



Joint Legislative Public Hearing on the New York State Fiscal Year 2024 Executive Budget Proposal

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Chairperson Harckham, Chairperson Glick, and distinguished members of the Senate and Assembly, thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on behalf of Parks & Trails New York (PTNY). My name is Will Coté and I am the Parks Program Director. Since our founding in 1985, PTNY has been fighting to improving our health, economy, and quality of life through the use and enjoyment of green space. In collaboration with our members and supporters, as well as advocates and partners from across the state, PTNY champions the protection and enhancement of New York's magnificent state park system and greenway trail network, ensuring all New Yorkers have access to the outdoors, for generations to come.

I want to start by thanking the Senate and the Assembly for your firm and consistent support for New York's public lands. The Governor's Executive Budget Proposal Fiscal Year 2024 outlines a significant investment in New York's state park system, public lands, and shared greenspaces. We encourage support from the Senate and Assembly for \$250 million in capital funding for state parks and historic sites, increasing OPRHP's operations appropriations by \$36 million, \$400 million for the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF)--which includes \$2 million for the Park and Trail Partnership Program--and \$90 million for DEC's Adventure New York program. These important initiatives demonstrate a commitment to the environment, as well as our public health, economic resiliency, and shared greenspaces, leaving a lasting legacy for generations to come.

Increase Proposed Capital Funding for State Parks to \$250 Million to Address Infrastructure Needs

We encourage the Legislature to increase New York Works capital funding for the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP) to \$250 million, over the Governor's proposed FY 2024 budget of \$200 million

Restoring and enhancing the nation's oldest state park system with a continued investment of \$250 million for budget year FY24 builds upon more than a decade of previous investment. This critical funding has created new opportunities for visitors to access the outdoors, provided updates and repairs for critical park infrastructure, and supported the increase in visitation to our premiere state park system, which welcomed more than 78 million in 2022. Last year's allocation of \$250 million was a critical continuation of NYS's recent legacy of reinvestment in our public green spaces, creating new

public lands for recreation and engagement with our shared multicultural history, and acting as a catalyst for economic development in local communities across the state. With the upcoming Centennial Celebration of the New York State Park System in 2024, now is the time to continue last year's level of critical investment to transform flagship parks, address critical infrastructure needs, and expand accessibility to public lands for all New Yorkers.

The Governor's State of the State Address directed the Office of Parks, Recreation & Historic Preservation (OPRHP) to power their facilities with renewable energy sources by 2030. This directive aligns with broader climate adaptations championed by the state, and resonates with green energy efforts the agency has prioritized for several years now. However, as more locations within the park system move to green technologies, it is clear that maintaining, repairing, and expanding these vital investments requires appropriate financial resources to accomplish these directives. We urge the legislature to consider increasing State Park's capital budget to \$250 million as another vital component of our state's efforts to address climate change. We will continue to advocate for increased Parks capital funding in the future to meet the more than \$300 million in annual capital needs that our state park system faces. We look forward to continuing to work with the legislature to meet that goal.

Support Proposed Increase of OPRHP Operating Budget

Governor Hochul's Executive Budget will help connect people to parks and the outdoors by providing crucial operational funding needed to maintain the quality of our nation-leading state park system. The Executive Budget builds upon last year's effort to increase the agency's capacity to welcome a growing number of visitors, reach new and underserved audiences, and more accurately interpret our state's multicultural history. Increasing OPRHP's operations appropriations will allow for the hire of 237 FTE's., bringing the agency's total staff to 2,374. This additional capacity--both for administration and operations--will dramatically improve visitors' experiences at the 181 parks and 35 historic sites that make up the NYS parks system. It will also provide the ability for the agency to more effectively and efficiently address other directives, such as the advancement of capital projects, execution of projects supported by the Clean Water, Clean Air, Green Jobs Bond Act, and provide of greater educational and recreational opportunities to New Yorkers.

