



## Joint Legislative Public Hearing on the New York State Fiscal Year 2022 Executive Budget Proposal

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Chairperson Kaminsky, Chairperson Englebright, and distinguished members of the Senate and Assembly, thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on behalf of Parks & Trails New York (PTNY). My name is Will Coté and I am the Parks Program Director. Since our founding in 1985, PTNY has been fighting to improve our health, economy, and quality of life through the use and enjoyment of green space. With the support of our members and supporters, as well as advocates and partners from across the state, PTNY champions the protection and enhancement of New York's magnificent state park system and greenway trail network, ensuring all New Yorkers have access to the outdoors, for generations to come.

I want to start by thanking the Senate and the Assembly for your firm and consistent support for New York's state park system and public lands. The Governor's Executive Budget Proposal for 2022-2023 outlines a historic investment in New York's park system, trails and shared greenspaces. We thank the Governor, and encourage support from the Senate and Assembly for \$200 million in capital funding for state parks and historic sites, \$400 million for the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF), which includes \$2 million for the Park and Trail Partnership Program, a capacity building grant program for grassroots Friends groups, and a \$4 billion Clean Water, Clean Air, Green Jobs Bond Act which will protect our state's natural resources and reduce harmful carbon emissions. These important programs create a legacy for generations to come that demonstrates a commitment to the environment, public health and shared greenspaces.

### **Support Proposed \$200 Million in Capital Funding for State Park Infrastructure Needs**

We encourage the Legislature to include \$200 million in New York Works capital funding for the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP) in the FY 2023 budget, as proposed by the Governor.

Governor Hochul's commitment to restoring and enhancing the nation's oldest state park system builds upon a decade of investment that has created new opportunities for visitors to access the outdoors and repair critical infrastructure, ushering a record 79 million users to our public lands in 2021. The previous capital funding program leveraged more than \$1.2 billion in public and private funds to carry out more than 900 improvement projects in over 200 parks, trails, and historic sites in local communities across

New York State. This year's proposed funding will continue this legacy by transforming flagship parks, addressing critical infrastructure needs, and expanding opportunities for local recreation. Funding is critical to ensure that New York State Parks can meet the goals laid out in ambitious planning documents such as the Statewide Greenway Trails Plan, which calls for continued growth in New York's greenway trail network and expanding the Empire State Trail to serve all New Yorkers. We are optimistic that the Governor's proposed increase to \$200 million is the first step towards achieving the goal of \$300 million in capital funding, which is necessary to meet the needs of our state park system. We look forward to working with the legislature to meet this goal.

### **Increase OPRHP Operating Budget to a More Sustainable Level**

Governor Hochul's Executive Budget helps connect people to parks and the outdoors by providing crucial funding needed to maintain the quality of our nation-leading state park system. The Executive Budget restores some of the agency's capacity to welcome a growing number of visitors, reach new and underserved audiences, and more accurately interpret our state's multicultural history. Increasing OPRHP's operations appropriations by 15% will allow for the hire of 53 FTE's, bringing the agency's total staff to 2,087. While this is invaluable for providing resources that create a positive visitor experience, it remains significantly less than the 2,230 employees the agency had in 2008 when its budget was slashed in the face of an economic recession. As agency staff are pressed to "do more with less," the stress on park infrastructure and programming is clear.

We remain hopeful that this proposed increase, as well as the budget proposal for a Park Police Academy class to be held this fall, are the first of many meaningful steps towards ensuring that all New Yorkers have access to safe, local outdoor places for recreation and respite. For too long, New York has overlooked the imbalance between the capital investments made over the last decade and effectively accommodating record visitation and upholding New York State's unparalleled park legacy.

### **Support the Environmental Protection Fund**

The Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) is more than simply a critical source of funding to protect New York's precious natural resources and achieve climate resiliency; it is a sound investment in an environmentally just economic recovery, which is fundamental to the health of our communities. This is why we ask the Legislature to increase the EPF to \$400 million, which will demonstrate a clear commitment to protecting our natural resources and bring us closer to achieving the environmental community's goal of a \$500 million Environmental Protection Fund.

The EPF is a critical source of funding for protecting New York's water, land, and air, providing stewardship for state parks and forests, and delivering essential resources to communities. EPF programs improve communities in every county of the state and support more than 350,000 jobs across a spectrum of industries. All told, EPF-supported businesses generate approximately \$40 billion every year and provide a 7-to-1 return on investment. Parks & Trails New York is pleased to see increased funding proposed for state land stewardship, open space and land conservation, parks and recreation, and the municipal park grants program. Funding for these categories will create and enhance public access to parks, expanding opportunities for New Yorkers to enjoy the outdoors and appreciate nature, particularly those in underserved communities.

