. Very depressing. The other entrance was adequate at best.... For a park that has some great facilities and is generally a greatly needed oasis for masses of urban dwellers, the entrances are sad.... This is a wonderful facility right in the middle of the densely populated Bronx. The major facilities, the pool, the big ballfield and the picnic tables are all good or excellent – but overall the park seems ‘tired,’ somewhat rundown, and the pavement covering the fountain area needs to be torn up.” [This park is scheduled for \$10 million in new capital construction and another \$10 million in facilities improvements, as funding becomes available.]

- ◆ At **Tallman Mountain State Park**, our visitor reported that “the restroom at South Picnic Area #2 was closed. You were directed to the restroom by the tennis court, where the sink in the men’s room was inoperable. Rest rooms were clean, but in need of repainting – especially the floors.” It wouldn’t always be easy to find the park, either: “The sign to the main entrance off of Route 9W

was very clear. But, (a) there were no signs giving a user any prior notice that you were approaching the turnoff, (b) there is no sign at a secondary entrance off of 9W south of the main entrance, and (c) there is no sign at the entrance to the Park from the Village of Piermont.”

- ◆ At **John Boyd Thacher State Park**, the swimming pool was leaking so badly that it had to be closed throughout the summer of 2006. [But a \$3 million project has now been launched to replace it completely.]

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## Visitors should get more information about park facilities and natural resources.

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### Visitor information and interpretation

The specific problems reported above will impact visitors only at the particular parks involved, of course. One other, significant problem that we found, however, appeared to be an issue in almost *every* park we visited – a relative paucity of information for visitors about the parks and their facilities, and of interpretive displays and programs that would help visitors come away with a better understanding of and appreciation for the natural resources found in the parks.

As we explain in more detail in Part 3, you’re not likely to get much information on a particular park before your visit. Information on the Internet is limited, if you can find it at all, and printed information is also sparse outside the parks themselves.



Tallman Mountain State Park

Drive into a park, pay your \$6 to \$8 entrance fee, and it's still not guaranteed that you'll get information. In almost every case, our visitors had to ask before being handed an informational brochure or a map, and sometimes these were not available at all. When available, they were often third- or fourth-generation photocopies, sometimes of difficult-to-read, hand-drawn maps.

At **Margaret Lewis Norrie State Park**, our visitor reported, "the marina provided a copy of a 'Mills-Norrie State Parks Trail Map.' Roads were shown but unmarked. Trails were identified by a hard-to-read letter system and a color code nullified on the black-and-white copy. The roads all had names, but the names were not on the map." At **Riverbank State Park**, our visitor reported, "the only Park hand-out was a very, very poor one-page poorly printed map."



Higley Flow State Park

Even if you can read the map, you can't always trust it. The map at **Fair Haven Beach State Park**, for example, shows a road leading to a parking area for a trail along the Lake Ontario waterfront. But the road is closed; it appears there never was a parking area; and the trailhead isn't marked (although the trail itself, when found, is quite pleasant).

In addition to supplying basic visitation information, parks also have an opportunity (and, in our view, an obligation) to present educational materials, displays and programs on nature, on the environment and, where relevant, on local history. We found that some of the parks we visited had excellent offerings of this sort – others, not. Most were a mixed bag at best.

At **Jones Beach State Park**, for example, there is a nature center with particularly fine outdoor exhibits on the protection of nesting shorebirds, and on dune ecology. But "we found it disappointing that only two or three interpretive nature talks or walks are offered each summer week – in a park that attracts almost 6 million visits a year," our visitor reported.

The observation that interpretive programs were few and far between was repeated in numerous visit reports from other parks as well. "The signs indicated that there were only three interpretive programs offered in the whole month of July – with hundreds of thousands of visitors!" was the report from **Bear Mountain**. At **Sunken Meadow**



**State Park**, our visitor reported that “there was some attempt at interpretive material in displays at the entrance building, but it was very poor.”

“The exhibition area is small and not especially attractive,” reported our visitor at **Higley Flow State Park**; Higley does, however, offer a nice set of natural history brochures, maps and trail guides. At **Grafton Lakes State Park**, our visitor reported, “the nature center in the concession building had been closed. The ‘new’ nature center was down a poorly marked gravel road. It could be found if one was determined, but it was not located so as to attract casual park visitors.” At **Tallman Mountain**, “there was one three-sided sign down by the pool looking out on the Piermont Marsh giving some Hudson River Estuary information.” Overall, of 18 parks on which we received evaluations of museums and nature centers, three were rated as “fair” by our visitors, and two as “poor.” (Only three were rated “exceptional.”)

The interpretive situation was better at some parks, however. At **Robert Moses** (Thousand Islands region), for example, “the exhibition area has a remarkable collection of stuffed animals and other nature specimens. It also has a large and active bee colony,” our visitor reported. At **Allegany State Park**, bulletin boards listed an extensive summer program of nature talks, guided walks and evening programs. At **Wellesley Island**, “The museum/nature center is quite nice – with dioramas featuring some stuffed mammals (coyote, beavers, and the like), plus several large aquariums with river fish, pond fish, frogs and snakes, and so forth. The back of the building is all glass and reveals a lovely view of the river. It was open, and the staff person was very friendly and helpful. There is also a butterfly house.” Even at Wellesley, however, our visitor found that “the quality of the roadside and trailside interpretive signs is uneven, as if there was a flurry of such installations at one point, with little added since then. Some of the signs are much in need of freshening up.”

At **Beaver Island State Park**, “there was plenty to see and ask about” in the nature center, and the seasonal employee on hand (an 8th-grade science teacher during the school year) “encouraged us to take the nature walk and provided us with an additional map that showed us how to access the trail. There was good signage along the nature trail.” At **Chenango Valley State Park**, our visitor reported that “interpretive signs were well designed and readable, as were all the brochures” – although the nature center was closed, on a Sunday in July!

