



Joint Legislative Public Hearing  
on the  
2016-2017 Executive Budget Proposal

*Respectfully submitted by*  
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Chairperson Young, Chairperson Farrell 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 Laura DiBetta and I direct Parks & Trails New York's parks program. In 1985, Parks & Trails New York was founded to support the state park system, and in the 30 years since, we have 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. Our network of dedicated park and trail supporters is nearly 40,000 strong.

I want to start by thanking members of the Senate and the Assembly for your strong, steadfast support for New York's state park system. A few years ago, the *New York Times* called Niagara Falls State Park "shabby" and "underfinanced." In November, the *New York Times* highlighted the "turnaround" of the state park system. That article was noticed by park leaders across the country. The California Parks Foundation, which supports a park system that rivals New York's, highlighted the story in an email blast to its tens of thousands of members and supporters. In it, the Foundation noted how New York is tackling "something that seems impossibly big...in a smart, systematic way that makes it manageable." They called the approach "fearless." New York is securing its place as a national leader in parks and conservation and serving as a model for other states that face similar challenges. Let's keep this forward momentum going.

## A State Parks Renaissance

The crown jewel of New York's outdoors is its state park system. Thanks to the commitment of Governor Cuomo and the Legislature, state parks are in the midst of an unprecedented renaissance, with four straight years of significant capital funding to build and restore visitor centers, bath houses and other critical infrastructure and modernize the nation's oldest state park system. The governor's visionary NY Parks 2020 plan is rejuvenating flagship parks, promoting healthy recreation and environmental education, restoring historic buildings and landmarks, improving storm resiliency, and engaging a new generation of park stewards. Thanks to the nearly \$380 million investment to-date and ongoing commitment, parks are transforming into destinations—places people want to visit for a day or an entire weekend, not just a few hours.

The Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP) has expertly taken this tremendous investment and opportunity to deploy capital strategically around the state and leverage it with private support. I would like to offer a couple of examples:

- Recently named America's "Best State Park," **Letchworth State Park** is only going to get better with the addition of a four-season Letchworth Nature Center. The new Nature Center will not only enrich the experience for the park's 750,000 annual visitors, it has the potential to bring a much larger number of visitors to communities in Livingston and Wyoming Counties. The state's \$3.2 million investment has been leveraged with \$2 million in private funds to build exhibits and endow the facility.
- The revitalization of **Roberto Clemente State Park** embodies nearly all the best state parks have to offer. The addition of a new state-of-the-art playground and baseball field is bringing healthy, active recreational opportunities to young and old in an underserved community. The new entry plaza will greet the park's 1.3 million visitors in a manner befitting our world-class park system. Projects to make the park's waterfront greener and more storm-resilient demonstrate the critical role parks play in the sustainability and resiliency of New York's communities, something that has become critical in an age of more frequent and severe weather events.

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

We know that this investment in our shared natural, cultural and historical resources is paying dividends. According to a study<sup>1</sup> commissioned by Parks & Trails New York, the state park system generates \$2 billion in economic activity for the state and provides a 5-to-1 return on

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<sup>1</sup>PERI Institute. *The NYS Park System: An Economic Asset to the Empire State*. March 2009. Prepared for Parks & Trails New York.

investment. The same report showed that state parks create 20,000 jobs, exclusive of park employees, and that 40% of visitor spending—\$744 million—comes from visitors living outside the communities in which the parks are located. The tourism dollars generated by parks are critical, especially to struggling Upstate communities.

There is also broad support for this investment; more than 85 organizations—from local Friends groups and Audubon chapters to state and national organizations—recently signed on to a letter to the governor in support of continued funding for state parks infrastructure, as well as the new Park and Trail Partnership Program, which I look forward to telling you more about later in my testimony.

