

NYS Budget Reflects Commitment to Protecting Parkland and Open Space

Governor and Legislature affirm commitment to state park system and protecting natural areas

ALBANY, N.Y. – Parks & Trails New York thanks Governor Andrew Cuomo and Legislative leaders for passage of the FY 2020-21 budget that avows the importance of preserving our natural environment and providing safe, high-quality outdoor recreation opportunities.

Major highlights from the budget include \$110 million in capital funding for State Parks, a \$300 million Environmental Protection Fund (EPF), and the historic \$3 billion “Restore Mother Nature” Environmental Bond Act.

“In these challenging times, many New Yorkers are relying on the outdoors to preserve their mental and physical well-being,” said Robin Dropkin, Executive Director of Parks & Trails New York. “We thank Governor Cuomo, Majority Leader Stewart-Cousins, and Speaker Heastie for their commitment to preserving our natural environment and ensuring that New Yorkers will continue to have beautiful, safe places for outdoor recreation and enjoyment for generations to come.”

“We also thank Assemblymembers Steven Englebright and Daniel O’Donnell, and Senators Todd Kaminsky and José Serrano for continuing to be true champions for open space and protecting our precious natural resources. Parks and public open space are truly critical public health infrastructure, and we thank our state leaders for continuing to affirm their importance during these challenging times.”

Capital Funding

Building off of the success of the NY Parks 2020 program, the FY2021 state budget continues the state’s investment in state parks infrastructure with \$110 million for capital improvements. This funding, which continues the revitalization of the oldest and one of the largest state park systems in the nation, will be used to build and restore visitor centers, bathroom facilities and other critical infrastructure, strengthening the role state parks and historic sites play in sustainable economic development and tourism in communities across the state.

Investment in our state park system has leveraged billions of dollars in New York State’s economy through increased tourism. Visitation to state parks has steadily increased over the past ten years, with a record-breaking 77.1 million visits to parks, historic sites, campgrounds, and trails in 2019. Continued capital investment in state parks will be essential in ensuring that our state’s economy can recover from the impact of coronavirus.

Environmental Protection Fund

The Governor and the Legislature once again have made a historic commitment to preserving our precious natural environment by funding the EPF at \$300 million in 2021. This funding is used across the state to protect New York’s water, land, and air, and to support the stewardship of our state parks, forests, and open space. We thank the Legislature for removing language that would have allowed agency staffing costs to be paid for out of this capital fund.

The funding for the EPF continues support for the Parks & Trails Partnership Grant program at \$1 million. This capacity-building grant program supports grassroots Friends groups in their critical work to support and enhance the state’s parks, trails, historic sites and public lands, enabling these groups to expand their impact and strengthen the state’s heritage of outdoors public-private partnership. Since 2015, 83 grants totaling \$1.8 million have been awarded, with another round of grant awards due to be announced in the coming weeks. Previous

awards have been used for innovative educational programs, capital projects, and capacity-building undertakings, and have leveraged more than \$700,000 in private investment.

We were pleased to see funding for the Connect Kids to School initiative increased to \$2 million in this year's EPF allocations. This important program provides transportation to parks and nature and environmental education centers for children in grades K-12, giving school children the chance to experience nature and the environment and providing an opportunity to engage the next generation in the stewardship of our natural resources.

Restore Mother Nature Bond Act

The budget includes a historic proposal for a \$3 Billion Restore Mother Nature Environmental Bond Act. However, unlike the other pieces of the budget which only require the Governor's signature to become law, this funding requires approval by the state's voters in November.

If approved, the funding would include \$550 million for open space land conservation and recreation, with \$75 million slated for the creation of a fish hatchery, at least \$200 million for open space land conservation, and at least \$100 million for farmland protection.

Proposed uses for Bond Act funds include the establishment of a new park on formerly industrial land in Kingston and a linear, water-based park along the Hudson River from Rensselaer to Hudson. These new parks would not only create recreational opportunities for future generations to enjoy, but also help increase storm resiliency and enhance the historic Hudson River corridor. Additionally, the acquisition of over 4,000 acres of land will expand seven existing parks, ensuring that these natural environments are preserved for future generations.

PTNY advocated throughout the budget process for funding from the bond act to be used for the expansion of the state's multi-use trail and greenway network. We were pleased to see these efforts bear fruit with such a robust allocation for conservation and recreation purposes. More than ever, we see the importance of trails as public health and social resiliency infrastructure, and these investments will help the state mitigate the imminent threats from climate change.

Other funding allocations in the Bond Act include:

- \$1 billion for restoration and flood risk reduction, including
 - \$250 million for a buyout program for those living in areas at risk for flood damage, and
 - \$100 million for coastal rehabilitation and shoreline restoration projects and projects which address inland flooding
- \$700 million for climate change mitigation, including
 - \$350 million for green buildings projects
- \$550 million for water quality improvement and resilient infrastructure, including
 - \$200 million for wastewater infrastructure projects
 - \$100 million for municipal stormwater projects

The proposed Bond Act includes a requirement that 35 percent of the funds be used to benefit environmental justice communities. The bill also includes a clause that allows the Bond Act to be removed from the ballot if the fiscal impact from the coronavirus on the state's economy is severe enough to merit it.

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