We found that **Letchworth State Park** was a model of best practices, among the parks we visited, in terms of nature and other exhibits, as well as interpretive programs. “The

upgraded Letchworth Museum was dedicated publicly in May of 2006 for the park’s 100th anniversary. The Seneca Indian Council Grounds were also restored for the 100th anniversary.... The many scenic overlooks all had interpretive signs.... The staff at the Letch-

Chenango Valley State Park





Fair Haven Beach State Park

worth Museum was particularly helpful and informative. Recreational, interpretive and naturalist programs are available during the summer.”

The informational materials at Letchworth, our visit report continued, were “exceptional, like nothing I’ve ever seen at other state parks. There are interpretive signs throughout, with a common design. Each couples generic information about the park and its history with site-specific

information about a natural or historic item of interest.”

## More maintenance and infrastructure issues

Although, as noted above, most facilities at most parks were rated “good” or better, there were enough exceptions to demonstrate the need for upgrades:

- ◆ Overall **accessibility** for wheelchair users was rated as only “fair” at seven parks – and “poor” at one.

All the bathrooms we visited had been adapted to permit wheelchair use. But turns and quarters were tight in many of the older bathrooms, even after these modifications.

Most picnic areas had at least some tables with the extensions that make it possible to fit a wheelchair under them – but generally these were few in number, meaning that a family with a wheelchair-using member would have a limited choice of places to spread out their picnic.

The accessibility of trails to wheelchair users was rated only “fair” at six parks, and “poor” at three. A number of these parks had relatively wide, flat trails that might be made suitable for wheelchair use, but with surfaces that are too rough (something a little grading or paving could fix). At **Fair Haven Beach State Park**, by contrast, there was an exemplary, paved, wheelchair-useable trail running around the picnic grounds, over to the beach and then along the Lake Ontario shoreline.

- ◆ We found **trash disposal** issues at a number of parks. Some had signs designating them as “carry in/carry out” parks, but then, confusingly, they also had disposal bins. Only a handful had plastic bags that

Chittenango Falls State Park





patrons could use to do their part in “carrying out.” At **Evangola State Park**, “there just weren’t enough trash cans – none whatsoever on or near the beach.” We spotted a few overflowing dumpsters – as though patrons didn’t get the “carry out” message,



Seneca Lake State Park

but park staff was assuming they would. Our visitors rated the trash systems in four parks as “poor,” and in 10 as only “fair.”

- ◆ Park **entrances** were rated as only “fair” in 10 instances, and “poor” in one. The entrance stations at Jones Beach State Park “looked like old Thruway toll booths and actually had weeds growing on the roofs,” our visitor there reported.
- ◆ Many parking lots need repair, or soon will. Our visitors rated parking lots in 11 parks as “fair,” and four as “poor.”
- ◆ Playing fields and basketball courts also got a number of negative ratings. But there were good ones, too: “The outdoor courts are exceptional – well kept, nicely placed with an open bathroom/changing facility right next to it,” reported our visitor to **Riverbank State Park**.

OPRHP has placed priority on soliciting private-sector sponsors for new playground equipment, and the results – colorful, interesting new playgrounds that provide a wide range of exercise and fun – were evident in many of the parks we visited. At **Sampson State Park** and **Seneca Lake**, beautiful new playground equipment is situated right next to the beach. But more parks need this kind of upgrade. At **Chittenango Falls**, for example, the playground advertised on the web site consisted of an old swing set in one spot and a sandbox in another.

### Other park-by-park observations

Our visitors passed along a number of other observations on the need for investment in maintenance and upgrades. A common theme was bathroom facilities and other buildings that need painting, and roofs that need repair. In addition:

- ◆ At popular **Taughannock Falls State Park** “the camping area appears too small for the number of sites provided; the soil is compacted in some places and eroded in others,” our visitor reported.





Saratoga Spa State Park

◆ At **Darien Lakes State Park**, there was “no signage regarding numerous unmarked entrances to the multi-purpose trails system. We had to ask how to get to the trailheads.”

◆ At **Allegany State Park**, our visitor reported that “attention and improvements are badly needed for many of the cabins and selected parts of the park road system. Drainage problems are obvious at one campground, and

the maintenance building at Quaker Lake needs painting.”

◆ At **Sunken Meadow State Park**, our visitor reported that “this park is used extensively for picnics and I was surprised that no pavilions existed.” He also noted that unused parking lots appear to have been abandoned, with weeds growing up through them; “could some of the parking fields be converted into sports fields? There are no formal playing fields, but so many people were using the open lawns for soccer and other field activities that there should be.”

◆ At **Rockland Lake State Park**, our visitor said there were “beautiful pools, but the surrounding support structures looked old, pavements were cracked or slabs uneven, and one chunk was missing out of a concrete wall.”

There were concluding observations like this one from our visitor to **Verona Beach State Park**: “This park looks a little worn but not worn out – a candidate for selective upgrades.” Our visitor to **Sunken Meadow** wrote that “this park needs a major overhaul and redesign to become efficient.”

When our visitors exchanged notes afterwards, a number of them said those comments resonated with their own experiences. Even where facilities are in good shape, modernization and upgrades would improve the visitor experience and attract more users.

A final observation is that, obviously, we didn’t find every problem in the system. Besides the facilities problems that we reported, it is a safe bet that there are more beneath the surface – problems that aren’t obvious to untrained eyes, but that would be turned up if a professional facilities audit were undertaken.

## The work that shouldn't wait

In the end, it was our visit reports that convinced us that New York's state parks are, indeed, at a turning point.

Clearly we found some problems that need immediate attention. When a bathroom is such a wreck that visitors walk out rather than use it, the time to fix it is *now*.

