



**OPEN SPACE
INSTITUTE
LAND TRUST**

**Testimony Before the Joint Fiscal Committees
of the State Legislature on the FY2018-19 Budget**

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February 7, 2018**

Senate Finance Chair Young and Assembly Ways & Means Chair Weinstein, Chairs O'Mara, Englebright, Funke 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 and environmental funding.

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 among New York's leading land and park conservation nonprofits. As such, we are, overall, very grateful that with his budget proposal, Governor Cuomo is continuing his park revitalization initiative, improving recreational access, and maintaining a \$300 million EPF, as well as his clean water infrastructure program – with a welcome emphasis on source water land conservation.

Throughout our 40-year history, OSI has conserved more than 143,000 acres in New York State. These conservation transactions achieve a variety of goals, including creating and expanding State Parks, Forests and Wildlife Refuges, expanding access to outdoor recreation, protecting habitat, mitigating the effects of climate change and, yes, protecting water sources.

The overall effect on the state park system, alone, 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. Throughout the years we were instrumental in the creation of Sterling Forest and Schunnemunk state parks and have more than doubled the size of Minnewaska, Fahnestock, Thacher, and Moreau Lake state parks. OSI has protected the southern hiking gateway to the Adirondack's High Peaks, and the shores of the Marion Carry, important to the annual 90-miler canoe paddle. On Long Island, we are protecting fragile coastal ecosystems.

And with our Alliance for New York State Parks program, OSI is extending 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.

Most recently, OSI joined New York State Parks in creating a new visitor center at Thacher State Park, outside of Albany. While the state completed the building, OSI raised approximately \$800,000 in grants and private donations to add state-of-the-art exhibits that tell stories of the park's geological formations, ecology, and rich history, while encouraging continued conservation and stewardship.

I encourage you all make the 25-minute trip from downtown Albany and experience the center's bat cave and learn how creatures found in the Caribbean seas ended up as fossils in Albany's Helderberg Escarpment.

Having helped to create and expand the state's parks and, today, working to improve the overall visitor experience, we enthusiastically welcome the governor's continued leadership in improving and upgrading state parks through his NY Parks 2020 and his inclusion of a \$90 million installment in his proposed budget. This is the sixth year for this unprecedented program, and we are pleased to see a special investment in creating a state park along Jamaica Bay in Brooklyn's East New York neighborhood.

We are extraordinarily grateful to the governor and the legislature for the renaissance that is underway throughout the system, borne out by another record-setting visitation rate last year. New Yorkers and tourists are loving our parks and that is a great thing for communities and local businesses throughout the state. Similarly, we are happy to see the formula for NY Parks 2020 being extended to DEC properties, through the Adventure NY program, as well as a continuation of the Empire State Trail initiative. In fact, we are pleased to be building an 11-mile stretch of that trail this year in Ulster County.

On the operations side of the ledger, this year's budget, once again, by-and-large freezes State Parks and DEC funding at last year's levels. For agencies facing increased fixed costs and growing numbers of visitors, it is difficult to maintain confidence that the agencies or the New Yorkers they serve are truly being held harmless.

I am also eager to express enthusiasm for another year of a \$300 million EPF, particularly with the myriad of pressures being placed on the state budget from the failings of Washington DC. The Legislature has long been champions of the EPF and we remain grateful to both Houses for your continuing support for the fund and all that it achieves.

Four categories of particular interest to us within the EPF are the Open Space Acquisition funding line, the Municipal Matching Grants pool, the State Land Stewardship Fund and the NYS Parks and Trail Partnership Grant Program. These are important initiatives aimed at expanding and buffering our protected lands, bolstering local and nonprofit park projects, caring for the natural resources within state parks and forests, and strengthening state park friends – and we urge your continued support for each of these items.

We applaud the \$300 million total, and welcome a new \$500,000 land acquisition entry for community forests – which, as you may know, stem from the nation's colonial days. Still, I call your attention to an area of concern within the EPF that requires some scrutiny. As a prominent land conservation organization, OSI is concerned that the proposed amount for land acquisition is reduced– from \$36 million to \$30 million. While this reduction can be partly attributed to a reduced volume of land projects in agency pipelines, OSI is concerned about gaps in line staff available to efficiently move open space conservation projects.

Before closing, I call your attention to beneficial proposed changes in the tax law to incentivize forest conservation on privately-owned property. We fully support this initiative to strengthen the state's

forests – improving them for climate, wildlife protection, and access for recreation and encouraging smart timber management principles.

In closing, I thank the governor and members of both the Senate and Assembly for working together in support of parks and the environment. Your commitment and effectiveness is setting a new national standard, one that can make all New Yorkers proud.

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