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Testimony of the Adirondack Mountain Club (ADK)
Joint Legislative Public Hearing, Environmental Conservation Portion
2023-2024 Executive Budget Proposal
14 February 2023

Good afternoon, Chairwoman Krueger, Chairwoman Weinstein and honored legislators, my name is Cathy Pedler, ADK Director of Advocacy. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the Governor's Executive Budget Proposal.

We respectfully urge you to restore the dedicated funding line for the Adirondack and Catskill Forest Preserve Parks with **\$10 million** in FY 23-24 under State Land Stewardship of the Environmental Protection Fund's (EPF) Parks and Recreation Account. This funding would be part of, and not in addition to, the Executive Budget Proposal of \$48,700,000 for State Land Stewardship.

We also request support of \$100,000 for ADK's High Peaks Information Center (HPIC), located at the busiest trailhead in New York State.

Since 1922 ADK (Adirondack Mountain Club) has been working to protect New York State wild lands and waters by promoting responsible outdoor recreation, building trails, conserving natural areas, and developing a stewardship community. We are a member, donor, and volunteer-supported organization reaching across New York State through 27 chapters and 30,000 members to inspire people to enjoy the outdoors ethically. ADK's educational efforts include school programs reaching up to 600 fourth graders annually; skills workshops and guided trips with 1,000 participants annually; the Summit Stewardship program reaching up to 40,000 hikers each year on the Adirondack High Peaks to protect fragile alpine habitat; and two visitor interpretive facilities, the High Peaks Information Center which yearly serves 100,000 recreators, and the new Cascade Welcome Center on Rt 73, the busiest travel corridor in the Adirondacks. Additionally, ADK's professional and volunteer trail crews provide highly skilled backcountry trail builders who take on some of the most challenging projects in wilderness areas. In the past year, ADK trail crews and volunteers spent over 7,000 hours building and maintaining 100 trails and over 200 lean-tos.

The Catskill and Adirondack Forest Preserve Parks collectively represent over 6.5 million acres of land which is nearly a quarter of New York State. The Adirondack and Catskill regions serve as home and recreation lands to over one million residents in Forest Preserve counties. In addition, there are more than 25 million visitors to the Adirondacks and Catskills each year bringing \$3 billion to regional economies annually. In our current climate crisis, the Adirondack and Catskill Forest Preserve Parks serve as the lungs of NY, a great force to combat climate change as its forests provide oxygen and sequester carbon. They protect critical habitat, and provide fresh drinking water to millions of residents, including those in New York City.

In November, ADK and **thirty-two Adirondack and Catskill groups and municipalities** signed on to a letter to Governor Hochul thanking her for last year's historic commitment to the \$400 million Environmental Protection Fund (EPF), and passage of the \$4.2 billion Clean Water, Clean Air, Green Jobs Bond Act, and for providing in last year's final budget \$8 million in dedicated funds for the Catskills and Adirondacks within the nearly \$50 million of State Land Stewardship funding in the EPF. The dedicated funding line in the EPF was an impressive step toward meeting the vision outlined by the Catskill Park and Adirondack High Peaks Strategic Planning Advisory Groups (CAG and HPAG), to protect wilderness, provide safe and welcoming visitor experiences, and to invest in Catskill and Adirondack communities. However, the groups were **extremely disappointed to see that the dedicated funding line was removed in the Executive Budget Proposal** this year which **threatens important progress made in the Forest Preserve** with this dedicated funding.

To continue our progress toward this shared vision for the Catskills and Adirondacks, **we urge you in FY 23-24 to**

1. **Retain the dedicated line** for the Catskill and Adirondack Forest Preserve Parks as an annual appropriation of \$10 million under the EPF's State Land Stewardship funding;
2. **Support agency staff increases**, especially positions necessary to implement the use of EPF and Clean Water, Clean Air, Green Jobs Bond Act funding; and,
3. **Invest in Forest Preserve Park communities** through supporting implementation projects funded by the Bond Act; Smart Growth initiatives; and **support of Visitor Centers**, including \$100,000 for the Adirondack High Peaks Information Center.

Retain the Dedicated Line

In last year's final budget the following language was provided for the dedicated line in State Land Stewardship of the EPF's Park and Recreation Account: "\$8,000,000 for Adirondack and Catskill visitor safety and wilderness protection activities to address issues relating to overuse." Last year's funding is being used for educational stewards, trail work, recreational infrastructure including parking and trailheads (e.g., kiosks and sanitation), water access, accessibility and inclusivity projects, and Visitor Use Management (VUM) Planning and Implementation. This year's funding will be used to continue this work and continue to implement recommendations of the Adirondack High Peaks and Catskill Park Strategic Planning Advisory Groups (HPAG and CAG).

The projects supported by the Catskill and Adirondack dedicated funding line in the EPF **are not one and done projects, but ongoing needs.** For example, the Visitor Use Management projects initiated this year will be followed by planning, monitoring, and management actions; trails must be maintained and improved annually; educational stewards are needed every year to help visitors have safe experiences and to protect natural habitats; and building capacity in **Diversity, Equity, Inclusivity, and Justice (DEIJ)** initiatives in the Adirondack and Catskill Parks will require annual investments such as by implementing the recommendations of the **Open Spaces for All report** led by the New York Outdoor Recreation Coalition (NYORC) and the Open Space Institute (OSI).