More important, however, are the problems that aren't yet so serious – problems that will become serious if neglected too long, but that can be fixed now, at reasonable expense to the state, *before* they grow into major problems.

It's better to paint the bathhouse that needs a new coat than wait until moisture rots the wood and forces you to pay for major repairs instead. It's better to fix cracks in a parking lot before it gets so bad that you must completely replace it. It's better to repair a bad roof than to wait until water damage forces you to rebuild the whole structure. It's better to spend money maintaining a water system than to allow rust or contamination to force you to replace the whole thing at huge expense.

Again and again we saw problems like those – conditions that might be relatively easy and cheap to fix now, but that will turn into big problems and big costs if neglected.

That's the nature of a turning point. It means you still have time to take action. And it means doing nothing would be the wrong choice.



Chenango Valley State Park

Wellesley Island State Park



# *The parks budget and its implications*

As reported above, our field surveys found a number of serious facility problems in the park system – and other signs of conditions that could, if neglected, cause major problems in the years ahead. To learn *why* these problems have developed, we turned our research to the budget and financing systems for New York’s park system.

General state budget support for parks operations has not declined, but its growth has slowed to a crawl. In recent years General Fund, tax-supported spending on parks operations and capital needs has grown an average of 0.4 percent a year – effectively flat-lined, at less than one-fifth the rate of inflation. This has happened even though the state has added 27 new parks or park units over the past decade.

Under the leadership of Commissioner Bernadette Castro, the parks agency has made major progress in recent years in developing its own non-taxpayer revenue streams – including an impressive \$120 million from corporate partnerships. This offers the *potential* of significantly enhancing the resources that support New York’s parks legacy.

But the opportunities presented by this revenue growth are lost when the new revenue sources are used to supplant, rather than supplement, general state budget support for the park system. And this is what has happened. **We believe this trend must be reversed.** As detailed below, to close the funding gap that is apparent both on the ground and in the budget, we recommend:

- ◆ Measured growth in tax-supported spending on parks operations.
- ◆ A five-year capital plan of at least \$300 million.
- ◆ And a mandatory minimum allocation of state environmental funds to the stewardship needs of state parks and other state lands.

## **How New York compares to other states in parks funding**

New Yorkers are accustomed to hearing that their state government spends the most of almost any state on almost everything. This is distinctly not the case, however, with parks. Here, New York is not much better than middle-of-the-pack.

The most comprehensive state-by-state comparisons on state parks capacity, usage and funding come from the Annual Information Exchange of the National Association of State Parks Directors. The data offer useful insights.



In this compilation, New York ranks 21<sup>st</sup> in the annual number of parks visits per resident (2.88). It ranks 17<sup>th</sup> in per-capita spending on its state parks (\$8.47 as of 2002-03). That's only about \$1 per capita above the national average – in this, a high-cost state.

California, Delaware, Tennessee, Vermont and West Virginia are among the states that spend more per capita. Michigan and Texas, among others, report generating more revenue per park visitor than does New York. Florida, Georgia, Kentucky and Texas are among the states reporting at least twice as many park staff per visitor as New York.

New York compares poorly in one non-financial area that is also significant, in our view. Many states have active alliances with support groups (sometimes referred to as “friends groups”) for their individual parks. New York’s OPRHP, by contrast, reports a support group for only about one out of every five of its facilities. That’s lower than all but seven other states. And the gap is larger than the comparative statistics indicate, because most of New York’s support groups are devoted to historic sites, not parks – and a number of the groups that exist on

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## **Taxpayer (General Fund) support has fallen from two-thirds of the parks budget to less than half.**

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paper seem to be inactive. As detailed in Part 3, we view this as a significant missed opportunity.

The table on the following two pages gives key state-by-state figures on park visitation and spending.

Fair Haven Beach State Park



**Table 2: U.S. state park systems, compared**

	Operating budget	Attendance	Visits per resident	Rank, visits per capita	Budget per capita	Rank, budget per capita
Alabama	\$30,691,515	5,163,113	1.15	45	\$6.82	21
Alaska	5,612,862	4,282,770	6.60	5	8.66	16
Arizona	17,039,500	2,410,383	0.43	50	3.05	46
Arkansas	30,448,784	8,217,845	3.01	18	11.17	8
California	333,541,000	85,664,789	2.42	28	9.41	14
Colorado	26,909,824	11,098,367	2.44	27	5.92	26
Connecticut	9,706,392	9,000,955	2.58	24	2.78	47
Delaware	18,546,847	3,207,162	3.92	15	22.68	1
Florida	70,251,254	17,734,774	1.04	46	4.13	40
Georgia	59,064,876	14,622,544	1.67	38	6.75	22
Hawaii	6,974,306	6,340,254	5.08	10	5.59	30
Idaho	20,527,600	2,497,165	1.83	35	15.00	5
Illinois	55,466,200	43,623,029	3.45	16	4.38	37
Indiana	42,591,798	16,878,651	2.72	23	6.87	20
Iowa	10,130,987	15,439,316	5.25	9	3.44	45
Kansas	7,210,985	7,990,560	2.93	20	2.65	48
Kentucky	83,318,707	7,872,625	1.91	32	20.24	2
Louisiana	17,465,483	2,007,564	0.45	49	3.89	41
Maine	7,227,666	2,554,006	1.95	31	5.52	31
Maryland	45,580,644	10,339,575	1.88	33	8.27	18
Massachusetts	31,829,335	11,883,637	1.85	34	4.96	36
Michigan	53,836,422	25,296,650	2.51	25	5.34	32
Minnesota	30,297,000	8,075,641	1.60	40	5.99	25
Mississippi	15,289,067	4,224,669	1.47	42	5.31	34
Missouri	30,204,161	17,760,077	3.11	17	5.28	35
Montana	6,039,946	1,219,191	1.33	44	6.58	23

