



Testimony Before the Joint Fiscal Committees
of the State Legislature on the FY 2020-2021 Budget

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Senate Finance Chair Kruger and Assembly Ways & Means Chair Weinstein, Chairs Kaminsky, Englebright, Serrano and O'Donnell, distinguished legislators – thank you for the opportunity to discuss Governor Cuomo's proposed budget as it relates to New York's state parks and the environment.

I am Kathy Moser, Senior Vice President for Parks and Policy at the Open Space Institute.

OSI is a leading East Coast land and park conservation nonprofit. And while our work extends from southern Canada to Florida, our home remains here in New York State. As such, there is much for us to cheer in Governor Andrew Cuomo's Executive Budget Proposal.

To begin with, both the governor's budget and the State-of-the-State strongly emphasize the values of land conservation – with emphasis that go beyond the traditional benefits of recreation, tourism, and wildlife habitat. There is a growing understanding of the critical role strategic land conservation can and does play in fighting climate change, protecting our water and lessening the effects of flooding – and the governor's recent presentations reflect this emerging knowledge.

To help enact these important conservation initiatives, Governor Cuomo is calling for a \$3 billion bond act that will pursue natural, land-based solutions to climate change as well as water source protection, habitat restoration, and flood mitigation. While details on the bond act are limited thus far, OSI looks forward to working with the administration, the legislature and our partner organizations in support of a bond act that will achieve much-needed funding to preserve natural areas and adapt to climate change.

Let me also express OSI's appreciation to the legislature and the Governor for maintaining support for a \$300 million Environmental Protection Fund. Although we continue to push for a \$500 million EPF by 2025, we fully understand the financial pressures facing the state this year.

As you know, the EPF is the source of funding for open space protection, municipal parks, support of Friends groups, environmental justice and the stewardship of public lands – among many other critical categories of natural resource protection in New York State.

We urge continued support for the Open Space Acquisition funding line, the Municipal Matching Grants pool, the State Land Stewardship Fund, NYS Parks and Trails Partnership Grant Program and the Environmental Justice line. The Environmental Justice section of the EPF underwrites the highly successful Connect Kids program allowing children from economically distressed and underserved communities to experience state parks and historic sites.

I am pleased the report that the EPF was the source of funding for 10 land projects completed by OSI last year that added more than 8,500 acres to public lands including Minnewaska, Harriman and Schunnemunk State Parks; as well as to the Bluestone, Vernoy Kill, and Sundown Wild Forests in the Catskills, and Hammond Pond Wild Forest in the Adirondacks.

Protecting the integrity of the EPF is critical. For that reason, OSI opposes any effort to offload project funds from the EPF to cover agency operating costs as has been proposed in the executive budget. Such a move undermines the EPF and places it at risk for this and future years.

And while on the subject of agency operating funds, we applaud the addition of 47 additional staffers at the Department of Environmental Conservation and 22 additional staffers at New York State Parks. These small increases are incredibly important as the agencies have struggled to keep up with more visitors, and related pressures on protecting our natural resources. Increased interest in hiking and biking our public lands is a good thing but must be managed for public safety and the long-term health of NY's treasured natural areas. As pleased as we are to welcome these new positions, raiding the EPF to pay for them is unacceptable.

Recognizing the connection between protecting land and making it accessible and enjoyable for visitors, OSI has, over the past ten years, actively partnered with State Parks and DEC to make our public lands more welcoming by adding trails, trailheads, and visitor centers with the hope of connecting more people to the land in a way that will ultimately encourage public support for the protection of natural resources.

To that end, we are extremely grateful that the budget allocates another \$110 million for NY Parks 2020, which, over the past ten years, has resulted in upgrades, improvements and repairs at parks throughout the state. There is a renaissance happening at our state parks, and New Yorkers are celebrating with record level visitation. We are extraordinarily grateful to the governor and the legislature for the sustained and historic commitment to our wonderful and diverse system of state parks.

Similarly, we fully endorse \$55 million for capital projects at DEC to provide upgrades to campgrounds, boat launches and dam safety.

And while the state is investing in its public land, OSI is also making major public access improvements in the Adirondacks at our Adirondac Upperworks property in the town of Newcomb. This project will improve the southern access to the High Peaks as part of an effort to better distribute visitors at the popular destination. The fact that more people want to get outdoors and explore all

that our state has to offer is welcome news – even though it will require better management and more options for the public to choose from.

In addition, OSI is partnering with State Parks to create a new visitor center at Minnewaska State Park. This park, located just 90 minutes north of New York City, welcomes more than 500,000 visitors each year and totals 24,000 acres – half on which was added by OSI. Today, OSI is raising \$3 million for the creation of the new \$6 million center which will serve as a gateway for visitors as they plan their Minnewaska exploration.

This past year, we also completed renovations at the cultural and performing arts center at Denny Farrell Riverbank State Park. OSI raised approximately \$1.2 million in private donations and public funding to upgrade the popular park centerpiece which serves as a cultural and arts hub in West Harlem.

In closing, I thank the governor and members of both the Senate and Assembly for working together in support of parks, open space, and the environment. Your commitment and effectiveness is setting a new national standard, one that can make all New Yorkers proud.

Thank you for your time and for the work you do to advance the cause of protecting and enhancing New York's precious environmental and recreational resources.

