



**OPEN SPACE
INSTITUTE**

**Testimony Before the Joint Fiscal Committees
of the State Legislature on the FY2021-22 Budget**

**Kathy Moser
Open Space Institute
January 27, 2021**

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 Cuomo's proposed budget as it relates to New York's state parks, open space, and the environment.

I am Kathy Moser, Chief Conservation Officer at 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, and wildlife habitat from southern Canada to Florida. Still, New York remains our home, and as such, we welcome the opportunity to be here today and offer testimony on Governor Andrew Cuomo's Executive Budget Proposal. In short, we appreciate the governor's budget proposal for parks and the environment – especially in light of the tremendous fiscal challenges facing the state.

We are especially grateful that both the governor's budget and the State-of-the-State demonstrate an understanding of the critical role strategic land conservation can and does play in protecting drinking water sources and providing New Yorkers places to safely spend time with families, connect with friends, get some much-needed exercise, and recharge from the emotional and mental fatigue stemming from the COVID pandemic. New York's state parks have, especially over the past year, proven to be a source of comfort and rejuvenation, and we are grateful for the governor's continued support for them.

With his Parks 100 initiative, Governor Cuomo is maintaining his historic commitment to improving park infrastructure – modernizing parks and making them safer and more appealing to the public.

Indeed, OSI shares this vision and is proud to be working with both State Parks and the Department of Conservation, investing millions of private dollars, to make the outdoors and public lands more welcoming by adding trails, trailheads, and visitor centers with the hope of connecting more people to the land in way that will ultimately encourage long-term public support for the protection of natural resources.

To that end, this past year, OSI partnered with State Parks to create a new visitor center at Minnewaska State Park that will serve as a gateway for existing and new visitors as they plan their exploration of the park's 24,000 acres – more than half of which was added by OSI. The park, located just 90 minutes north of New York City in Ulster County, welcomes more than

500,000 visitors each year. There is a renaissance happening at our state parks and OSI is proud to be a part of it.

Similarly, OSI is also working with DEC to improve the visitor experience. This past year we funded a new trail network at Blue Stone Wild Forest in the Catskills close to the city of Kingston. In the Adirondacks, we are working closely with the department to provide an alternative, southern entry point to the popular High Peaks area. This spring, OSI will complete public access improvements at our Adirondac Upper Works property in an effort to better distribute High Peaks visitors.

To complement this effort, OSI, in partnership with DEC, continues to conserve land in the Adirondacks. Over the past year alone, we completed projects protecting more than 16,000 acres in the Adirondacks – in order to provide new, alternative locations for the public to enjoy, while also protecting water sources, preserving habitat for wildlife, and fighting climate change through the absorption and storage of carbon.

Of course, all these land conservation achievements, and many others, are made possible through the state's Environmental Protection Fund. And we are very pleased that in his budget, the Governor maintains his historic commitment for the EPF.

As you know, the EPF is the source of funding for open space protection, municipal parks, support of Friends groups, environmental justice and the stewardship of public lands – among many other critical categories of natural resource protection in New York State.

We urge continued support for the EPF, and in particular, the Open Space Acquisition line, the Municipal Matching Grants pool, the State Land Stewardship Fund, NYS Parks and Trail Partnership Grant Program, the Land Trust Alliance Conservation Partnership Program, the Parks and Trails NY Grant 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.

Knowing the Legislature's long-term and passionate commitment to supporting and protecting the program, 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 years to protect and expand this critical funding source.

In addition, the Open Space Institute welcomes the \$500 million contained in the governor's budget for clean water infrastructure, particularly the inclusion of funding for source water protection.

This one proposal highlights the myriad of natural, cost-effective solutions that can be found in land protection. From fighting climate change to protecting clean drinking water and mitigating flood damage, strategic land conservation can play a critical role in solving some of the biggest environmental challenges we face today.

We commend the Governor for taking the bold actions of environmental funding I outlined today and hope to see these measures included in the final budget.

Finally, with regard to the potential of an Environmental Bond Act, we thank both houses of the legislature for your support last year. As the 2021 Legislative Session gets underway, we renew our call for the bond initiative, knowing that such a measure would produce enormous, long-term benefits of the good of all New Yorkers and the place we call home.

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.