*Table 2: U.S. state park systems compared – cont'd.*

	Operating budget	Attendance	Visits per resident	Rank, visits per capita	Budget per capita	Rank, budget per capita
Nebraska	\$19,731,584	9,802,430	5.64	6	\$11.35	7
Nevada	8,528,763	3,285,847	1.47	43	3.80	42
New Hampshire	7,595,496	6,779,207	5.27	8	5.90	27
New Jersey	36,825,156	15,039,719	1.74	36	4.26	38
New Mexico	16,880,400	3,922,888	2.09	29	8.98	15
<b>New York</b>	<b>\$162,907,900</b>	<b>55,409,000</b>	<b>2.88</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>8.47</b>	<b>17</b>
North Carolina	31,176,142	12,758,396	1.51	41	3.70	43
North Dakota	2,644,221	1,096,666	1.73	37	4.18	39
Ohio	65,361,580	57,246,373	5.01	11	5.72	29
Oklahoma	44,985,574	14,057,136	4.01	14	12.83	6
Oregon	36,543,061	39,438,936	11.07	2	10.26	11
Pennsylvania	79,808,000	36,627,267	2.96	19	6.45	24
Rhode Island	5,719,235	7,269,823	6.76	4	5.32	33
South Carolina	23,969,797	8,150,521	1.97	30	5.78	28
South Dakota	11,983,559	8,821,691	11.54	1	15.67	4
Tennessee	64,208,100	26,274,529	4.50	12	10.99	9
Texas	57,943,313	17,089,692	0.77	48	2.62	49
Utah	22,484,200	5,940,741	2.50	26	9.45	13
Vermont	6,259,543	994,011	1.61	39	10.11	12
Virginia	18,049,695	6,856,305	0.93	47	2.44	50
Washington	43,316,651	48,864,376	7.97	3	7.07	19
West Virginia	30,353,992	7,317,734	4.04	13	16.77	3
Wisconsin	19,633,370	15,528,496	2.84	22	3.59	44
Wyoming	5,491,871	2,783,965	5.55	7	10.94	10

*SOURCE: Annual Information Exchange, National Association of State Parks Directors. To try to achieve uniformity, this survey uses a definition of operating expenditures that differs from that used by many of the individual states, including New York, so these spending numbers may differ from those published by individual states.*



## Parks in the current New York State financial plan

The 2006-07 New York State budget, as enacted, allocates \$244.3 million for the operating and capital needs of OPRHP facilities. This is less than one-fifth of one percent of the total state budget – which means, among other things, that **the state could make a significant increase in parks funding, without having a significant impact on the overall state budget.**

The 2006-07 OPRHP operating and capital budget represents an increase of \$80.5 million, or 49 percent, since state fiscal year 1994-95. This averages out to 4 percent a year, slightly ahead of the rate of inflation. However, what the state calls General Fund support (basically meaning taxpayer-financed spending) for the OPRHP budget has grown only about \$5.3 million since 1994-95 – from \$111.1 million to \$116.6 million. That's a total 12-year increase of 4.8 percent, averaging only 0.4 percent a year.

General Fund support has fallen from **two-thirds** (68 percent) of the parks budget in 1994-95 to **less than half** (48 percent) today. Support from revenue funds – user fees, sponsorships, concession income, and the like – has grown from 29 percent of the budget to 42 percent. The table below fleshes out the details.

<b>Table 3: Key budget trends for New York parks</b>					
	FY 1994-95 actual	FY 2006-07 budget	\$ change	% change	Average % / yr.
<b>Operating Budget</b>					
General Fund	\$102,249	\$116,593	+ 14,344	+ 14.0%	+ 1.2%
Revenue Funds	21,785	70,705	+ 48,920	+ 224.6%	+ 18.7%
Federal Funds	2,787	4,701	+ 1,914	+ 68.7%	+ 5.7%
Fiduciary/other	1,929	2,500	+ 571	+ 29.6%	+ 2.5%
<i>SUBTOTAL</i>	<i>\$128,750</i>	<i>\$194,499</i>	<i>+ 65,749</i>	<i>+ 51.1%</i>	<i>+ 4.3%</i>
<b>Capital Budget</b>					
General Fund	\$ 9,000	0	- 9,000	- 100.0%	
Revenue Funds	25,000	31,200	+ 6,200	+ 24.8%	+ 2.1%
Federal Funds	1,000	4,000	+ 3,000	+ 300.0%	+ 25.0%
Fiduciary/other	-	14,600	N/A		
<i>SUBTOTAL</i>	<i>\$ 35,000</i>	<i>\$ 49,800</i>	<i>+ 14,800</i>	<i>+ 42.3%</i>	<i>3.5%</i>
<b>Total, operating and capital</b>	<b>\$163,750</b>	<b>\$244,299</b>	<b>+ 80,549</b>	<b>+ 49.2%</b>	<b>+ 4.1%</b>
General Fund total	111,249	116,593	+ 5,344	+ 4.8%	+ 0.4%
State tax-supported share	68%	48%			
<i>All dollars in 1,000s. SOURCES: New York State Division of the Budget; Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation; Parks &amp; Trails New York calculations.</i>					

## The struggle over parks revenues

This fundamental trend – a gradual shift in parks funding from general taxpayer support, to user-based fees and other revenues – is an outgrowth of policies and budget practices that began almost 15 years ago.

In 1992 the state created the State Parks Infrastructure Fund (SPIF) to ensure that all the monies collected from state park user fees and other revenue sources would be pooled in one place and allocated to parks purposes. Previously such revenues were swept into the General Fund, where they could be and (to an extent that can no longer be determined) were used for non-parks purposes.

