



Testimony of Parks & Trails New York
to the Assembly Committee on
Tourism, Parks, Arts, and Sports Development

Respectfully submitted by
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Chairperson Markey and members of the Committee, thank you for this opportunity to speak out on behalf of New York's outstanding outdoor recreational resources, especially its magnificent state park system and its thousands of miles of greenways, canalways, and bikeways, and to explore ways to enhance New York's role as a leader in outdoor recreation and boost outdoor recreation's already significant impact on the state's economy.

I am Laura DiBetta, Director of Parks & Trails New York's Parks Program and Government Relations. Since 1985, Parks & Trails New York has been the state's leading advocate for the expansion, protection, and promotion of a network of parks, trails, bike paths, and greenways throughout the state.

Today, I am going to highlight the significant return on investment provided by outdoor recreation, in particular how revitalization of our state park system and initiatives related to trail and bicycle tourism can enhance the state's tourism industry.

Outdoor Recreation Creates an Attractive Business Climate

Outdoor recreation is a major component of New York State's economy, contributing \$11.3 billion to the state's tourism economy each year—that's over 21 percent of the state's total tourism industry.¹ Active outdoor recreation generates annual tax revenues for the state of nearly \$800 million.²

¹ New York State Office of the Comptroller, 2010. *Economic Benefits of Open Space Preservation, March 2010.*

² Outdoor Industry Foundation, 2006. *The Active Outdoor Recreation Economy: A \$730 Billion Contribution to the U.S. Economy.* Fall 2006.

Our world-class parks and extensive network of trails are key assets in helping the state and localities attract tax-paying businesses and a high-quality workforce.

From small business owners to Fortune 500 senior executives, recreation—including parks and trails—ranks high as a factor for determining business location. And skilled workers prefer places with a diverse range of outdoor recreational activities, from rock climbing to walking and bicycling paths. Portland, Seattle, Austin, Denver, and San Francisco are among the top cycling cities; they also are among the leaders in knowledge workers.³

Parks and trails already have a significant, positive impact on New York’s economy, but there is a great deal more potential to be realized.

New York State Parks—A 5-to-1 Return on Investment

New York’s state park system is the nation’s oldest, dating to the creation of the Niagara Reservation in 1885, and one of the most heavily visited. The system’s 179 parks and 35 historic sites welcome 58 million visitors annually and 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 study 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. For every dollar the state invests in the park system it gets back \$5. Plus, the state park system creates 20,000 jobs—exclusive of state parks employees. The study also showed that about \$744 million of 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.

Parks also generate significant additional benefits to the state, including maintaining the natural environment, protecting communities from the impacts of extreme weather events and mitigating the impacts from climate change, providing an escape for millions of New Yorkers and others from around the world, and protecting the state’s heritage for future generations. Because of these additional benefits, most assessments of the economic impact of parks underestimate their true economic contribution.

³American Planning Association. *How Cities Use Parks for Economic Development*.
<http://www.planning.org/cityparks/briefingpapers/economicdevelopment.htm>.

Preserve and Enhance the NYS Park System

Over the past two years the Governor has put parks in the forefront of his efforts to rebuild the state's infrastructure and economy. Thanks to the leadership of the Governor and Legislature, state parks received a historic infusion of capital funding through the New York Works initiative to restore and rebuild state parks' aging and dilapidated infrastructure. This \$89 million commitment in the 2012-2013 budget—leveraged to \$143 million—is breathing new life into a park system that has suffered from decades of underfunding while creating local jobs and helping to grow the state's economy.

Visitors are noticing the improvements, too. Through Labor Day, 47.4 million people had visited state parks and historic sites in 2012—an 8.6 percent increase in visits over 2011. This is a continuing trend; 2011 saw 58 million total visitors, up 1 million from 2010.

With an estimated \$1.1 billion backlog in health, safety, and infrastructure projects, state parks and historic sites still face a tremendous need. According to a recent report by the Office of the Comptroller, almost every park and historic site in the system has some infrastructure need, from crumbling buildings and bridges and leaky swimming pools, to outdated water, sewer and electrical systems and deteriorating roads.

To continue to be well-maintained and inviting places for the 58 million plus visitors each year, parks must receive an appropriate level of funding to maintain an adequate level of service and address aging infrastructure.

As the Assembly works with the Senate and the Governor on the State Fiscal Year 2013-2014 budget, we encourage you to keep the momentum for parks going with another round of funding through the NY Works program. With an investment of \$100 million annually, the backlog in capital needs can be addressed over a roughly ten-year period. Continuing to invest in these treasured places will keep people working to help grow New York's economy sustainably, boost tourism in communities across the state, and secure our parks and conservation legacy for future generations.

In addition to investing in state parks infrastructure through the NY Works program, there are other creative ways to move forward and secure the future of the park system.

A new, dedicated funding mechanism for parks is the best chance to adequately support our iconic state park system, for ourselves and future generations. A viable proposal currently before the Legislature is Pennies for Parks. It is a proposal for a five-cent surcharge on disposable bags, which can provide more than \$70 million annually to state parks for capital needs. A recent poll shows 3 out of 4 New Yorkers support a surcharge if the money goes to parks. Plus, the

surcharge is completely avoidable through the use of reusable bags. Through this proposal we can reduce waste going to our landfills and reduce our contribution to greenhouse gases at the same time we generate funding to keep our parks open and safe. It is a win-win. We encourage the Committee to consider Pennies for Parks as well as other permanent sources of funding to establish a long-term strategy to address capital needs at state parks and historic sites.

