



Testimony of Parks & Trails New York

Impacts of the 2013-2014 State Budget on the Department of Environmental Conservation and the Need for a New Environmental Bond Act

Assembly Standing Committee on Environmental Conservation
Assembly Subcommittee on Oversight of the
Department of Environmental Conservation

September 6, 2013

Good morning Chairman Sweeney and members of the committee. My name is Laura DiBetta and I am the Parks Program Director at Parks & Trails New York. Since 1985, Parks & Trails New York has been the state's leading organization working to preserve and enhance a network of parks, trails and greenways for all New Yorkers for generations to come. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the state's environmental programs and a new Environmental Bond Act.

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 2013-2014 that funded the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) at \$153 million—an increase of \$19 million—and provided \$90 million in capital funding for infrastructure improvements at state parks and historic sites, as well as a \$40 million investment in Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) infrastructure. The enacted budget was truly a victory for the environment.

Parks and Trails: Good for the Environment, Good for the Economy

New York State enjoys significant economic benefits thanks to 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. Outdoor recreation generates \$33.8 billion in

consumer spending, 305,000 direct jobs, and \$12.4 billion in wages and salaries.¹ Active outdoor recreation generates annual state and local tax revenues in New York of \$2.8 billion. Our world-class parks and extensive network of trails are also key assets in helping the state and localities attract tax-paying businesses and a high-quality workforce.

The storms of 2011 and 2012 (Irene, Lee and Sandy) demonstrated our vulnerability to weather-related disaster and the need for further investment in programs that improve the strength and resilience of our state's infrastructure and protect our communities at a time of climate change and an increased risk of extreme storm events. Parks, trails and transportation alternatives can provide natural protective systems while keeping the lands they occupy in productive, attractive use and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

While parks and trails already have a significant, positive impact on New York's economy and resiliency, there is a great deal more potential to be realized. Each year New York's environmental funding needs greatly exceed the amount of available funding. A significant infusion of capital funding will go a long way toward filling the gap between available and needed funding.

Protecting New York's Conservation Legacy

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. Today, our 214 state parks and historic sites are significant economic drivers, while also strengthening New Yorkers' health and fitness, enhancing their quality of life, and preserving invaluable landscapes, ecosystems and historic and cultural treasures.

The tourism dollars generated by parks are critical, especially to local Upstate economies. According to a 2009 independent study² commissioned by Parks & Trails New York, the NYS Park System boosts the state's economy to the tune of nearly \$2 billion annually—that's a 5-to-1 return on investment. Plus, the state park system creates and supports 20,000 jobs—exclusive of state parks employees.

Thanks to the leadership of the Governor and the Legislature, state parks have received an historic infusion of capital funding through the New York Works initiative to restore and rebuild state parks' aging and dilapidated infrastructure. The \$179 million committed in the last two state budgets is breathing new life into a park system that has suffered from decades of underfunding while creating thousands of local jobs and helping to grow the state's economy.

¹Outdoor Industry Foundation, 2013. *The Active Outdoor Recreation Economy*. http://www.outdoorindustry.org/images/ore_reports/NY-newyork-outdoorrecreationeconomy-oia.pdf

²PERI Institute. *The NYS Park System: An Economic Asset to the Empire State*. March 2009. Prepared for Parks & Trails New York.

Visitors are clearly noticing the improvements, too. With visitation now up to more than 60 million people annually, our state parks and historic sites are primed to anchor the state's regional tourism efforts, particularly in Upstate communities. The Parks & Trails New York study I mentioned earlier also showed that about \$744 million of park visitor expenditure—that is, around 40% of total visitor spending—comes from visitors living outside the communities in which the parks are located. This is money local businesses would not have without the presence of the parks to attract visitors to the area.