The use of the word “infrastructure” in SPIF’s name implied that the funds would go to maintenance and capital improvements. This impression was reinforced by provisions in the law spelling out that a “State Parks Infrastructure Project” would include

“preserving, improving or rehabilitating” state park infrastructure, including “design, acquisition, construction, improvement, and installation” of park facilities. SPIF was implemented effective with the 1993-94 budget – and the use of General Fund, taxpayer dollars for capital purposes in the parks was quickly phased out.

There was a Catch-22 in the SPIF law, however.

It said that each year’s budget could appropriate

as much of the parks revenue as the Governor and the Legislature chose into a “Patron Services Account” – basically a part of the parks *operating* budget. Only what was left over from parks revenue after that transfer had been made would actually be devoted to infrastructure projects.

In effect this gave the appearance of securing funds for park infrastructure, while in practice allowing much of the money to be devoted instead to operating expenses.

**This is exactly what has happened.**

## The great SPIF shift

In every year but one since SPIF was implemented, in the enacted state budget the Legislature appropriated for parks infrastructure projects an amount of money significantly larger than what ended up actually being spent. (See table on page 24.)

Infrastructure spending fell short of appropriations because the revenues earned by the parks fell below the forecast embodied in the budget – and the operating budget got first call on the income that was available. As Table 4 illustrates, available receipts have steadily risen, but almost always at a more modest pace than forecast in the budget – suggesting that the budget-makers’ forecast has been consistently (and perhaps not accidentally) over-optimistic. Meanwhile, the budgeted amount of Patron Services Account operating funds has been taken out of SPIF as planned each year, despite the

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**Our parks have a backlog of more than \$140 million in infrastructure projects — work the Legislature has approved, but hasn’t funded.**

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revenue shortfall. That, in turn, has meant that **the entire shortfall from the over-optimistic forecast has been subtracted from the infrastructure projects** that would have been funded if the program had worked as hoped – a loss to infrastructure projects reaching as high as \$24 million in Fiscal Year 2003-04.

Over time, this has added up to a cumulative backlog of over \$140 million in parks infrastructure projects for which the Legislature made appropriations – but which were never undertaken, because the actual cash never showed up.

Some SPIF money has made it to infrastructure, of course – about \$270 million over 15 years, it appears from budget figures. Adding in funds raised through partnerships and other sources, OPRHP says total capital improvements totaling \$482.5 million have been funded in the past 12 years.

But clearly, there would have been more infrastructure funding available if SPIF had lived up to its promise – and it hasn't. The park system's capital budget has grown more slowly than its operating budget, which is exactly the opposite of what you would hope for in a system that has recently acquired 27 new parks and 65,000 largely undeveloped acres. And a lot of the maintenance backlogs, closed campsites, damaged bathrooms, water system problems, splintered picnic tables, dubious roofs, broken water fountains and other concerns that our field surveys identified can be accounted for simply by this SPIF shortfall.

**Table 4: Status of New York's State Parks Infrastructure Fund**

	Revenue Funds Appropriated	Receipts Actually Available	Year's SPIF Project Shortfall	Cumulative SPIF Project Shortfall
FY 1993-94	\$40,338	\$38,851	1,487	1,487
FY 1994-95	82,630	38,428	44,202	45,689
FY 1995-96	46,868	43,851	3,017	48,706
FY 1996-97	48,889	50,310	(1,421)	47,285
FY 1997-98	60,623	55,730	4,893	52,178
FY 1998-99	54,200	56,693	(2,493)	49,685
FY 1999-00	69,230	61,741	7,489	57,174
FY 2000-01	69,427	60,500	8,927	66,101
FY 2001-02	71,360	64,173	7,187	73,288
FY 2002-03	76,031	64,164	11,867	85,155
FY 2003-04	90,052	65,400	24,652	109,807
FT 2004-05	89,646	75,028	14,618	124,425
FY 2005-06	93,126	81,598	11,528	135,953
FY 2006-07 (proj.)	89,915	83,000	6,915	<b>\$142,868</b>

*All dollars in thousands. SOURCE: New York State Division of the Budget; Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation*



# Restoring and enhancing our parks

Our research has documented fiscal shortfalls and emerging problems impacting many of our parks. It has traced the roots of the fiscal practices that we believe are contributing to the issues we observed in the field.

This combination tell us that the parks have reached a turning point. If New York acts quickly, it can restore and enhance its park system to a condition that will meet the needs of our people in the years ahead. If it does *not* act, we fear that the problems and the deterioration that we have documented will accelerate rapidly.

**Parks & Trails New York therefore proposes an action agenda of effective, low-cost initiatives that will:**

- ◆ **Provide the resources needed to get ahead of the maintenance and infrastructure backlog.**
- ◆ **Strengthen the operating resources of the park system.**
- ◆ **Protect the system's environmental resources.**
- ◆ **And ensure that our parks will be an ever more valuable asset for the state and its people.**

## Maintenance, capital investment and environmental stewardship

The budgetary figures and our survey reports both show that there is an urgent need to catch up with long-deferred investments in maintaining and restoring park facilities, making capital improvements in existing parks, and creating the infrastructure needed to open the state's 27 new parks to full public use.

These investments simply cannot be delayed indefinitely – with infrastructure funds siphoned off to cover operating expenses, and new funds going more to the acquisition of new parks than to the stewardship needed to operate them. Further delay will squander the great heritage our parks represent, and destroy the values that our park system can bring to our quality of life, to public health and to the state's economy.

We recommend a multi-faceted strategy to address these urgent infrastructure needs.

- ◆ First, we recommend the development of a **\$300 million, five-year capital plan** for the parks. The parks need up to \$250 million of this to address the \$140 million SPIF backlog that has developed over the last 14 years, and to deal with \$90 million to \$100 million in similar needs that recent trends suggest will develop in the next five years. The rest should be used to build the facilities re-

quired to open a minimum of five of the new parks within no more than five years.

