



OPEN SPACE INSTITUTE

**ALLIANCE FOR
NEW YORK STATE PARKS**

22

Testimony Before the Joint Fiscal Committees of the State Legislature on the FY2016-17 Budget

**Erik Kulleseid
Open Space Institute's Alliance for New York State Parks Program
January 28, 2016**

Senate Finance Chair Young and Assembly Ways & Means Chair Farrell, Chairs O'Mara, Englebright, Funke and Markey, distinguished legislators – thank you for the opportunity to discuss Governor Cuomo's proposed budget as it relates to our state parks and the Environmental Protection Fund.

I am Erik Kulleseid, Senior Vice President at the Open Space Institute and Executive Director of its Alliance for New York State Parks program.

OSI is one of New York's leading land and park conservation nonprofits. As such, we are grateful that with his budget proposal, Governor Cuomo is expressing a renewed and historic commitment to the state's Environmental Protection Fund and continuing his state park revitalization initiative; as well as a new program aimed at strengthening park friends groups.

Throughout its 40-year history, OSI, working with our land conservation partners, has added more than 40,000 acres to state parks. These transactions achieve a variety of goals, from creating new parks and adding valuable acreage, to providing important buffer zones and connectivity.

The overall effect on the state park system has been significant. OSI's work accounts for more than 10 percent of the state park system's total acreage of more than 335,000 acres.

And with its Alliance for New York State Parks program, OSI has extended its commitment to public enjoyment of parks through advocacy, private fundraising and support of public-private endeavors that are adding to the revitalization of New York's magnificent state park system.

I am here today to express our enthusiastic support for the governor's environmental and parks budget – particularly as it pertains to this year's historic increase to the EPF. Of course, in praising the EPF budget advanced by the governor, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge and credit legislators from both chambers who have been ardent supporters of both protecting and expanding the EPF.

As we applaud the governor's plan, we know that we have many active and steadfast friends in both the Assembly and Senate who have been fierce supporters of the EPF and we are grateful for this longstanding commitment.

Before I get in to detailed remarks, I think it's worthwhile to pause and reflect on the remarkable turnabout that has occurred for our state parks and environmental funding in the past five years. In 2010, 90 out of 213 state parks and historic sites were at risk of closing due to budget cuts. The EPF collapsed by 47 percent.

Since that dark moment, however, Governor Cuomo, the Assembly and the Senate have forged a bipartisan and stable consensus that our parks are reflections of our state, and that we need to burnish the places that help drive New York's tourism industry and quality of life. Bravo!

With this year's infusion to the EPF, we urge that you forge the same bipartisan consensus around the need to invest in New York's environment generally, and restore our leadership. New Yorkers are with you; boosting their visitorship to parks by 10 percent in recent years and by showing 70 percent support for a \$300 million EPF in polling conducted late last summer.

The governor's proposal to fund the EPF at \$300 million represents an historic advancement in the conservation and protection of New York's natural resources; and supports clean water, land preservation, job creation and stronger environmental communities.

We are particularly grateful that among the EPF categories slated for increase are the open space acquisition fund (which grows from \$26.5 million to \$40 million) and the State Lands Stewardship fund (which grows from \$18.5 million to \$28 million).

The increased support for open space conservation underscores the value that smart and effective land conservation can and does play in building stronger communities. From promoting clean water and air, outdoor recreation, working farms and forests, to protecting habitats and mitigating the storm-related impacts of climate change, land conservation is an invaluable, long-term solution in the pursuit of environmental security.

The State Land Stewardship category not only maintains \$500,000 for capacity-building grants to state park and historic site friends groups, it also supports both DEC and State Parks capital and operations programs. We urge funding support for these critical stewardship initiatives.

In addition to the EPF dollars, we are delighted to see the governor include another \$90 million installment to support ongoing efforts to restore and upgrade New York's wonderful system of state parks. With his budget proposal, Governor Cuomo is maintaining a 10 year commitment outlined in his Parks 2020 Plan to revitalize state parks and make them more accessible, appealing and welcoming for generations of park visitors.

After decades of state park underinvestment resulting in a \$1 billion backlog in maintenance and repairs, Governor Cuomo launched his Parks 2020 initiative, resulting in a state park renaissance that is underway in every region throughout the state. Funding announced in the executive budget builds on this success.

We are extraordinarily grateful to Governor Cuomo for his unwavering commitment to New York's beloved state parks. Thanks to the governor, and legislators who stood with state parks when they were at their lowest, and have been partners in turning the fortunes of our spectacular natural and cultural treasures, great things are happening at state parks throughout New York. This ongoing commitment marks the most significant and sustained infusion of resources needed to repair, upgrade and enhance New York's increasingly popular state parks.

Thanks to him and to you, great things are happening at state parks throughout New York. From new nature centers at Letchworth and Thacher state parks, to major restoration projects at Niagara Falls, Jones Beach and Minnewaska, our state parks are undergoing a transformation unlike anything this state has ever seen.

These investments are transforming a once beleaguered system and restoring our greatest natural treasures as sources of pride, community vitality and economic strength. On behalf of the more than 62 million people who visit state parks each year and the businesses and workers that benefit from the economic activity they spur, we appreciate all Governor Cuomo and the Legislature have done to address the park's capital backlog needs and look forward to working with the Senate and Assembly to secure this latest installment in parks capital funding.

On the operations side of the ledger, this year's budget once again by-and-large freezes state parks funding at last year's levels. For an agency that has seen its budget cut by twenty percent over recent years in the face of rising fixed costs, and a growing number of visitors, it is difficult to maintain confidence that the agency or the New Yorkers it serves is truly being held harmless.

We once again credit Commissioner Rose Harvey for leading the Office of Parks during these lean times. The Commissioner's efforts to establish operating partnerships, improve efficiency and enhance the visitor experience shine through with the capital projects and programs advancing through Parks 2020.

Thank you for your time this afternoon and for the work you do to advance the cause of protecting and enhancing New York's precious environmental and recreational resources.