Support Agency Staff Increases

We applaud the fact that the Governor has proposed increasing NYSDEC staffing to 3,331 FTEs and hope to see increased staffing in the Lands and Forests, and Operations divisions specifically. **We are especially concerned about insufficient staffing levels in the Division of Lands and Forests.** In 1996, there were 186 staff responsible for managing a total of 3,818,983 acres of public land. Today there are 170 staff who are responsible for 4,950,000 acres of public land and conservation easements. Also, during this time, three critical new programs were added: 1) climate change; 2) invasive species; and 3) conservation easements. Simultaneously, recreational use has doubled. **Acres and workload are up, and staff is down;** staff numbers in the Division of Lands and Forests should be increased. Also adding staff in the **Division of Operations would support the 55 state public campgrounds** in the Catskill and Adirondack Forest Preserve Parks and allow DEC to have their own **dedicated trail crews.** There is only one dedicated DEC trail crew in the Adirondack High Peaks. The Catskills and other parts of the Adirondacks do not have dedicated DEC trail crews. Supporting DEC Division of Operations staff will also enable campgrounds in the Adirondacks and Catskills remain open as long as possible in the season. Autumn has now become even more popular than summer and keeping campgrounds open helps regional economies and communities thrive. We also **support hiring more real property staff** at DEC, OPRHP and the Attorney General's Office and streamlining the land acquisition process in NY so more land is protected for climate mitigation, biodiversity habitat, and public use.

Continued support for DEC Forest Rangers is needed. This past year the New York State Forest Ranger force had their own Ranger Academy and 40 slots for new recruits. The Forest Ranger force is a critical piece of Forest Preserve recreation infrastructure. When people get lost or injured on the Forest Preserve, the Forest Rangers are there to get them safely back home. We urge support for another Forest Ranger academy in 2023 or early 2024 to stay ahead of attrition due to promotions and retirements. **Unfortunately, the Executive Budget Proposal did not provide funding for a Ranger Academy this year.**

Continued support for the Adirondack Park Agency is needed. The Adirondack Park Agency is tasked with long-range planning for 20% of the state of New York. It is a model for planning agencies across the country and the world. The large capital appropriation last year will allow the APA to construct a new headquarters. The Executive Budget Proposal retained 54 positions for the APA this year.

Invest in Forest Preserve Park Communities and Support Visitor Centers

Healthy Parks require Healthy Communities. Unlike other state parks, Adirondack and Catskill Forest Preserve Parks contain communities where people live, work, and raise families. These communities and their businesses are part of the fabric of the Parks, and they provide lodging, food, entertainment, and emergency services to park visitors. The **Park Towns and Villages** are integral parts of the Adirondack and Catskill Forest Preserve Parks. As such they **need infrastructure support for quality of residential life, and for safe and enjoyable visitor experiences that help support regional economies.** In the Adirondacks, the Common Ground Alliance (CGA), and in the Catskills, the Catskill Park Coalition (CPC), regularly meet to collaborate and develop priorities on whole park issues that include the needs of communities within the park as well as recreation and ecological concerns. Smart Growth grant funding and other investments such as the Clean Water, Clean Air, Green Jobs Bond Act should be available for updating infrastructure in Forest Preserve Park communities. Funding should support clean water, affordable housing, Park-centered curricula, and infrastructure projects such as trails, community development, and scenic byways. It is also essential to support programs and opportunities in Park communities that will build capacity in DEIJ, such as the work of the Adirondack Diversity Initiative (ADI), and the recommendations of the Open Spaces for All report. We were **pleased to see in the EPF continued funding for the Adirondack Diversity Initiative (ADI), and the Timbuctoo Summer Institute. We were also pleased to see an increase for Smart Growth funding** in the EPF's Climate Change Account of the Executive Budget Proposal.

Visitor Centers support communities. Five privately funded, privately run visitor centers in the Forest Preserve Parks address stewardship and promote communities, including the Catskills Visitor Center in Mt. Tremper, the Paul Smith's Visitor Interpretive Center, the ESF Adirondack Interpretive Center in Newcomb, ADK's Adirondack High Peaks Information Center at Heart Lake, and ADK's Cascade Welcome Center in North Elba. These facilities are strategically located and attract visitors traveling to popular areas. Continued funding of these strategic centers is critical as they serve to protect the Forest Preserve, keep recreators safe, and highlight community businesses.

In the Executive Budget Proposal we were happy to see the increase for the Catskills Visitor Center to \$200,000. We were disappointed to see that SUNY ESF and Paul Smith's Interpretive Centers did not receive increases, and **very disappointed that there was no funding for visitor centers in the Adirondack High Peaks at the busiest trailhead in the state. Funding the High Peaks Information Center at \$100,000 is a priority for ADK.** As a 2/7/23 Op-Ed in the Schenectady Daily Gazette recently explained, "Visitor centers are vital for high-quality visitor experiences and resource protection. Visitor centers are commonplace in most parks and protected areas in the U.S., and are often funded and operated by the managing agency. Given that the New York Forest Preserve [Parks are] larger than [Yellowstone, Everglades, Glacier and Grand Canyon National Parks] all of these national parks combined...it is baffling that there is not robust state support of visitor centers in the Forest Preserve."

We are also **disappointed not to see funding renewed for Camp Santanoni** which will be used for site management and Fire Protection.

Thank you for your work and leadership in caring for the great State of New York and the Catskill and Adirondack Forest Preserve Parks. We greatly appreciate your attention to these important requests.

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