There is already some talk of placing an environmental bond issue before New York voters in 2007 or 2008. The 1996 environmental bond issue, which received overwhelming public approval, has been fully expended. At least some of the park system's immediate capital needs could be part of a new bond issue.

- ◆ Second, we recommend use of the state's **Environmental Protection Fund** to better support infrastructure and resource protection needs in parks. At least 10 percent of the EPF every year should be **dedicated to the EPF's Parks and Lands Stewardship Fund**.

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**If we fail to preserve the natural resources, even the very best visitor infrastructure will prove pointless.**

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The EPF was created in 1993 to dedicate certain state revenues (primarily the real estate transfer tax) to environmental purposes. It started out at \$125 million and has been funded at \$225 million for the 2006-07 fiscal year.

In practice the usage of the fund has been tilted toward the acquisition of new lands and new parks (as opposed to the infrastructure or stewardship of these new acquisitions).

If the state were allocating only 10 percent of each year's EPF to stewardship, that would have made \$22.5 million in the current fiscal year available for such needs – versus the \$15 million (\$9 million to OPRHP and \$6 million to DEC) that the Legislature actually allocated in the current budget.

In part because land acquisition takes time, the EPF has built up reserves of unused funds. According to state Comptroller Alan Hevesi (*GreenWatch*, Fall 2005) accumulated EPF funds that were intended for parks, recreation and historic sites but had not been spent run as high as \$150 million. We recommend that a portion of the unexpended funds in the EPF be freed up for **important resource protection and infrastructure projects** in the parks and other state lands.

- ◆ Third, we believe that as new parks are brought on line and new facilities are added to existing parks, OPRHP needs the resources for up-to-date **environmental stewardship and planning** in making these improvements. Many of New York's existing park facilities were developed before the importance of wetlands, habitats for unique species, and other environmentally sensitive areas were fully understood. New and expanded facilities must be planned, developed and managed with these environmental concerns in mind.

Maintenance and capital improvement priorities tend to be determined primarily around visitor needs. But natural resources are part of the reason people visit parks; they are essential components of the visitor's experience and should be considered one of the "facilities" offered to the visitor. Threats to man-made

facilities and infrastructure are more easily recognized and understood than threats to natural resources – yet if we fail to preserve the resources, even the very best visitor infrastructure will ultimately prove pointless.

We recommend, therefore, that **resource protection needs** be formally incorporated into all park plans that involve significant new acquisition, construction or rehabilitation. Capital funds must be allocated to resource protection, as well as visitor facilities. All parks should have management plans (if not full-blown master plans) targeted at both visitor enjoyment and resource protection.

We also recommend that as the parks agency is given new capital resources to restore, expand and improve the system, it **strengthen the staff and other resources devoted to environmental planning and compliance**. This is the best way to ensure that these new projects will be planned in accordance with sound environmental stewardship.

## The search for operating revenues

Our recommendations for a new *infrastructure* strategy dovetail with our views on how best to maintain quality funding for parks *operations* in the future. It is healthy for the parks to grow the income they earn (though not to the point that entrance fees deter attendance). But the state has an obligation to ensure that the added revenues are used to improve parks and their programs, not to supplant tax dollars.

The reaction of OPRHP to the diversion of SPIF funds into support of the operating budget has been, sensibly enough, to strive ever harder to increase revenues from non-taxpayer sources. Only higher revenues have given the agency any hope of meeting its operating budget and still having funds left over for infrastructure improvements.

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**It is healthy for the parks to grow their revenues. But the funds should be used to help the parks — not to supplant taxpayer dollars.**

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OPRHP's revenue sources now include admission fees; golf-course charges; cabin and campground fees; rentals of picnic pavilions; marina and boat-launching charges; corporate sponsorships; concession income and other miscellaneous sources – all told, a total of \$83 million for the 2006-07 Fiscal Year, up from \$38.4 million in FY 1994-95. That's a growth rate that has averaged almost **10 percent** a year.

OPRHP made all this effort to ensure that park operations would still be supported fiscally even as the Budget Division and the Legislature looked for ways to hold down the taxpayer dollars spent in this part of the state budget. And the effort has been a success.

But in another sense it may only have encouraged them – that is, the growth in park revenue funds has made it easier for the Legislature to cut back on conventional taxpayer support for parks. The virtual flatlining of General Fund spending on parks suggests that this is exactly what has happened.



We believe that OPRHP's success in attracting new revenues should be used as an opportunity to enhance park operations, maintenance, infrastructure development and stewardship – *not* as budget relief that enables the state to redirect tax money that would otherwise go to support parks. So we recommend this policy:

- ◆ Given the importance of the park system to the state's quality of life and to its economic growth, **state taxpayer support for parks should grow every year at least in pace with the rest of the General Fund budget.**

Had this been the policy for just the last five years, it would have added about **\$25 million** to the current year's OPRHP budget – a significant additional amount for this small agency, yet an *insignificant* amount in the overall context of a \$114.7 billion state budget.

A high priority for the use of additional operating funds, we believe, is **more and better information, documentation and interpretive programs** in the parks. These will enrich the visitor experience; enhance public understanding of and support for the environmental and other resources of the parks; and help stimulate visitation.

Even with more General Fund support, however, our state parks will continue to depend on generating ever more of their own revenues if their operations and maintenance are to reach optimal levels. And it is appropriate to collect funds for park support from users, particularly for facilities such as golf courses and marinas that are expensive to maintain – rather than to charge the entire cost to taxpayers, including those who never touch a golf club and don't own a boat.

On the other hand, it is equally important not to set fees, especially basic entrance fees, at levels that turn people away. **The ideal way to get more parks revenues is to attract more park users** – not set higher fees. Parks & Trails New York strongly believes in the health and quality-of-life benefits that parks deliver for our citizens. We want to see *more* parks usage, not less – and the fact that parks would benefit financially, if that were to happen, is icing on the cake.

