



Testimony of Parks & Trails New York  
to the Assembly Committee on  
Tourism, Parks, Arts, and Sports Development

*Respectfully submitted by Robin Dropkin, November 1, 2011*

Chairperson Markey and committee members, thank you for this opportunity to speak out on behalf of New York's outstanding outdoor recreational resources, especially its magnificent state park system and its thousands of miles of greenways, canalways, and bikeways, and to explore ways to enhance New York's role as a leader in outdoor recreation and boost outdoor recreation's already significant impact on the state's economy.

I am Robin Dropkin, Executive Director of Parks & Trails New York. Since 1985, Parks & Trails New York has been the state's leading advocate for the expansion, protection, and promotion of a network of parks, trails, bike paths, and greenways throughout the state.

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

New York's state park system is the nation's oldest, dating to the creation of the Niagara Reservation in 1885. The system, comprised of 178 parks and 36 historic sites, welcomes 57 million visitors annually. Our 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.

At a time when everyone is searching for ways to stimulate the economy, to bring more money and jobs into the state, the tourism dollars generated by parks are critical, especially to local Upstate economies. According to a 2009 independent study 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. For every dollar the state invests in the park system it gets back \$5. Plus, the State Park System creates 20,000 jobs—exclusive of state parks employees. The study showed that

about \$744 million of 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.

### **Outdoor Recreation Creates an Attractive Business Climate**

Our world-class parks and extensive network of trails are key assets in helping the state and localities attract tax-paying businesses and a high-quality workforce.

Fortune 500 senior executives, when ranking city attributes for facility location, consider quality of life issues such as parks and recreation equal with cost of living, and just behind the number one attribute—a pool of talented, skilled workers.<sup>1</sup> And these skilled workers prefer places with a diverse range of outdoor recreational activities, from rock climbing to walking and bicycling paths. Portland, Seattle, Austin, Denver, and San Francisco are among the top cycling cities; they also are among the leaders in knowledge workers.<sup>2</sup>

Small business owners also rank recreation high as a factor for relocation, higher than cost of living, education, safety, and health care.<sup>3</sup>

Parks and trails already have a significant, positive impact on New York's economy, but there is a great deal more potential to be realized.

### **Preserve and Enhance the NYS Park System**

Despite their essential role in New York's economy, health, and quality of life, our state parks are in jeopardy. The threat of closure of 88 parks is still fresh in many New Yorkers' minds. But while today parks remain open, they are being starved, with reduced hours, reduced days, reduced seasons, fewer programs, fewer workers, less maintenance. The backlog of unmet maintenance and infrastructure needs—repairs to crumbling buildings, bridges, roads, swimming pools, and water and electrical systems—is estimated at \$1.1 billion while the parks agency's capital budget this year is a mere \$7 million. Can you imagine keeping a system which includes 5,000 buildings, 604 bridges, 106 dams, and 8,000 campgrounds functioning with a capital budget of \$7 million?

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<sup>1</sup> Poll conducted by Harris Interactive for AT Kearny/EDS Corp. June/July 2001.

<sup>2</sup> American Planning Association. *How Cities Use Parks for Economic Development*. <http://www.planning.org/cityparks/briefingpapers/economicdevelopment.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Dr. John Compton (2003). *The Economic Benefits of Parks and Open Space: How Land Conservation Helps Communities Grow Smart and Protect the Bottom Line*. Texas A&M University.

But the cuts to the state parks agency and other state agencies are well-known and not about to be reversed in the foreseeable future. So I want to focus on creative ways to move forward.

A new, dedicated funding mechanism for parks is the best chance to adequately support our iconic state park system, for ourselves and future generations. A viable proposal currently before the Committee is Pennies for Parks, Bill A.6272/S.4277. It's a proposal for a penny surcharge on plastic bags, which can provide more than \$60 million to Parks for capital needs. A recent poll shows 3 out of 4 New Yorkers support a one penny surcharge if the money goes to parks. Plus, the surcharge can be avoided through the use of reusable bags. Through this proposal we can reduce waste going to our landfills at the same time we generate funding to keep our parks open and safe. It is a win-win.

While the state parks agency has made great strides in expanding and enhancing its marketing, much more could be done to promote the state's parks and trails. For example, the successful I Love NY brand could be better linked with our state parks and historic sites. This would increase park visitation, which in turn would bring in more money for parks. Plus greater cooperation between state agencies means greater operations efficiency. Similarly, our state's trails and the communities in which they are located would greatly benefit from more tie-in with state tourism efforts.

I also urge the committee to take a closer look at the role of park and historic site friends groups in the future of our park system. These nonprofit organizations, oftentimes made up entirely of volunteers, clear trails, paint buildings, build kiosks, lead interpretive programs, and raise significant money for local park and historic site projects. While their success should not allow the state to shirk its responsibility to parks, greater investment in these organizations will serve to extend the capacity of the parks agency.

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

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. A special focus of our efforts is promoting and completing the 350-mile Erie Canalway Trail from Buffalo to Albany so it can realize its full potential as a world-class tourism destination and attract cyclists and other outdoor enthusiasts from around the nation and the world to help revitalize the economies of Upstate towns and villages.

Bicycle tourism is now the third most common vacation activity<sup>4</sup> and bicycle tourists spend significant money on food, lodging, and transportation. Data from other states indicates that bicycle tourism can

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<sup>4</sup> U.S. Travel Association

make a substantial contribution to the state and local economies. Bicycling brings in one billion dollars a year to Colorado's economy. In Portland, Oregon, it contributes \$90 million and about 1,000 jobs. A 2007 economic impact study of Pennsylvania's Great Allegheny Passage Trail, which has many similarities to our own Erie Canalway Trail, determined that it was generating \$40 million in revenue annually.<sup>5</sup> The Office of Parks Recreation and Historic Preservation estimated in a recent study that for just one trail studied—the Town of Hurley Rail Trail in the Hudson Valley—the economic impact was greater than \$1 million.<sup>6</sup>

Again, better statewide marketing and more visibility for the Canalway Trail and other bikeways and greenways would go a long way to enhancing their economic impact.

### **Closing**

We know the members of this committee share our passion for parks and trails. And Governor Cuomo's Cleaner, Greener NY plan also shows he understands their importance, especially to the state's economy. Parks & Trails New York looks forward to working with the Committee, the rest of the legislature, our partner organizations, and park and trail friends groups to revitalize our wonderful but beleaguered park system and make New York a top destination for trail and bicycling tourism.

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<sup>5</sup> *The Great Allegheny Passage Economic Impact Study, Phases I, II, & III*. Allegheny Trail Alliance, Latrobe, PA. [www.atatrail.org/about/reports](http://www.atatrail.org/about/reports).

<sup>6</sup> NYS Office of Parks, Recreation & Historic Preservation (2010). *Every Mile Counts - An Analysis of the 2008 Trail User Surveys*.