### **Support Proposed \$90 Million for State Park Infrastructure Needs**

Decades of underfunding combined with the age and growing popularity of our park system have put tremendous stress on park infrastructure. Health, safety and infrastructure needs remain unmet at parks in every region in the state—outdated sewer, water, fire and electrical systems; deteriorating bathrooms; crumbling roads, bridges and dams; historic buildings falling into disrepair. Continuing to invest in the restoration and revitalization of New York’s state parks and historic sites will enable these treasured places to more fully realize their potential as economic engines for local communities and as destinations for healthy outdoor recreation and open space for all New Yorkers.

***We encourage the Legislature to include another round of \$90 million in NY Parks 2020 capital funding in the State FY2016-2017 budget, as proposed by the governor.***

This annual investment in state parks infrastructure will strengthen the role state parks and historic sites play in sustainable economic development and tourism in communities across the state.

### **Untapped Potential**

We appreciate that OPRHP’s operations budget was held steady during the state’s fiscal crisis. 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. The Agency’s budget suffered steep, disproportionate cuts by prior administrations. Although increased visitation has brought in additional revenue from user fees, the continued shrinking of General Fund support has wiped out potential gains.

Unlike most other agencies, OPRHP interacts with New Yorkers in their communities and tourists during their visits. The effects of this budget contraction 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. More visitors also mean greater wear and tear on facilities and increased pressure on park staff to keep up with visitor needs and safety. If visitors' expectations are not met, if their experience leaves them dissatisfied, they are less likely to come back or notice the capital improvements.

With visitation now at more than 62 million—its highest in a decade—and state-of-the-art nature centers and other facilities being designed and built, there is a real opportunity to use state parks to provide education, guidance and inspiration to the public as to how we can best protect and enjoy our environment, tackle global problems like climate change, and celebrate our cultural and historical past. Plus, more programs mean more engaged visitors, resulting in longer stays, more frequent visits and a greater overall impact on tourism. The governor's Connect Kids initiative—which will provide transportation to parks for 4,000 children from underserved communities, as well as free entry for all 220,000 fourth graders and their families in partnership with the National Park Service—also provides an opportunity to engage the next generation in the stewardship of our shared resources.

***In order to maximize the exciting 21<sup>st</sup> Century transformation of the entire park system, we encourage the Legislature to work with the governor to begin to put the Agency's operations budget on a path towards sustainability.***

Investing in state parks has proven to provide significant return on investment, and targeted increases to support day-to-day operations will allow the Agency to better fulfill its mission to provide accessible, quality outdoor recreation and open space to all New Yorkers and visitors to our state, and to be responsible stewards of our valuable natural, historical and cultural resources.

### **Restore the Environmental Protection Fund**

The Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) is a critical source of funding for protecting New York's water and air, providing stewardship for state parks and forests, and delivering essential resources to communities such as the municipal park program that supports local parks and trails. EPF programs improve communities in every county of the state and support more than 350,000 jobs across a spectrum of industries. All told, EPF-supported industries generate approximately \$40 billion every year and provide a 7-to-1 return on investment.

Thanks in large part to the continued commitment of the Legislature, the EPF has been on a path towards restoration after steep cuts and sweeps during the economic crisis. We, like many of our partner organizations, applaud the governor's historic commitment to a \$300 million EPF in his budget proposal. If approved, this will make New York a national leader by ensuring the conservation of critical resources for future generations while creating jobs and making our communities more resilient.

***Given the health of the state's economy and the proven benefits of the EPF, Parks & Trails New York strongly supports a fully funded and sustainable EPF at \$300 million this year.***

Parks & Trails New York is particularly pleased to see increased funding proposed for categories that suffered severe cuts during the state's financial crisis, namely state land stewardship, open space / land conservation, and the municipal park grants program. Restoration of funding in these categories will create and enhance public access to parks, repair recreational facilities like trails, campgrounds and boat launches, and expand opportunities for New Yorkers to enjoy the outdoors and appreciate nature, particularly in underserved communities.