## Trends in park attendance

Unfortunately, attendance at New York State parks appears to be flat. In fact, the official figures compiled and published by OPRHP suggest overall attendance has *dropped* by about 14 percent, representing 8 million fewer visitors a year, since FY 1993-94. We suspect this supposed decline is a statistical fluke rather than a real trend – but certainly there is no evidence that attendance is growing as we would like it to. The table on the following page gives the official numbers, with attendance figures broken out by region, and by type of activity.

Some decline in park attendance in New York State might have been predicted from demographic changes. The 2000 Census, for example, reported that our cohort of those aged 20-35 declined by almost one-quarter from 1990, both on Long Island and in Upstate New York. The young families in that age cohort are a key demographic for parks, and Long Island and Upstate account for the overwhelming share of state park

usage.\* New York is not alone in this trend; attendance at U.S. national parks declined 6.6 percent from 1997 to 2004.

Even so, New York’s park attendance is almost certainly not declining as steeply as suggested by the published numbers – if at all. Note that the *entire* alleged decline can be accounted simply for by the “other” category – walk-ins and the like, estimates of which are least likely to be accurate and consistent. In recent years OPRHP has tightened the standards for making these estimates (especially in parks with lots of foot traffic, such as Riverbank in New York City), so it is to be expected that the reported numbers would have dropped.

\* This age cohort drop has been attributed to, among other things, post-Baby Boom demographic patterns—and also to economic decline Upstate, and rising housing costs on Long Island.

**Table 5: New York State parks attendance trends**

<b>Attendance by region</b> (in thousands)				
	1993-94	2005-06	# change	% change
Total, New York State	63,399	54,733	- 8,666	- 14%
Allegany	1,571	1,736	+ 165	+ 11%
Central New York	3,056	2,398	- 658	- 22%
Finger Lakes	3,967	2,747	- 1,220	- 31%
Genesee	1,802	1,177	- 625	- 35%
Long Island	20,956	19,013	- 1,943	- 9%
New York City	3,334	3,674	+ 340	+ 10%
Niagara Frontier	13,850	10,019	- 3,831	- 28%
Palisades	6,480	6,810	+ 330	+ 5%
Saratoga/Capital District	2,258	2,264	+ 6	+ 0%
Taconic	4,183	3,256	- 927	- 22%
Thousand Islands	1,942	1,638	- 304	- 16%
<b>Attendance by activity</b> (in thousands)				
	1993-94	2005-06	# change	% change
Vehicle Use	37,238	32,197	- 5,041	- 14%
Campsites	2,326	2,265	- 61	- 3%
General Admission*	2,115	7,770	+ 5,655	+ 267%
Golf	1,146	861	- 285	- 25%
Cabins	377	443	+ 66	+ 18%
Other**	19,970	10,114	- 9,856	- 49%
* Includes paid pedestrian entrance at Niagara Falls, more closely monitored in recent years.				
** Includes walk-ins, bicycles, etc., the totals for which are estimated. Also includes boats, marinas.				
<i>SOURCE: New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation.</i>				

But even assuming that overall park attendance is holding steady, rather than declining, the situation carries two implications. First, usage trends are not what we would like to see – given our views on the value of park experiences to the New Yorkers of today. Second, OPRHP may not have much “pricing power” left. That is, the fees and other charges it now employs may be about as high as they can go without discouraging use – if indeed they are not already too high.

So the way OPRHP can most successfully get more park revenues is to realize more park attendance. That, in turn, is going to require a serious effort at marketing.

### Where, oh where are my parks?

Given what attractive destinations New York’s state parks are, it seems to us to be surprisingly difficult for ordinary consumers to come across information that even tells them what and where the parks are – let alone to encounter information that would strongly entice them to visit a particular park.

It’s almost as though the parks are only meant to be used by people who were raised nearby and went as kids, or who wander in out of curiosity. Otherwise the parks might never come to the average person’s attention.

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**We want to see *more* parks usage — not less. And that will help the parks financially, too.**

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In cooperation with corporate sponsors and advertisers, OPRHP has an attractive color booklet, *New York Adventure Guide*, with basic information. But the only distribution we saw was to visitors once they’re already *in* a park – in other words, it’s probably not playing much of a role in getting people to go to the parks in the first place. The printed *2006 New York State Travel Guide*, available

for free by request on [www.iloveny.com](http://www.iloveny.com), scatters listings of state parks in among other kinds of attractions. If you’re looking for Jones Beach and you don’t know that it would be listed under Wantagh, you must wade through five pages of tiny type to find it. Should you go looking on the World Wide Web for information on New York parks, there’s no direct link to parks from *I Love New York* web site, nor from the New York State home page ([www.state.ny.us](http://www.state.ny.us)).

### An obvious need for better marketing

Google “New York parks” and you’ll find a link to OPRHP’s web site, [www.nysparks.com](http://www.nysparks.com), which has enticing pictures, and tools to help you “plan your trip” or go to a special interest like “boating.” Maps will help you find parks close to your home. There’s a feature that regularly showcases a rotating assortment of state parks (although on the site it is called, confusingly, “featured *properties*”).

Even on OPRHP’s site, however, your park search is best done by region, in the apparent expectation that potential visitors will know in advance which of 13 regions (as distinct from the 11 regions into which the *I Love NY* material divides the state) they’re



interested in. The selection tools focus by region on the kinds of activities you want to participate in (hiking, biking, camping, swimming, etc.).

Once you find a particular park to investigate further, there's a color photo and some descriptive text, but the information on the web site is pretty rudimentary – a checklist of the kinds of facilities available, with those that are accessible to wheelchair users so designated, a link to the state's campsite reservation system, and a button that allows you to bring up a road map to the park.