Support the Environmental Protection Fund at \$400 Million

The Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) is more than a critical source of funding to protect our natural resources and work toward climate resiliency; it is fundamental to the health and vitality of our communities and a sound, necessary investment in the future of our state. For these reasons, we ask the Legislature to maintain the EPF at \$400 million as proposed, further demonstrating New York's commitment to the importance our public green space as critical infrastructure for the health of all New Yorkers through supporting the value of parks and open spaces for climate adaptation.

The EPF is a primary source of funding for protecting New York's water, land, and air, providing stewardship for state parks and forests, and delivering essential resources to communities. EPF programs improve communities in every county of the state and support more than 350,000 jobs across a spectrum of industries. All told, EPF-supported endeavors generate approximately \$40 billion every year and provide a 7-to-1 return on investment. Parks & Trails New York—and our network of partners and members across the state—appreciates the impact EPF funding continues to have regarding expanding public access to parks and open spaces, particularly for those in historically and currently underserved communities.

We are pleased that the Governor is proposing to sustain essential funding to critical statewide programs. The Governor's inclusion of \$25 million for the Municipal Parks program (which provides critical support to local parks projects that create more equitable opportunities for New Yorkers to access open spaces), and the Connect Kids to Parks Initiative (which has provided transportation to parks, nature and environmental education centers to hundreds of thousands of students in K-12 education programs across New York), will make a vast difference in connecting communities with limited access to public green space throughout NYS.

The proposed EPF budget will support a wealth of programs beyond open space protection and recreational opportunities. Funds will enable the creation of a Park Police Academy class, supplement components of the Environmental Bond Act, fund enhancements for the Empire State Trail, and provide for park administration and site operations.

For these reasons and more, it is critical that the legislature prevent the offloading of agency staff costs into the EPF. Fully supporting these EPF-funded programs ensures we continue on the path towards creating a more just, accessible, and resilient network of public lands for *all* New Yorkers, and for the generations to come.

Maintain \$2 million for the Park and Trail Partnership Program in the EPF

The Executive Budget calls for sustaining the Park and Trail Partnership Grant program at \$2 million. These capacity-building competitive grants—administered by Parks & Trails New York, in partnership with State Parks and the Department of Environmental Conservation—enable nonprofit, grassroots Friends groups affiliated with these agencies to expand their impact and strengthen the state's heritage of public-private partnerships. The Park and Trail Partnership Grants support a wide array of efforts, from raising funds for capital projects and performing maintenance and beautification tasks, to providing innovative educational programming and hosting special events.

Since the grant program's inception in 2015, 167 awards totaling \$4.5 million have been provided to non-profit organizations, leveraging nearly \$2 million in private investment that directly benefits park communities. This relatively modest initiative propels these organizations to a higher level of effectiveness, while developing deeper synergy with the state's key initiatives, including: addressing diversity, equity, and inclusion; fostering community-level partnerships; and addressing barriers to accessibility. As we look forward to the Centennial Celebration of New York's state park system in 2024, the Park and Trail Partnership Grants program will be instrumental in contributing to New York's legacy of environmental stewardship and engagement for the next century.

Maintain Adventure NY Funding at \$90 Million

The Department of Environmental Conservation manages millions of acres of open space across New York State. Adventure NY funding is essential in ensuring these natural places are accessible, welcoming, and safe. With a continued rise in usage, maintaining the Governor's proposed \$90 million allocation is vital. This funding addresses a variety of capital needs to facilitate access to state lands, ensures the safety and durability of infrastructure such as campgrounds, and upgrades a variety of widely used recreational facilities. This funding will also provide critical repairs to public property, including wetlands, trails, waterfronts, and fish hatcheries. Similar to other programs within the proposed budget, this funding dovetails with the broader conservation and climate adaptation objectives adopted by our state and supported overwhelmingly by voters, as evidenced by clear passage of the Environmental Bond Act last fall.

Conclusion

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide testimony. Parks & Trails New York looks forward to working with the Senate, the Assembly and the Governor to keep up the momentum for state parks, greenways, and public lands. Through our partnership, we can solidify New York's conservation legacy, strengthening the network of parks, trails and open spaces across the state. Caring for our public green spaces not only encourages lasting stewardship, but has been proven to effectively boost New York's economy, from the Capitol to communities in every corner of the state.