With an approximately \$1 billion backlog in health, safety, and infrastructure projects, state parks and historic sites still face a tremendous need. In November 2006, Parks & Trails New York released its *Parks at a Turning Point* report in which we highlighted the many challenges facing the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP), particularly the agency's enormous capital projects backlog. These challenges remain; according to a recent report by the Office of the Comptroller, almost every park and historic site in the system has some infrastructure need.³

In many parts of the state, the state forests, campgrounds, trails and wildlife management areas managed by DEC serve as *de facto* state parks for local residents. The \$40 million in capital funding for DEC in this year's budget is being put towards recreational facility improvements, including campgrounds, environmental centers, trails and fishing access sites, among other programs. But the backlog of projects remains. DEC's Division of Lands and Forests faces a large backlog of projects among its nearly 3 million acres of Forest Preserve, 780,000 acres of State Forests, and 200,000 acres of Wildlife Management Areas. It also manages more than 4,000 miles of recreation trails in the Forest Preserve and in State Forests for hiking, snowmobiling, cross-country skiing, and horseback riding providing access to fishing, boat launches, campsites, beaches and scenic vistas. In order for these trails and sites to realize their full potential as tourist and recreation destinations as well as continue to serve critical ecosystem functions, DEC must have adequate stewardship and infrastructure funding.

We were extremely pleased to see funding for OPRHP and DEC in the state's 10-year capital spending plan released this year. The report includes a target of more than \$1.2 billion and \$5.4 billion over the next 10 years for state parks and DEC capital funding, respectively, showing the Governor's continued recognition of the importance of sustained capital funding for environmental infrastructure needs.

It is our hope that we will continue to see this commitment to eliminating OPRHP's capital projects backlog, as well as funding for the infrastructure needs at DEC-managed lands. Continuing to invest in these treasured places will keep people working to help grow New

³NYS Office of the State Comptroller. *Safety of Infrastructure, Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation*. September 2012. Report 2012-S-29.

York's economy sustainably, boost tourism in communities across the state, and secure New York's parks and conservation legacy for future generations.

Lean Agency Operations Budgets Taking a Toll

Given the state's continued fiscal challenges, we appreciate that the operations budgets of OPRHP and DEC have held steady. The Governor and Legislature have shown tremendous support for parks and a clear recognition of the important link between well-maintained parks and other public lands and economic growth.

I would be remiss, however, if I did not acknowledge that the toll of the last few years will continue to weigh heavily. OPRHP's budget has been cut 23% over the last few years—more than many agencies—and it is operating today with 1,500 fewer staff than it was in 2008. DEC staffing levels are likewise down significantly from just a few years ago. The state park operations budget has been on a downward slide for more than 15 years and parks are being starved as a result, with reduced hours, days, and seasons, fewer programs and workers, fewer park police, and less maintenance, not to mention fewer resources dedicated to natural resource protection and the visitor experience.

Local Parks and Trails: An Integral Part of State's Recreation Assets

The situation for our local community parks and trails is equally challenging. Infrastructure backlogs plague aging systems in municipalities with shrinking budgets. Important lands that should be protected and added to the network of city, town, village and county parks and trails either go to the highest bidder or sit undeveloped or underutilized because of a lack of funds. Many communities struggle just to keep their parks open.

As with state parks, need greatly outpaces available funding. In 2012, funding requests through the EPF's municipal park grants program administered by OPRHP was nearly six times the amount of available funding. Municipal parks alone requested \$47,633,974 and were awarded a paltry \$7,878,133.

Funding for local park and trail improvements and open space protection—whether through an enhanced EPF, an environmental bond act, or other mechanism—could clearly be productively put to use immediately in communities across the state.

Bike and Pedestrian Paths, Trails and Greenways: Myriad Connections and Benefits

Parks & Trails New York also enthusiastically supports capital funding for bike and pedestrian paths, trails and greenways. These projects can increase the number of people of all ages and

abilities who engage in regular physical activity, improve air quality by reducing vehicle trips, add tourism dollars to local economies, and enhance the quality of life for all New Yorkers.

