



Testimony
of
Parks & Trails New York
at the
Joint Legislative Public Hearing on the
2010-2011 Executive Budget Proposal
January 26, 2010

Good afternoon and thank you for letting me speak to you today about the cuts to State Parks proposed in the 2010-11 Executive Budget.

I would like to start by telling you a little about my organization and about myself. Parks & Trails New York is a statewide not-for-profit organization that works to expand, protect and promote a network of parks, trails and open spaces throughout New York State.

I was drawn to this organization and this cause because I was raised in a small town in the Finger Lakes called Branchport, just five minutes from Keuka Lake State Park. As soon as I learned to ride a bike, I pedaled that bike to the park and spent almost every summer day of my childhood there. I took swimming lessons, participated in day camp activities, and hiked through its trails. The park contributed to my development a great deal. It provided me a safe place to spend the summer days while my parents were away at work; it instilled in me a great respect for nature; it provided a place to socialize with other children, and it inspired in me, in this age of high obesity rates, a desire and love of exercise. It contributed a great deal to my community, too. People drawn to the park filled our local shops, wineries, and restaurants, providing a boost in revenue that helped keep local establishments profitable and able to employ local workers.

Whether it's Montauk Point, Niagara Falls, Allegany, Harriman, Robert Moses, Letchworth, or Saratoga Spa, New York's 214 parks and historic sites contribute similarly to the economy and quality of life of many of our state's communities.

According to the report, *The NYS Park System: An Economic Asset to the Empire State*, the state park system generates nearly \$1.9 billion in annual economic benefits for the state and local economies.

For every one dollar our state spends on the state parks system, we enjoy five dollars in economic activity. The State Park System creates 20,000 jobs - exclusive of state parks employees. These are long-lasting, sustainable jobs. Many of the parks are located in upstate New York, where the revenue and jobs they generate are desperately needed. Another great thing about our state parks – they're close to home. In a typical year more than 55 million people visit our magnificent State Parks and Historic Sites, seeking to reconnect with nature and enjoy the great outdoors, while at the same time spending money in every region of the state. And that number is increasing as people are less able to afford far away vacations.

Despite their essential role in New York's economy, health and quality of life, our State Parks are in jeopardy. In December, State Parks reported that their budget had been cut by 25% since 2008 and the agency had lost nearly 1,000 permanent and seasonal staff. The cuts forced State Parks to cut back programming, maintenance and hours at 100 parks. At that point, the agency warned that the situation was so dire that further significant cuts would not merely lead to more service and program reductions, but would lead to park closings.

And that is precisely what the proposed executive budget will bring about. The current budget proposal will slash \$33 million from the agency's operating budget and \$4 million from State Parks' capital program. If passed, the parks budget will have been reduced 40% from 2008-2009 levels and will leave State Parks' with no choice but to close parks and historic sites.

Closing parks, reducing hours and eliminating programs will mean fewer visitors, and thus a reduction in revenue for the state and reduced economic benefits for all. If you close a park, you lose revenue. Entrance fees, camping fees, picnic shelter rentals--all park revenues remain with the agency. Park revenues account for a third of OPRHP's operating budget. Every \$1 million in park closings generates only \$650,000 in net budget savings. And because of the expense of bringing a closed park back on-line the expectation is that any park that closes will remain closed for three to five years, and maybe permanently. The closing of parks is an unprecedented step in our state's history that will have a deleterious effect for years, if not decades, on the State Park System and the economy, particularly of upstate. Does this legislature want to have the legacy of being the first to close state parks? Judging from the reaction in areas where State Parks were proposed to be closed last winter, the public will not take summer park closings lightly and will hold their legislators accountable.

Additionally, despite this administration's progress in advancing an aggressive capital program, State Parks suffer a \$650 million backlog of unmet maintenance and infrastructure needs—repairs to crumbling buildings, bridges, roads, swimming pools, and water and electrical systems. Unfortunately, and incredibly, state parks were left out of the federal stimulus legislation so relief for these critical

capital needs will not come from the federal government. Moreover, the inability of State Parks to hold annual park police trainings for two years has drained the park police force, threatening the safety of park patrons.

Parks & Trails New York is not oblivious to the state's current fiscal crisis. However, the Governor's proposed Executive Budget for 2010-2011 is larger than the previous year. It inflicts far deeper cuts to parks and environmental programs than most other areas of the budget. According to the Division of the Budget's *Briefing Book*, the executive proposal will cut about thirteen percent from the funding of both DEC and Office of Parks. Other analysis estimates the total cuts to be much larger; 40 percent from the DEC and 20 percent from the Office of Parks. Regardless which numbers you use, the environmental agencies were cut at a disproportionately high rate. In addition, the Environmental Protection Fund was cut \$70 million, or 33 percent. Reinstating the EPF to last years' level (\$222 million) would help New York's dedicated source of environmental funding meet the billions of dollars in needs that exist throughout the State for critically important projects such as open space and farmland protection, recycling, water quality enhancement in addition to parks. We strongly oppose such disproportionate cuts to programs that protect our natural resources, protect the public health, and enhance New Yorkers quality of life.

We call on the legislature to look for creative ways to bolster OPRHP's ability to fulfill its mission, not look to cut the agency to the point where the only option is closing state park facilities. At a time when everyone is searching for ways to stimulate the NYS economy, to bring more money and jobs into the state, the tourism dollars generated by our parks are critical to our state's economy, too. Upstate, New York, which has suffered economically well before the most current economic meltdown, especially can not afford to lose the long lasting jobs, revenue, services, and pride the parks provide.