



OPEN SPACE INSTITUTE

ALLIANCE FOR
NEW YORK STATE PARKS

**Testimony Before Joint Fiscal Committees of the State Legislature on the
FY2014-15 State Budget
Open Space Institute's Alliance for New York State Parks
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Senate Finance Chair DeFrancisco and Assembly Ways & Means Chair Farrell, Chairman O'Mara, Chairs Little 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 commitment to the state's Environmental Protection Fund and support for farmland protection; continuing his state park revitalization initiative; and introducing a new plan to support the growth of successful 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.

And it is this ongoing revitalization of our state parks that is the focus of my remarks today. The \$110 million in state parks capital funding included in this proposed budget builds on \$270 million allocated by the Governor and the Legislature over the past three years to restore and upgrade state parks throughout New York. After decades of deferred maintenance and underinvestment in our state parks infrastructure, leading to a capital backlog totaling more than \$1 billion, these investments are long overdue. We are deeply grateful to Governor Cuomo and members of the legislature for this continuing commitment to New York's most spectacular natural treasures. What a stunning turnaround from 2010 when 90 parks were slated for closure!

Thanks to him and to you, great things are happening at state parks throughout New York. From long-needed, multi-year commitments to overhaul Niagara Falls and Jones Beach to significant improvements at Thacher and Riverbank, 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 members 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 New York Works.

As referenced earlier, OSI is also grateful that the executive budget includes a \$10 million expansion of the EPF.

Allow me to pause and offer our great thanks to members of this legislature for your steadfast commitment to funding and maintaining the integrity of the EPF and, in particular, for your strong effort last year to increase it. We acknowledge the legislature's leadership in supporting the EPF and look forward to working with you to restore the EPF to prior funding levels and eventually its rightful level of \$300 million.

The current EPF budget proposal includes a \$4 million increase in open space protection funding, and a new \$50 million farmland protection initiative, underscoring the value that smart and effective land conservation can and does play a role in building stronger communities.

As you may know, last fall, the Governor issued an Open Space Conservation Plan emphasizing the multitude of benefits derived by effective land conservation. The Cuomo plan underscores the importance of protecting natural resources and stresses the important role land conservation plays in promoting clean water and air, outdoor recreation, working farms, habitat protection and adapting to climate change.

We are gratified that after years of stagnation on the part of the administration, the governor has turned the corner on open space funding within the EPF. We are pleased that with this proposal, the administration is returning its focus to the economic, environmental and recreational benefits that result from smart land conservation.

Finally, we are exceptionally pleased to support the governor's inclusion of \$500,000 in the EPF for capacity-building grants to state park and historic site friends groups. The program, to be managed by our partners at Parks & Trails New York, is modeled on the extraordinarily successful Land Trust Conservation Partnership administered by the DEC and the Land Trust Alliance. The program promises to give a major boost to the nonprofit groups across the state that work to bring private funding and volunteer labor into our unparalleled state parks and historic sites. All New Yorkers will benefit.

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.

