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AN INITIATIVE OF THE OPEN SPACE INSTITUTE

**Testimony Before Joint Fiscal Committees  
of the State Legislature on the FY2013-14 State Budget**

**Alliance for New York State Parks**

*A program of the Open Space Institute*

**Erik Kulleseid, Executive Director**

February 4, 2013

Senate Finance Chair DeFrancisco and Assembly Ways & Means Chair Farrell, thank you for the opportunity to be with you today to discuss Governor Cuomo's proposed budget for our state parks for the upcoming fiscal year.

Thanks also to Senator Little and Assemblywoman Markey, Chairs of the Tourism Committees, and Senator Grisanti and Assemblyman Sweeney, Chairs of the Environmental Conservation Committees, as well as other members here today.

I am Erik Kulleseid, Executive Director of the Alliance for New York State Parks, a program of the Open Space Institute, one of New York's leading land and park conservation nonprofits. The mission of the Alliance is to protect and enhance New York's state parks and historic sites for present and future generations. Support for the Alliance comes from the Dyson Foundation, Lucy Rockefeller Waletzky, and other generous donors.

We remain grateful to members of the legislature for their strong support for state parks in many ways over the course of the last several years. We are also extraordinarily grateful that Governor Cuomo's proposed budget renews and deepens his administration's commitment to restoring New York's great state parks.

Indeed, after decades of deferred maintenance and underinvestment at New York's state parks, Governor Cuomo has demonstrated a strong commitment to restoring state parks, and addressing a capital backlog total still nearing \$1 billion.

New York's 214 state parks and historic sites are in line for another round of capital investment to repair, restore and improve the system's aging and outdated facilities, thanks to a proposed \$90 million infusion under New York Works. The spending commitment is comprised of \$45 million in new funding, with the balance freed up from unused balances from prior year appropriations.

Moreover, long-term planning will now be possible, thanks to the governor's inclusion of parks in New York's capital budget. His recognition that fixing and updating parks infrastructure requires a multi-year commitment is a critical recognition of the severity of the problem and what it will take to solve it.

As you know, last year's state budget included a historic \$143 million in state parks capital funding. It is a tremendous credit to the Office of State Parks that to date, nearly all of that funding has been spent or is under contract for projects aimed at repairing and improving state parks and historic sites.

As state park visitation continues to rise, up five percent to 60 million visitors in 2012, the Alliance is also appreciative of Governor Cuomo's focus on smart tourism development through a greater emphasis on a more regional approach to marketing the state's tremendous assets – particularly upstate. In doing so, the governor continues to acknowledge the important role state parks play as natural, recreational and cultural destinations for New Yorkers and out-of-state visitors, alike.

On the operations side of the ledger, this year's budget by-and-large holds the agency harmless from another round of budget cuts. Like other areas of state government, the Office of State Parks has seen its operations budget cut by more than twenty percent over the past several years. Of notable concern are the declining park police staffing levels. Particularly, as visitation continues to rise we would be remiss if we didn't share our continued concern for the capacity of a reduced workforce to effectively and safely serve an increasing number of customers.

We once again credit Commissioner Rose Harvey for leading the agency during challenging times, especially in the wake of Superstorm Sandy. She has effectively confronted challenges head-on and is committed to rethinking the way the agency functions. She has embraced Alliance fundraising efforts; supported the idea of repurposing unused state park assets, where appropriate; partnered with local governments and not-for profits; and seized on opportunities to promote more public-private partnerships.

Finally, as terrific as this renewed commitment is to state parks, we remain keenly mindful that every budget year brings along a new set of challenges and obstacles. To underpin the governor's commitment, we once again call for a permanent funding source to support the upgrade and upkeep of state parks.

The Alliance continues to back the creation of a dedicated funding stream in support of state park capital needs. One such long-term solution would create a five cent avoidable charge on disposable paper and plastic bags given out by supermarkets and retailers, generating an estimated \$150 million annually and reducing bag use by 50 percent or more.

We thank Senator Grisanti and Assemblyman Cahill and others for sponsoring this "Pennies for Parks" legislation, which will provide a permanent funding source to repair and improve failing parks infrastructure. Just as important are the environmental benefits that will be derived from this effort – a reduction of bag usage, which will dramatically cut down on litter and ease the burden on landfills throughout New York.

In closing and, on behalf of the more than 60 million people who visit state parks each year, we again express our gratitude for the support of state parks, both from Governor Cuomo and members of the Senate and Assembly.

As park supporters and champions – we continue to see a bright future for our state parks and historic sites. Thank you.