### **NYS Park and Trail Partnership Program**

I want to especially thank you for your inclusion in the FY2015-2016 state budget of \$500,000 in the EPF for the NYS Park and Trail Partnership Program, a capacity-building grants program for the nonprofit Friends organizations that support, strengthen and improve access to state parks and historic sites.

Often, these local grassroots groups are comprised of dedicated individuals—in most cases, volunteers—who accomplish Herculean tasks on shoestring budgets. These groups raise private funds for conservation and capital projects; they perform maintenance and stewardship tasks; they lead tours and provide educational programming for young and old; and they promote public use and enjoyment of these sites through communications and special events.

This small investment will propel these organizations to a higher level of effectiveness, enabling groups to leverage more private and federal funding and marshal more volunteer power while providing tremendous synergy with the NY Parks 2020 plan. Their efforts will enhance stewardship of our wonderful state treasures, leading to even greater economic benefits from tourism and outdoor recreation, improved access to outdoor resources, and healthier, more sustainable and resilient communities.

We are proud to be administering this matching grants program in partnership with OPRHP and look forward to announcing the first grant awardees in March. In the meantime, I can share with

you that more than one-third of the pool of eligible applicants applied in the first year, 77% of which operate with no full-time staff. Funding requests far exceeded available funds; the total requested by Friends groups was nearly \$967,000, more than double the amount of available grant funds. We anticipate this program leveraging nearly \$250,000 this year in other funds (private foundations, individual donors and federal grants).

It is clear that there is significant need, interest and excitement about the Park and Trail Partnership Program and its potential to transform Friends organizations and, more important, their ability to steward state parks and historic sites. Additional information on the grants program is attached to my testimony.

***Parks & Trails New York strongly supports \$500,000 for the Park and Trail Partnership Program, as proposed by the governor in his budget for the EPF as part of the appropriation for state land stewardship.***

### **Dedicated Funding for Complete Streets**

Parks & Trails New York wants New York State to be a leader in supporting active transportation options like biking and walking. ***By creating a new, dedicated funding stream for Complete Streets projects—including bike lanes, sidewalks, and multi-use trails—the state will protect New Yorkers who currently choose these emission-free transportation modes and encourage more to do so in the future.***

Biking and walking trips decrease our state's overall greenhouse gas emissions and advance New York's Climate Action Plan. Since transportation accounts for approximately 35% of New York's greenhouse gas emissions, and a large proportion of automobile emissions are the result of short trips of two miles or less, if New Yorkers choose to walk and bike for even a fraction of these short trips, we can remove a significant source of pollution. Multi-use trails and greenways, many of which would be eligible for this new funding, can also enhance resiliency and sustainability projects such as coastal rehabilitation, primary goals of the Climate Action Plan.

### **Make New York State a World-Class Destination for Sustainable Tourism**

Under the governor's leadership, New York has expanded and enhanced its marketing of the state's natural and recreational resources. Empire State Development's Market New York program is providing governments and nonprofits with the resources needed to promote the many and varied natural, historical and cultural resources and recreational opportunities that so uniquely define our state.

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.

*We think New York is poised to be a leader and world-class destination for bicycle tourism, and that by investing in this sector we can make a significant contribution to both state and local economies.*

A great example is the Erie Canalway Trail (ECT), which extends 360 miles across New York. The ECT is the backbone of the statewide trail system, and, at more than 75% complete, well on its way to becoming the longest trail of its kind in the country.

And it's already a significant economic driver: Parks & Trails New York's 2014 economic impact study of the ECT demonstrates an annual trail traffic volume of almost 1.6 million visits per year, generating an economic impact of approximately \$253 million and supporting 3,440 jobs in the local economies within the trail corridor.

We estimate that it will take approximately \$40 million to complete the remaining 55 miles of unfunded gaps in the ECT. When we make this investment, and fully connect the trail as a continuous, off-road route from Buffalo to Albany, we'll see the ECT realize its full potential as a world-class tourism destination and a great economic generator for more than 200 communities along its route.

## **Closing**

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