

**Testimony before the Joint Budget Hearing of the State Legislature
on the FY 2019-20 Executive Budget**

**Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation
Commissioner Rose Harvey
January 23, 2019**

Good Morning, Chairwoman Krueger, Chairwoman Weinstein, Senator Serrano and Assemblyman O'Donnell and distinguished members of the State Legislature. Thank you for inviting me to discuss Governor Cuomo's Executive Budget proposal.

I've had the great fortune over the last eight years to oversee New York's 250 state parks, historic sites, boat launches and recreational trails, which are now visited by more than 71 million people each year. New Yorkers are united in their appreciation for their state parks. In a time of too much division, parks are our common ground. They are the lands, refuges, open spaces that belong to us all – and from which we all benefit.

It's been a joy to serve work with my talented, dedicated and hard-working staff, which takes great pride in caring for these properties meaningful experiences for our visitors. And it's been an honor to serve a Governor and Legislature who support this good work.

The Executive Budget provides for excellent stewardship for the lands entrusted to our care. It provides level funding for agency operations and programs, maintains the Environmental Protection Fund at its historic high, and provides \$110 million for our capital budget – which continues our baseline \$90 million annual capital appropriation and provides an additional \$20 million to both open and fund future improvements for our new state park in Brooklyn.

The capital allocation will continue the Governor's NY Parks 2020 initiative to reverse decades of decline and neglect in our parks, and transform and modernize them for the 21st century. While there is still so much more to do to rebuild, reopen, revitalize, and transform our parks and historic sites, we have made such amazing progress – all with capital improvements that ensure resiliency and sustainability for the long term. Since the Governor launched this \$900 million investment, with your huge support, we have initiated more than 825 improvement projects across the state, and completed more than \$880 million in work with public and private funds. A Governor's "Parks 2024," (with your continued support for annual New York Works) will continue a true renaissance, we, together, all began and now will continue for future generations.

In fully funding the EPF, the Executive Budget will enhance our stewardship and protection of the State's natural and cultural resources; and connect parks and people with more education and access to our magnificent park system. I paraphrase Baba Dioum; In the end we will conserve **only what we love; we will love only what we understand; and we will understand only what we are taught** (and experience)." (Baba Dioum, 1968.)

To this end, three years ago, the Governor, with your support of \$1 million from the EPF, launched "Connect Kids," an initiative to bring more youth to our parks, connect them to the outdoors, encourage active and healthy lifestyles and alternatives, and create the next generation of environmental stewards. The program has a first focus on youth at risk, and those from communities of high obesity, diabetes, and poverty... with few parks...the same areas we focused our first NY Parks 2020 capital improvements. Connect Kids is threefold:

- providing free educational field trips (and transportation) to all NYS Title 1 schools; Since 2016, our public schools now send, annually, over 200,000 public school to our and DEC's new and improved environmental and historical centers.
- providing outdoor skills to those kids unfamiliar with the outdoors such as our Free Learn to Swim program; We now teach, each year, over 20,000 kids to swim; and such as our new "wilderness-like" summer camps for youth at risk.
- expanding the Governor's ECC for youth 18 to 25; a 10-month public works program providing room and board to the 100 members, with extensive job skill training, application of this training in Parks and DEC lands, a small weekly stipend and a \$5,000 college scholarship upon completion.

Connect Kids to Parks is a part of a holistic strategy to improve the lives of our youth through positive activity, with a particular emphasis on urban and youth at risk. The budget includes additional funding to expand the successful Friends Groups Capacity Grants program, administered by Parks & Trails New York, which provides competitive grants to friends groups that support state parks and historic sites and many of these programs.

We continue making considerable progress on the Empire State Trail, a 750-mile bicycling and walking trail spanning New York State, to promote safe, healthy outdoor recreation, enhance community vitality, and support tourism-based economic development. Of the 63 different and new trail projects needed to stitch together the EST, 20 are completed, under construction, or in the contract award phase. The remaining projects are all under design, and are on schedule for completion no later than fall 2020.

Again our Division for Historic Preservation leads the nation in the number and diversity of historic preservation listings; In 2018, we added over 1,300 properties to the National Register of Historic Places, qualifying them to use the New York State Rehabilitation Tax Credit program. And, since Governor Cuomo and Legislature improved our State Historic credit incentives in 2013 and 2017, New York State leads the nation in encouraging private investment in revitalization of historic buildings. For the fourth straight year, the combination of New York's state and the federal tax rehabilitation tax credit programs has led the nation with a record \$850 million in private investment to restore derelict commercial, Main Street buildings and districts essential to local economic development. Nearly 80 percent of this activity is in upstate communities, both urban and rural, and over the last four years the total investment is more than \$3.27 billion.

This year the budget includes an innovative strategy to allow the State Rehabilitation Tax Credit to be utilized in State Parks and attract private partners to invest in the revitalization of

deteriorated and unused historic buildings in State Parks and Historic Sites. This small change will leverage public/ private dollars and stimulate heritage tourism opportunities

State Parks is looking forward to a momentous year in 2019. We will:

- Complete a six-year, \$70 million renewal of Niagara Falls State Park, our nation's most historic state park.
- finish the \$90 million transformation of Roberto Clemente State Park in the South Bronx and with MLB and Dream, open a baseball and softball academy, for thousands of the girls and boys in nearby communities.
- Open the largest state park in New York City named after Shirley Chisholm a pioneer for equal rights.
- Complete and open, Junior's Camp in Harriman State Park, in partnership with the Bronx Borough President and Fresh Air Fund. Junior's camp is a gang prevention initiative to provide, every year, outdoor and skills experience for 400 to 500 at risk youth in the Bronx to honor Junior, who was not part of a gang and was ruthlessly killed in June of 2017.
- Open more of the 300 new/improved cabin/ cottages for new and different camping experiences, in the Finger Lakes, Thousand Islands, and the first ever on Long Island.
- And Host one of the top sporting events of the year at a public park – the PGA Championship at Long Island's Bethpage State Park.

Those will be some of big headlines. But the everyday things – family picnics, children's laughter on the playgrounds, splashing in the waves, nights beside the campfire – are the essence of our park system. It is an amazing thing to be able to make happen for millions of people. We should all be proud for our role in it.

I want to thank you for your support for New York's magnificent and historic places as well as the support you've given me personally over the last eight years. I will very soon be handing over the reins to Erik Kulleseid. He is a hugely dedicated and effective champion of parks and open space. Governor Cuomo made an excellent choice in naming him the next commissioner of State Parks. I know Erik is eager to collaborate with you to make the park system the best it can be and to serve the citizens of our state. Thank you.