We found several instances in which the information on the web site was incorrect, incomplete and/or outdated. As of August 2006, for example, the page devoted to Chittenango Falls State Park was still listing camping as a feature of the park – even though the campsite was closed the year before because of the drinking water quality problem. The page for Seneca Lake State Park said “children will be especially delighted with our Sprayground” – not mentioning that the facility was closed at the time, and had been all summer. If you're interested in our Native American heritage, you'd never know from the web site how central that is to the Letchworth State Park experience.

In addition to more frequent updating, the web site could present a far richer array of information about each park: overall maps, trail maps, detailed descriptions of facilities, more photos, and so on. And a search tool could be added to enable people quickly to identify parks within, say, 30 minutes' drive of their zip code.

### **Better marketing = more attendance = more resources**

It seems clear to us that if New York is to grow the revenue resources available for its park system, it needs an effective marketing plan aimed at increasing park attendance. It should start with some research. What are the demographics on current park visitors? What do visitors say about why they came, what they liked, and what will bring them back? Who's not coming, and why? Would more public transportation – especially to parks near urban areas – help attendance? What are better ways of enticing visitors? What are the best and most efficient ways of getting appealing information about our parks to our citizens?

This will require a multi-agency effort, because OPRHP alone cannot control or even shape how state government promotes the parks. The “I Love New York” information gateway for potential visitors is controlled by Empire State Development, not OPRHP. Park-type facilities offered by DEC in the Adirondacks and the Catskills will also be of interest to many potential visitors and need to be presented on an equal basis. Transportation agencies control directional signage and access, so they need to be involved, too. Therefore:

- ◆ We recommend that a task force be created, with outside expert assistance, to **develop a marketing plan targeted at increasing attendance**, particularly revenue-generating attendance, at New York State parks.

## Friends in need can be friends indeed

As we struggle to ensure that New York’s parks get the financial resources they need, it’s also important to help our parks agency find ways to get more done for less – or even better, for free. One key opportunity for that, we believe, may lie in the development of more organizations of parks supporters – often called “friends groups” – to supplement the resources and programs offered by the parks agency.

Such “friends groups” bring together volunteers and supporters to help in any number of ways – raising funds, joining in spring and fall clean-ups, producing promotional materials and events, running nature study and historical interpretive programs. New York, however, has only 16 officially designated support groups for particular parks, meaning that nine out of 10 parks are without such help. (Another eight groups are affiliated with one particular facility in a park, such as a nature center.) New York is below the level of all but seven other states in this category.

California, to offer one example in contrast, rallies parks supporters of two types – 80 “cooperating associations” that raise funds to support specific park activities and programs, and individual “volunteers in parks,” who offset costs and enhance services by taking on unpaid jobs ranging from campground hosts to mountain bike patrols. According to the web site of the California park system ([www.parks.ca.gov](http://www.parks.ca.gov)), the 80 cooperating associations have more than 26,000 members associated with 278 state parks, and contribute more than \$10 million annually to fund staff positions, exhibits, visitor centers, nature programs, living history demonstrations, and special events.

Funding raised by these associations helps California build, restore or furnish visitor centers, museums, exhibit shelters and historic buildings, as well as run tours, nature walks, and special events. And most of these groups also fund books, brochures, newspapers and/or videos about individual parks and their resources.

But just as important as money is the volunteer help that park friends groups can supply. Volunteers help California staff visitor centers and other facilities, and conduct interpretive programs for visitors, including nature hikes, historic talks and train rides. Our park visits found that interpretive programs in New York State parks are all too limited; if volunteers enabled our state to offer more in this area it would enhance the visitor experience, increase public support for stewardship of our natural resources, and probably bolster attendance, as well.

The California park system actively recruits friends groups and their members, as well as the individual volunteers, through its web site and other means. And it has some specific statutory authority recognizing the groups and establishing accountability and auditing for the financial support they raise on behalf of parks.

- ◆ **We recommend that OPRHP and its regional park commissions work with parks supporters to determine how an expanded “friends group” program can be developed in New York.**

# Honoring the legacy

One reason we are confident that groups of supporters and friends of the parks can do much to support and enhance the system is that this idea builds off the best in New York's park heritage. In a sense, it was the friends of parks who gave New York its state parks in the first place.

The creation of New York's park system, dating back to more than a century ago, was the work of friends with names like Rockefeller, Harriman, Perkins, Robert Moses — and countless other citizens, civic groups, and front-line parks workers. These individuals and families and public servants contributed their wealth, their political clout, their brainpower, their skills and their sweat to create and build a park system that has brought the joys of the outdoors to tens of millions of New Yorkers who came after them.

## **Our park system is their legacy to us.**

And a legacy, as we know, is not a mere *gift* — something one generation creates, and then passes on to the next generation to use as it sees fit, without care for what it will be like in the future.

A legacy is a *responsibility*, handed from one generation to the next, with each generation privileged to enjoy it — but obligated, too, to pass it on in better shape than it found it.

Our parks are perhaps New York State's greatest single legacy. They are, indeed, gems worth caring for. They are at the turning point. It is time for our generation to step up.

Fair Haven Beach State Park





# Parks & Trails NEW YORK

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## About Parks & Trails NEW YORK

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Parks & Trails New York is a non-profit organization working statewide to protect New York's parks and help communities create new parks. Founded in 1985, Parks & Trails New York has grown from a small group of park advocates to over 5000 members and supporters from every region of the state.

Our mission is to expand, protect and promote a network of parks, trails, and open spaces throughout our state for use and enjoyment by all.

**29 Elk Street ♦ Albany, New York 12207 ♦ (518) 434-1583 ♦ [www.ptny.org](http://www.ptny.org)**



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NEW YORK

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