

# **Joint Legislative Public Hearing on the New York State Fiscal Year 2020-2021 Executive Budget Proposal**

Will Coté, Parks Program Director

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Chairperson Kaminsky, Chairperson Englebright, and distinguished members of the Senate and Assembly, thank you for the opportunity to present testimony today on behalf of Parks & Trails New York. My name is Will Coté and I am the Parks Program Director. Since 1985, Parks & Trails New York has been the state's leading organization working to preserve and enhance a network of parks, historic sites, trails and greenways for all New Yorkers to enjoy. Our network of dedicated park and trail supporters is nearly 40,000 strong.

The Governor's Executive Budget Proposal includes important funding for New York's park system, trails and shared greenspaces.

Specifically, we thank the Governor, and encourage support from the Senate and Assembly for \$110 million in capital funding for state parks and historic sites, and \$300 million for the Environmental Protection Fund, which includes \$1 million for the Park and Trail Partnership Program Grant, a capacity building grant program for grassroots Friends groups.

We encourage the Legislature to include \$110 million in NY Parks 2020 capital funding for the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation. This investment in state parks infrastructure will continue to tackle the backlog of needed repairs and advance the revitalization of the state parks system.

We appreciate that OPRHP's operations budget has held relatively steady, despite difficult fiscal situations. With visitation now at more than 79 million, the commitment to protect our parks and environment should be extended to funding agency staff. Targeted increases to support day-to-day operations will allow the agency to better fulfill its mission to provide safe and enjoyable recreational opportunities to all New Yorkers. We request that the Senate and

Assembly support the Governor's call to add new staffing positions at OPRHP to ensure that residents and visitors alike can access quality education, guidance and inspiration as to how we can best protect and enjoy our environment, and celebrate our cultural and historic past.

We ask you to support the Environmental Protection Fund at \$300 million.

The EPF is a critical source of funding for protecting New York's water, land, and air, providing stewardship for state parks and forests, and delivering essential resources to communities. We, like many of our partner organizations, applaud the Governor's commitment to a \$300 million EPF in his budget proposal.

Within the EPF, the Executive Budget includes \$1 million for the NYS Park and Trail Partnership Program. This is a capacity-building grants program for grassroots organizations, or Friends groups, that support, strengthen and improve the state's parks, trails, historic sites and public lands. Since 2015, 83 grants totaling \$1.8 million have been awarded, with funds going toward innovative educational programs, capital projects and capacity-building undertakings, enabling organizations to become more effective, leverage more volunteer power and ultimately lead to even greater economic benefits, improved access to outdoor resources, and healthier communities.

In fact, as we prepare to announce our fifth round of awardees in March, we recognize the value this opportunity has for our volunteer-led groups. We received 53 applications requesting a total of \$2 million during this round of applications; double the available funding available. This response confirms the effectiveness of the program and we are proud to be administering this matching grant in partnership with OPRHP, DEC and grassroots efforts being undertaken across the state.

We are pleased to see increased funding for the Connect Kids initiative, which provides transportation to parks, nature and environmental education centers for children in K-12 education programs. This gives school kids the chance to experience nature and the environment as well as provide students an opportunity to share in the stewardship of our shared resources. We encourage the legislature to approve this proposed funding expansion to

\$2 million, ensuring that even more young people are exposed to the beauty of nature and importance of conservation of our state's resources.

The Governor's proposal includes language that would allow the use of EPF money for agency staff salaries. This language was rejected by the Legislature last year, and we encourage the Senate and Assembly to do this again and ensure EPF funds are spent specifically on initiatives that preserve our state's environment.

We continue to hope that the Environmental Protection Fund will be expanded in future years to more robust levels to ensure that New York's fragile ecosystems and natural resources are preserved for future generations.

### **Restore Mother Nature Bond Act**

We encourage the Legislature to support the proposed Restore Mother Nature Bond Act which will fund environmental resiliency through the preservation of open space, restoring wetlands, waterways, and wildlife habitats, as well as facilitate the creation of new recreational opportunities for New Yorkers. The proposed investment of \$152 million for open space programs, including the establishment of a new park on formerly industrial land in Kingston and a linear, water-based park along the Hudson River from Rensselaer, to Hudson, as well as the acquisition of 4,000 acres of land to enhance seven existing parks will ensure that these natural environments are preserved for future generations. We must secure our state's environmental future – without which, all of our investment in parks and open space will have been for naught.

### **Conclusion**

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today. Parks & Trails New York looks forward to working with the Senate, the Assembly and the Governor to keep up the momentum for state parks, solidifying New York's conservation legacy, and strengthening the network of parks, trails and greenways across the state.