While the state parks agency has made great strides in expanding and enhancing its marketing, for example launching a free phone app, much more could be done to promote state parks. The successful I Love NY brand could be better linked with our state parks and historic sites. An “I Love NY Parks” campaign, for example, would raise the visibility of the park system, increasing visitation, which in turn would bring in more money for parks. Plus greater cooperation between state agencies means greater operations efficiency.

In addition, partnerships with state park and historic site Friends groups could be enhanced. These nonprofit organizations—oftentimes made up entirely of volunteers— already contribute significantly to promotion of our park system in addition to clearing trails, painting buildings, building kiosks, leading interpretive programs, and raising significant money for capital projects. Greater investment in these organizations will serve to extend the capacity of the parks agency and put to good use already existing capacity in our state parks.

We also join with our partners in urging the Legislature and Governor to work together to develop a strategy by which the Environmental Protection Fund, the lifeblood of environmental funding in New York, can grow in future years as the economy continues to improve.

Make New York State a World-Class Destination for Bicycle Tourism

Parks & Trails New York has worked with more than 300 communities and organizations to build thousands of miles of trails, helping to bring important economic, public health, tourism, and quality-of-life benefits to New Yorkers across the state.

Data from other states indicates that bicycle tourism can make a substantial contribution to the state and local economy. A survey of three Orange County Florida trails indicated that trail users spend on average \$19 per visit which supports 516 jobs and produces an economic impact of \$42.6 million.⁴ A 2009 report by the League of American Bicyclists reveals that bicycling brings in one billion dollars a year to Colorado’s economy, while bicycle-related activity in Portland, Oregon contributes \$90 million to its local economy and provides 850 to 1,150 jobs. A 2007 economic impact study of Pennsylvania’s Great Allegheny Passage Trail, which has many

⁴ Economic Impact Analysis of Orange County Trails, East Central Florida Regional Planning Council, 2010, <http://www.ecfrpc.org/Document-Library/Environment/Economic-Impact-of-Trails-in-Orange-County.aspx>

similarities to our own Erie Canalway Trail, determined that it was generating \$12.5 million in revenue annually.⁵ Right here in New York, annual use for 22 locations on 14 multi-use greenway trails is over 2.2 million users.⁶ Clearly there is great unrealized potential in New York.

Extending 365 miles across New York, the Erie Canalway Trail is the backbone of the statewide trail system. Presently, the Erie Canalway Trail is more than 75% complete and on its way to becoming a premiere tourist destination for cyclists and other outdoor enthusiasts as well as the longest, continuous intrastate multi-use trail in the nation. However, the Canalway Trail can neither realize its full potential as a world-class tourism destination nor offer maximum benefit to the more than 200 communities along its length until it is finished from Buffalo to Albany as a continuous off-road trail.

The NYS Canal Corporation estimates that closing the five remaining major gaps will result in more than 1.5 million bicycle and pedestrian trips across the Erie Canalway Trail, an increase of 500,000 trail users annually, and will generate an estimated \$5 million in additional annual mobility, health, recreation and reduced auto use benefits system-wide.

For more than two decades the federal transportation bill has provided New York communities with the funds to build pedestrian and bicycle paths, sidewalks, bike lanes, and other infrastructure that promotes complete streets and walking and bicycling. However, the current federal transportation bill has reduced support by 30% for such programs and given state DOTs much greater flexibility in how to utilize these funds.

New York State can still be a national leader in trails and active transportation by ensuring that 100% of the state's federal Transportation Alternatives funding is directed to building community infrastructure and trails that encourage safe walking and bicycling.

New York must also commit to continuing the federally funded Recreational Trails Program which is designed to directly support construction, maintenance and development of trails for all types of recreation.

It is also vitally important for New York's communities to have the opportunity to apply for the estimated \$30-\$50 million in dedicated, unallocated funds in the Transportation Enhancements program, which supports trails and bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure construction. If

⁵ *The Great Allegheny Passage Economic Impact Study, Phases I, II, & III*. Allegheny Trail Alliance, Latrobe, PA. www.atatrail.org/about/reports.

⁶ *Report of the 2012 New York State Trail User Count*, December 2012. www.ptny.org/greenways/NYSTrailUserCount/2012%20NYS%20Trail%20User%20Count%20report.pdf

communities are not allowed the opportunity to access these funds very soon, New York State will lose them.

As with state parks, better statewide marketing and more visibility for the Canalway Trail and other bikeways and greenways would go a long way to enhancing their economic impact. Our state's trails and the communities in which they are located would greatly benefit from more tie-in with state tourism efforts. An "I Love NY Trails" or "I Love NY" Heritage marketing campaign could be coordinated with other state and federal agencies. A signage program could also be implemented to better promote and brand the system of New York State trails.

Closing

We know the members of this Committee share our passion for parks and trails. And Governor Cuomo's Cleaner, Greener NY plan and NY Works initiative also show he understands their importance, especially to the state's economy. Parks & Trails New York looks forward to working with this Committee, the rest of the Legislature, the Governor, our partner organizations, and park and trail groups to revitalize our wonderful but beleaguered park system and make New York a top destination for trail and bicycling tourism.