



## Testimony of Parks & Trails New York

### The Future Development, Growth and Maintenance of the State Park System

#### Assembly Committee on Tourism, Parks, Arts, and Sports Development

November 21, 2013

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Good morning Chairperson Markey and members of the committee. My name is Robin Dropkin and I am Executive Director of Parks & Trails New York. We have been the state's leading advocate for parks and trails for nearly 30 years and are dedicated to improving New Yorkers' health, economy, and quality of life through the use and enjoyment of green space. Thank you for this opportunity to speak out on behalf of New York's magnificent state park system and to explore ways to efficiently and effectively manage existing assets while continuing to enhance the park system and maximize public use and enjoyment of its facilities.

#### **A State Parks Renaissance**

New York State has a long and proud tradition of being a leader in environmental protection and our state park 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.

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.

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.

## **Challenges Remain**

With an approximately \$1 billion backlog in health, safety, and infrastructure projects, state parks and historic sites still face a tremendous need. Parks & Trails New York has long called attention to the backlog of parks’ capital needs. In November 2006, Parks & Trails New York released its landmark *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.<sup>1</sup>

Among the backlog of capital projects faced by the agency is its portfolio of facilities—from historic structures to storage and maintenance buildings—that sit underutilized and deteriorating because of the need for significant investment, or because the facilities do not serve a park purpose. In light of current budgetary constraints, we need to think creatively about how we can efficiently and effectively manage existing assets while continuing to enhance the park system and ensure that the public is able to use and enjoy our parks and historic sites to their maximum potential.

## **Recommendations**

Parks & Trails New York supports strategies that strengthen and diversify funding sources. A stable level of public funding is key, along with private, philanthropic support and revenues from user fees, concessions, and other appropriate public-private partnerships.

### *Conduct an inventory and assessment of assets*

Before the state can begin to fully implement new strategies for maintaining and enhancing the state park system, there is a need to more completely understand the portfolio of facilities that currently sit underutilized. We recommend OPRHP build upon its October 2010 Capital Needs Assessment and conduct an inventory of assets for mission-related revenue opportunities, such as historic buildings as overnight accommodations.

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<sup>1</sup>NYS Office of the State Comptroller. *Safety of Infrastructure, Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation*. September 2012. Report 2012-S-29.

*Develop public-private partnerships to save historic structures*

Innovative thinking is needed to ameliorate the immense problem of OPRHP's aging infrastructure and save important and historic properties. PTNY supports authorizing OPRHP, after careful consideration of terms to protect the public interest, to enter into agreements with private individuals who are willing to invest private funds to rehabilitate and maintain vacant and at-risk buildings in state parks and historic sites for which the agency has no public use and lacks the funds or staff resources to improve and maintain, either in exchange for receiving a long-term lease or life estate to live in the building or for licenses or leases for adaptive reuse. In such partnerships, ownership of the structures would remain with OPRHP and, at the end of the lease or term, control would revert back to the state.

Given the state's fiscal constraints and the continued slow turnaround of the economy, a resident curator program is a very appropriate step to take at this point and would hopefully save some important and historic properties. New York has already approved such public-private partnerships: the Governor and Legislature authorized OPRHP to lease the caretaker's house and garage at Buttermilk Falls State Park in 2011 as a way to encourage private investment in the buildings. Similar programs have also been very successful in other states, including Maryland and Massachusetts.

Many other properties, such as three residential-style properties located in three Long Island parks—Cold Spring Harbor State Park, Heckscher State Park, and Hither Hills State Park—have been vacant for many years and need major renovations.

Just recently, the National Park Service (NPS) announced it is looking for tenants to invest in and repair 35 at-risk historic buildings at a former Army base inside the Gateway National Recreation Area in New Jersey. Tenants could sign up to a 60-year lease in return for committing to restoring the buildings. NPS estimates for repairs range from \$350,000 for a captain's quarters to nearly \$6 million for barracks. The invitation to submit proposals is open to government agencies, schools, non-profits, companies, and private citizens.

Longer term leases or licenses of properties to private entities for adaptive reuse can also assist with the agency's capital backlog. The Legislature has already designated approximately 50 state park properties or facilities as requiring longer term leases in order to attract private funding for rehabilitation and repair purposes and many more could potentially be added to the list, for example: the clubhouse and tennis facility at Bethpage State Park, the Winter Cottage and Main House at Caumsett State Historic Park Preserve, recreational facilities at the location of the aquatic complex and campground at Heckscher State Park; and the Bayswater Sunset Lodge at Bayswater Point State Park.

It is PTNY's expectation that the ultimate uses agreed upon between the agency and the concessionaire would be consistent with park purposes and that any user fees or other costs to the public would allow all New Yorkers to use and enjoy the facilities.

*Strengthen the capacity of Friends groups and expand volunteer engagement*

Active and engaged grassroots organizations already contribute significantly to the stewardship of the state's parks and historic sites, raising tens of millions of dollars and logging hundreds of thousands of hours of volunteer assistance. Finding ways to strengthen and further engage these organizations will reap large benefits, enabling these groups to leverage more private and federal funding, marshal more volunteer power, and better fill the growing gap in government support.