Currently, more than 60% of New York adults and 32% of New York children ages 10 to 17 are overweight or obese. New York ranks second highest in the United States for medical expenditures attributable to obesity. Spending on obesity-related diseases in New York State totals \$11.1 billion (in 2009 dollars). Medicaid finances \$4 billion and Medicare finances \$2.7 billion of these costs.⁴ These Medicare and Medicaid expenditures directly impact our taxes and the services supplied by all levels of government.

People who report having access to sidewalks and trails are 28-55% more likely to be physically active. Therefore, funding for close-to-home, multi-use trails can provide opportunities for everyone, irrespective of age or fitness level, to increase their level of daily physical activity, improve their mental and physical health, and reduce the burden of rising health care costs.

Local economies also benefit from the presence of trails through increase in home values and the addition of tourism dollars. A 2011 National Association of Realtors survey found that 77% of respondents felt sidewalks and places to take walks such as trails were one of their top priorities when deciding where to live.⁵ Bicycle tourism is now the third most common vacation activity and bicycle tourists can often spend between \$100 and \$300 per day, providing an enormous boost for local business development.

Trails also help protect valuable open space; preserve natural and historic resources; provide safe off-road links to parks, schools, libraries, shops and neighborhoods; and foster public-private partnerships, community investment, and civic pride.

Again, need far outpaces available funding for trails projects. For example, for the 2011 Recreational Trails Program local assistance grant round, OPRHP received 104 applications totaling \$12,553,577 in federal funding requested. Of those, 23 projects were funded at just \$2.69 million in federal funding.

Environmental Protection Fund – the Lifblood of Environmental Funding

The EPF is the lifblood of environmental funding in New York and supports a wide range of programs that generate revenue and create jobs in many sectors throughout the state, as well as support disaster recovery and preparedness. We applaud Assemblyman Sweeney and Senator Grisanti for their leadership within the Legislature, and partnership with Governor Cuomo, which led to a \$19 million increase in appropriations for the EPF this year, the first increase

⁴http://www.health.ny.gov/prevention/prevention_agenda/2013-2017/plan/chronic_diseases/focus_area_1.htm

⁵The 2011 Community Preference Survey: What Americans are looking for when deciding where to live, National Association of Realtors, 2011. <http://www.realtor.org/sites/default/files/smart-growth-comm-survey-results-2011.pdf>, retrieved 7/6/13.

since 2008.

The EPF has shown that programs that protect our environment also generate significant revenue for the state; for every \$1 invested in the EPF, the state gets back \$7.⁶

From land conservation and farmland protection, to our parks infrastructure, zoos and botanical gardens, to our community services such as recycling, waste management and invasive species prevention, to waterfront revitalization and community resilience projects that prevent flooding and storm impacts, there are unmet needs in localities across the state.

Closing

We know the members of this Committee share our passion for the outdoors and understand that parks and trails are more than just niceties; they are essential community infrastructure. And Governor Cuomo's actions reflect his recognition of the important role these treasured places play in local economic growth, in the protection of important natural areas, improving New Yorkers' health and fitness, and in providing affordable recreational opportunities for New Yorkers and out-of-state visitors, alike.

Funding for infrastructure projects is an investment in both New York's environment and its economy. 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. The last environmental bond act was passed with strong public support in 1996, and from what we understand most, if not all, of those funds have been spent.

We believe the new Bond Act proposal highlights the significant need for environmental funding, are pleased at the public conversation this proposal has started, and appreciate your efforts to find creative solutions to fund environmental programs and address the tremendous infrastructure need in our state parks, forests, campgrounds, wildlife areas, local parks and trails.

We look forward to working with this Committee, the rest of the Legislature, the Governor, and our partner organizations to protect and preserve New York's parks and conservation legacy, as well as strengthen the network of parks, trails and greenways across the state. It is our strong hope that these discussions on the need and support for greater environmental funding coalesce around a proposal to make a significant increase in the next state budget, building on the excellent work done by the Governor and Legislature this fiscal year.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify.

⁶The Trust for Public Land. *The Economic Benefits of New York's Environmental Protection Fund*. January 2012.