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NYS BUDGET PROVIDES GREAT PROMISE FOR GENESEE VALLEY TRAIL TOWN INITIATIVE

The members of the Genesee Valley Trail Town Initiative - including Letchworth Gateway Villages, Parks & Trails New York, the Friends of the Genesee Valley Greenway, and ten participating Trail Town communities - praised Governor Kathy Hochul and the New York State Legislature for passing the SFY 2022-23 budget that provides rural communities with the resources needed to continue to improve the Genesee Valley's outdoor recreation assets and to successfully benefit from eco-tourism in the region.

The newly passed budget increases funding for a number of programs across various agencies for which Genesee Valley Trail Town communities stand to benefit. Major highlights from the budget include a 15 percent increase in the operating budget for the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP), \$250 million in capital funding for the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, a \$400 million Environmental Protection Fund, and the new \$100 million New York Forward rural economic development initiative.

The budget increases the annual operating budget for State Parks to \$285 million. This funding will help to provide additional staffing at some of the state's most well-known and heavily used outdoor destinations, such as Letchworth State Park and Genesee Valley Greenway State Park. The New York State Park system continues to see record visitation on an annual basis; parks welcomed more than 78 million visitors statewide in 2021. The budget also includes a record \$250 million in capital funding for OPRHP, which will help the agency continue to address decades of deferred investment in the park system's core infrastructure.

The Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) is New York State's primary source of funding for environmental programming and critical initiatives such as flood protection, open space preservation, solid waste management, and outdoor recreation. The SFY 2022-23 budget includes funding for the EPF at a record \$400 million, an increase of \$100 million from last year's funding level. The additional funding expands numerous successful programs, including the Park & Trail Partnership Grants. This competitive grant funding program, which helps non-profit organizations enhance the preservation, stewardship, interpretation, maintenance and promotion of New York State parks, trails, state historic sites and public lands, is doubled from \$1 million to \$2 million. Both the Friends of the Genesee Valley Greenway and the Friends of Letchworth State Park have been recipients of this grant funding in the past, allowing them to enhance visitors' experience.

In addition to record environmental funding, the newly passed budget includes funding for a new rural economic development program. The “New York Forward” program will be modeled after the successful statewide Downtown Revitalization Initiative, but will focus on smaller, rural communities. This exciting new program holds great promise for participating Genesee Valley Trail Towns, and the Genesee Valley Trail Town initiative overall.

Robin Dropkin, Executive Director of Parks & Trails New York said “This historic budget reflects decades of hard work and advocacy on behalf of our state park system. Parks, greenways, and open spaces are essential to the economic, environmental, social and physical health of our communities, and we are grateful to Governor Hochul and the legislature for validating their importance with record funding levels in this year’s budget.”

Nicole Manapol, Director of Letchworth Gateway Villages said “The inclusion of the New York Forward rural economic development program in this year's budget represents a momentous opportunity for the Genesee Valley Trail Town Initiative. With a growing network of partners and 10 participating trail towns across four counties, the Initiative is poised to establish the Genesee Valley Region as a prime destination for outdoor recreation tourism. This investment in rural revitalization could not have come at a more opportune time. We thank Governor Hochul and the legislature for this vital economic opportunity for our network of small, rural communities.”

Joan Schumaker, President of the Friends of the Genesee Valley Greenway said “We thank Governor Hochul and the Legislature for approving multiple programs that will not only ensure completion of more miles of Genesee Valley Greenway Trail but also promote revitalization and economic development in the multiple Trail Town communities along its 90-mile length. Already the Trail Town program has been transformative as Greenway communities are experiencing a new energy, enthusiasm, civic pride, and fuller recognition of their unique recreational and natural assets. As advocates for the Greenway for more than 30 years, we are thrilled that the historic funding levels approved in this year’s budget will offer Greenway communities so many ways to benefit.”

About the Genesee Valley Trail Town Initiative

The Genesee Valley Trail Town Initiative is a network of organizations and municipalities working together to revitalize the rural communities adjacent to Letchworth and the Genesee Valley Greenway State Parks. By growing outdoor tourism and small businesses through regional marketing, trail and signage improvements, and support for small businesses, entrepreneurs, and various community efforts, we aim to preserve and promote the natural resource assets, cultural attractions and historically important places that make the Genesee Valley / Letchworth region a unique and vibrant tourism destination. Since 2018, our network of partners, which includes Letchworth Gateway Villages, Parks & Trails New York, the Friends of the Genesee Valley Greenway, the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation and many others, have worked collaboratively to establish a network of Trail Towns along the Genesee Valley Greenway and Genesee River corridor.

About Parks & Trails New York

Parks & Trails New York (PTNY) is the state’s leading advocate for parks and trails. Thanks to support from the Ralph C. Wilson Jr. Foundation, PTNY is partnering with Letchworth Gateway Villages and the Friends of the Genesee Valley Greenway to provide programming, develop materials and supply seed grants to communities along the 90-mile Genesee Valley Greenway that will help them become more welcoming to bicyclists and other trail visitors. Our work will provide villages and towns in the region with the tools to fully benefit from trail tourism.