

## **Testimony Before the Joint Fiscal Committees of the State Legislature on the FY2022-23 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 Hochul's proposed budget as it relates to New York's state parks, open space protection, and the environment.

My name is Kim Elliman. I am president and CEO of the Open Space Institute.

OSI is among the leading land conservation nonprofits in the eastern United States, having protected 2.3 million acres of land for clean water, recreation, carbon storage, flood mitigation, and wildlife habitat from southern Canada to Florida. Still, New York remains our home and I welcome the opportunity to be here today.

The Open Space Institute believes strongly that the governor's proposed state budget sets the stage for a momentous year by instituting long-term protections for the water, lands, and clean air that sustain all New Yorkers. Hers is a budgetary roadmap that addresses climate change as the environmental crisis of our time, acknowledges and responds to the public's need to connect with nature, and makes much-needed investments in land conservation for clean drinking water, flood protection, carbon absorption, and recreation.

Specifically, the \$4 billion Clean Water, Clean Air, and Green Jobs Bond Act, and its emphasis on land conservation and the protection of open space, is particularly welcome as New York State prioritizes water protection, the reduction of carbon in our atmosphere, addresses increasing threats of flooding in the wake of climate change, and the need to conserve habitat. This expansion represents a clear understanding of what's at stake for all of us in New York State as, together, we confront the realities of climate change and the water, air, and land that sustains us all.

At the same time, the proposed Environmental Protection Fund increase to \$400 million sets a new, higher standard for reliable environmental funding in New York State to meet the growing demand for parks and greenspace for people and wildlife. We strongly support this new overall funding level, particularly the \$10 million increase for open space protection.

This increase for open space protection demonstrates a full understanding of the critical role strategic land conservation can and does play in protecting drinking water sources, fighting climate change, and providing New Yorkers places to safely spend time with families, connect with friends, exercise, and recharge from emotional and mental fatigue.

We also remain supportive of the Municipal Parks Grants pool, the State Land Stewardship Fund, the Parks and Trails NY Grant Program, the Land Trust Alliance Conservation Partnership

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 and OSI fully endorses the governor's increase in funding for this important initiative.

Knowing the Legislature's long-term and passionate commitment to supporting and protecting the EPF, I would be remiss if I failed to thank members of both houses and leadership for all you have done for the EPF over the years. Whether it be supporting increased EPF funding or preserving its long-term integrity, we fully understand and appreciate all you have done over the decades to protect and expand this critical funding source.

And because OSI's land mission extends from conservation to making parks and protected land available and welcoming to all, OSI enthusiastically endorses Governor Hochul's monumental commitment to public lands which have, especially in recent years, proven to be a source of comfort and rejuvenation for tens of millions of New Yorkers.

The governor's \$200 million allocation for state parks infrastructure represents the single largest capital infusion for New York State Parks in history, and dramatically raises the bar for public access throughout the nation. The increased investment in the Department of Environmental Conservation will also go a long way to improving safe access to state lands.

This commitment complements that of the Open Space Institute. Over the past decade, OSI has invested millions of private dollars for new trails, trailheads, and visitor centers with the hope of connecting more people to the land and demonstrating that all New Yorkers are welcome in our state parks and public lands.

In 2021, OSI partnered with State Parks to complete several access and amenity projects at Fahnestock State Park in Putnam County, including the creation of a new entrance and major trail improvements aided by a class of West Point engineering students who have now constructed four trail bridges. Thanks to two key land acquisition projects in the Hudson Valley, OSI provided the means to improve access at Breakneck Ridge at Hudson Highlands State Park and Walkway Over the Hudson. In addition, OSI began restoration of 3.5 miles of the Wallkill Valley Rail Trail, a key link in the Empire State Trail in Ulster County. Once completed, OSI will have restored the northern 13 miles of the popular trail.

In the Adirondacks, OSI completed a suite of upgrades to its Adirondac Upper Works site aimed at improving visitor access to the High Peaks Wilderness Area and helping to better disburse visitors. At Moreau Lake State Park in northern Saratoga County, OSI added nearly 900 acres, bringing OSI's historical additions to the park to more than 4,250 acres – more than tripling the park over the past two decades. All total, in 2021 OSI added nearly 1,500 acres to State Parks and DEC properties and protected another 860 acres to be added to the state for public benefit in the future.

OSI also welcome the proposed staffing increases at both DEC and State Parks. These incremental increases will allow the agencies to reverse staffing level trends that have, for years,

resulted in a diminished ability to properly serve the tens of millions of New Yorkers who love and rely on our parks and public land. This turnaround is both warranted and welcome.

And finally, by prioritizing the protection of New York's vulnerable wetlands, Governor Hochul is taking a wise and necessary step to maintain water quality, fight climate change, and mitigate the effects of severe storms and flooding. We hope to work with the administration and the legislature to secure vital wetlands mapping changes this year.

As the 2022 legislative session gets underway, we look forward to working with Governor Hochul, her administration, and members of the Legislature to enact a budget that moves New York State forward as a national leader in addressing the climate crisis, improving and creating access to nature and the outdoors, and ensuring that that water and air we need are protected for generations to come.

In closing, I thank the governor and members of the Senate and Assembly for working together in support of parks, open space, and the environment. Your ongoing commitment to protecting and enhancing New York's precious environmental and recreational resources is more important now than ever.

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