Over the years, Parks & Trails New York has developed a suite of resources and opportunities for Friends groups. Through capacity-building grants, a one-on-one technical assistance program, an online resource kit, periodic regional gatherings and more, we are helping to build the capacity and strength of Friends groups. But there is clearly more that could be done and the need is great.

For the past two years Parks & Trails New York has worked with State Parks and local Friends groups to engage thousands of volunteers for the popular event, I Love My Park Day. In May, thousands of volunteers, including Governor Cuomo, contributed more than 10,000 volunteer hours to cleanup, repair, and beautify nearly 80 state parks and historic sites. With a 100% participation increase from 2012, I Love My Park Day has gained momentum and is making a real difference for parks and historic sites around the state. Imagine what could be accomplished by a year-round volunteer force. Together, we should explore plugging into existing volunteer networks, such as AmeriCorps, to grow the event into a year-round volunteer program.

*Create a dedicated funding stream for state parks*

PTNY also strongly supports the establishment of a new, dedicated funding stream for the state park system. A dedicated funding mechanism for parks is the best chance to adequately support our iconic state park system, for ourselves and future generations.

Models for dedicated park funding that do not require any new taxes on New Yorkers exist in other places, such as an "I Love NYS Parks" license plate, a surcharge on disposable grocery bags, a voluntary tax check-off for parks, or a voluntary donation as part of vehicle registration. Several states use a percentage of a tax—for example, sales tax, real estate transfer tax, gas tax, etc.—dedicated to parks.

Other examples increase philanthropic efforts to support state parks in ways that enhance citizen engagement in state parks. The state of California, for example, has instituted a State Parks'

Patron Program as a vehicle for “point of sale fundraising.” The program collects voluntary donations from patrons of hotels, restaurants, or other service providers close to parks. Participating businesses work with park managers to determine the use of collected funds to achieve mutually agreeable goals. Participating businesses are recognized at the park, online, in print materials and in press releases. A similar program could be piloted in New York at the three hotels located in state parks: the Bear Mountain Inn in Bear Mountain State Park, the Gideon Putnam Resort and Spa in Saratoga Spa State Park, and the Glen Iris Inn in Letchworth State Park.

A dedicated funding stream for parks can help revitalize the park system and ensure its integrity for future generations. It does not so much matter the source of that funding stream, but that there is a united commitment to finding a way to make the park system the best it can be. We should study the experience of other jurisdictions, combine it with New York spunk and creativity, develop the model that best suits New York, and get going. (See Appendix A for examples of dedicated funding mechanisms used in other states.)

#### *Keep parks and historic sites relevant*

While the state parks agency has clearly expanded and enhanced its marketing, for example launching a free phone app and virtual tours of its campgrounds, 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 to marketing, new models for providing recreational opportunities, interpretation, lodging, and other park and site features should continue to be explored to attract new and different visitors and keep parks and historic sites relevant.

#### **Lean Agency Operations Budgets Taking a Toll**

Parks & Trails New York believes it is critically important to also address OPRHP’s operations budget. Given the state’s continued fiscal challenges, we appreciate that OPRHP’s operations budget has been held steady. However, rising costs outside OPRHP’s control mean that even a steady-state budget will result in belt-tightening. This reality and the toll of the last few years 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. With decades of underinvestment in state parks, the effects can be felt on the ground 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. While critically important, capital improvements without sufficient funding for operations leave the agency struggling to achieve its mission of “providing 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.”

### **Closing**

Great strides have been made the past two years in addressing capital needs at state parks and historic sites and in moving the entire state park system forward into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A suite of creative strategies are needed in order for this renaissance to continue. By encouraging philanthropic and non-profit support, implementing new public-private partnerships and business opportunities, and boosting volunteerism, along with continued state investment in infrastructure and increased operations support, New York can preserve its parks and conservation legacy for future generations. Parks & Trails New York looks forward to working with this Committee, the rest of the Legislature, the Governor, and our partner organizations to implement creative solutions to continue the revitalization of our wonderful but beleaguered park system.

**Appendix A: Examples of Dedicated Funding Mechanisms for State Parks**

<b>Examples of Dedicated Funding Mechanisms for State Parks<sup>2</sup></b>		
<b>Dedicated Revenue Source</b>	<b>Revenue Generated Annually</b>	<b>States</b>
Sales tax	Tens of millions of dollars	Minnesota, Arkansas, Texas (sale of sporting goods only)
Oil and gas/drilling tax	Tens of millions of dollars	Alabama, Arkansas, Michigan, Alaska, Pennsylvania
Real estate transfer tax	\$5 to \$20 million	Tennessee, Delaware, North Carolina
Vehicle license fee (opt-in or opt-out)	Tens of millions of dollars	Montana, Washington
Income tax donation check-off	Less than \$10 million	Arkansas, Kansas, South Carolina, Colorado, Delaware
Specialty license plates and/or stamps	Less than \$10 million	Montana, Nebraska, Ohio, Texas, Kentucky, North Carolina, South Carolina, California, Maine

<sup>2</sup> Source: <http://www.lao.ca.gov/analysis/2012/resources/state-parks-030212.aspx>