



Written Testimony of Parks & Trails New York

FY 2015 Capital Budget Hearing

New York State Division of the Budget

October 17, 2013

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 submit written testimony on the State Fiscal Year 2014-2015 Executive Budget proposal, in particular the capital budget of the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation (OPRHP).

Outdoor Recreation: 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 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 can provide natural protective systems while keeping the lands they occupy in productive, attractive use.

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

While parks 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 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.

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 park 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.

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 cited 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 OPRHP, particularly the agency's enormous capital projects backlog. These challenges

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

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

We were extremely pleased to see funding for OPRHP in the state's 10-year capital spending plan released this year. The report includes a target of more than \$1.2 billion over the next 10 years for state parks capital funding, showing the Governor's continued recognition of the importance of sustained capital funding for environmental infrastructure needs and the important role these treasured places play in local economic growth, in the protection of important natural areas, and in providing affordable recreational opportunities for New Yorkers and out-of-state visitors, alike.

It is our hope that we will continue to see this commitment to eliminating OPRHP's capital projects backlog. 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 New York's parks and conservation legacy for future generations.

Lean Agency Operations Budget Taking a Toll

Given the state's continued fiscal challenges, we appreciate that the operations budget of OPRHP has 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.

We would be remiss, however, if we did not acknowledge that the toll of the last few years will continue to weigh heavily. OPRHP's budget has been cut 22% over the last few years—more than many agencies—and it is operating today with 1,500 fewer staff than it was in 2008. 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. While significant, capital improvements without sufficient funding for operations keep 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.”

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

Closing

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.

As you prepare the State Fiscal Year 2014-2015 Executive Budget proposal, we encourage you to keep the momentum for parks going with another round of funding through the NY Works program. With an investment of \$90 million annually the backlog in capital needs can be addressed over a roughly ten-year period. We also encourage you to begin to put OPRHP's operations budget on an upward trajectory so that our state parks and historic sites can more fully realize their potential as destinations and economic engines for local communities. 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.

Thank you again for the opportunity to submit testimony.