We are pleased to see a proposed increase—from \$2 million to \$3 million—for the Connect Kids to Parks Initiative, which has provided transportation to parks, nature and environmental education centers to hundreds of thousands of students in K-12 education programs across New York. This program gives school children—particularly those in Title I communities—the chance to experience nature and creates

an opportunity to engage the next generation in the stewardship of our shared resources. Programs such as Connect Kids are vital to ensuring that our public lands and historic sites are welcoming and accessible for all New Yorkers. Fostering opportunities for education about traditionally overlooked stories of our diverse history are important investments.

Creating and expanding opportunities for equitable access to parks in underserved areas and marginalized communities is a crucial element in environmental justice and creating a healthy and resilient New York, which is why we applaud the proposed \$6.5 million increase in funding for the Parks, Preservation and Heritage Program. Commonly referred to as the Municipal Parks Program, funding in this line provides matching grants to projects that acquire, develop and plan municipal parks and recreational facilities in our cities and urban areas. The proposed increase of this program to a total of \$26 million – of which 38% is dedicated for projects in environmental justice communities – is an important step in addressing a persistent funding shortfall that impedes dozens of projects that would otherwise foster dynamic, livable communities across New York.

### **Include \$2 million for the Park and Trail Partnership Program in the EPF**

The Executive Budget calls for an increase for the Park and Trail Partnership Grant, from \$1 million to \$2 million. These capacity-building, competitive grants—administered by Parks & Trails New York, in partnership with State Parks—enable Friends groups affiliated with these agencies to expand their impact and strengthen the state’s heritage of public-private partnership. This is done by supporting a wide array of efforts, from raising funds for capital projects and performing maintenance and beautification tasks, to providing innovative educational programming and hosting special events. Since the grant program’s inception in 2015, 140 non-profit organizations have received \$3.6 million in grants and leveraged more than \$1.6 million in private investment that directly benefits park communities.

Year upon year, many more excellent proposals are submitted than can be funded. Overall, less than half of submitted proposals are approved due to a lack of funding. This is compounded by a constantly growing pool of applicants as existing groups apply for the first time and new groups form, a trend that is accelerating.

This small investment will propel these organizations to a higher level of effectiveness, while developing deeper synergy with the state’s initiatives. The increased funding will be directed into three primary strategies for enhancing stewardship of our treasured outdoor resources. A primary focus will advance diversity, equity and inclusion through the development of community partnerships that expand access to marginalized communities, while also providing resources to Friends groups to train and educate board members and staff and develop action plans to internally address DEI and begin the process of dismantling barriers to inclusion for marginalized communities. Other strategies include expanding eligibility to new groups to strengthen public-private partnerships and volunteerism, as well as increasing maximum grant amounts for existing categories in an effort to offset the rising costs of goods and services and allow friends groups to have greater impact with the projects they undertake.

As we look forward to the centennial celebration of New York’s state park system in 2024, now is the time to expand funding for Park and Trail Partnership Grants, which have a proven record of advancing essential private partner contributions to New York’s park and outdoor legacy.

### **Clean Water, Clean Air, Green Jobs Bond Act**

With the impending threat of climate change looming, it is critical that the state continue and advance its strong work to protect the environment. The Governor’s proposal lays out critical steps to do that,

and we applaud the inclusion of the \$4 billion Clean Water, Clean Air and Green Jobs Bond Act which would provide essential investments in climate change mitigation, the protection of clean drinking water, modernization of critical infrastructure, and restoring wildlife habitats while providing access to nature and recreational opportunities for more people. Moreover, the bond act will support more than 65,000 jobs and allow New York to leverage federal, local, and private funding to improve quality of life for New Yorkers in every corner of the state. A proposed \$650 million from the bond act will be used for Open Space Land Conservation and Recreation uses, providing funds for important conservation projects, to protect farmland, and to cover costs associated with the development or improvement of state and municipal parks, campgrounds, nature centers and other infrastructure. We hope that the legislature will join us in working to ensure that funds are used to implement and build off of existing plans, such as the 2020 Statewide Greenway Trails Plan. In addition, the bond act will ensure a just response to climate change, with strong environmental justice provisions included that require 35% of funds spent through the bond act to benefit environmental justice communities.

### **Conclusion**

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Parks & Trails New York looks forward to working with the Senate, the Assembly and the Governor to keep up the momentum for state parks, greenways and public lands, solidifying New York's conservation legacy, and strengthening the network of parks, trails and open spaces across the state. These developments not only encourage stewardship of our shared green spaces, but have been proven to bolster New York State's economy.