



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

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Serrano, Englebright, Colleagues, and Advocates Call on Governor Paterson to Restore Funding for State Parks and Historic Sites

JOSÉ M. SERRANO March 3, 2010

| ISSUE: **STATE PARKS**



Senator José M. Serrano (D-Manhattan/Bronx) and Assemblyman Steve Englebright (D-Setauket), Chairmen of the Assembly and Senate Committees overseeing State Parks, convened a bipartisan press conference on Wednesday to discuss the devastating cuts to Parks in Governor David A. Paterson's proposed Executive Budget for FY 2010-11. Alongside colleagues and Parks advocates from across the state, they called on the Governor to restore a minimum of \$11.3 million in operating aid for State Parks to the final state budget in order to prevent unprecedented park closures.

91 State Parks and 14 historic sites would be forced to close, and service reductions and cutbacks in programming would affect 40 sites.

"Appropriate funding for State Parks is important to both the economy and character of New York," said Senator Serrano, who serves as Chair of the Senate Committee on Cultural Affairs, Tourism, Parks, and Recreation. "In the current economic climate, demand for parks is at an all-time high, and we cannot stand by as New Yorkers face losing the quality recreational environment on which they have come to depend."

"We find ourselves amidst the greatest financial crisis since the Great Depression, during which Governor Franklin Roosevelt increased the size of the State Park system, seeing its potential as an economic catalyst," said Serrano. "We must make fiscally responsible budgeting decisions in order to create jobs and maintain the vital programs and services that New Yorkers have come to rely on. The people of New York State deserve more than typical Albany quick-fixes for the current fiscal environment."

The Governor's Executive Budget Proposal included \$20 million in General Fund cuts to the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation's (OPRHP) operating budget, which was partially offset by a restoration of \$3.9 million in his 21-Day Amendments. However, this additional funding would not prevent the first park closures in the history of the State Park system.

Serrano, who distributed a sign-on letter addressed to legislative leadership to all members of the New York State Senate, has garnered bipartisan support in favor of restoring funds for State Parks. The sign on letter requests \$20 million in aid for State Parks. Since the letter was drafted, additional funding has been restored and the endangered State Parks would be able to remain open with an additional \$11.3 million.

"The proposed Executive budget outlines cuts that will damage forever the people's immensely important parks and historic sites," said Assemblyman Englebright. "We know parks and historic sites to be economic generators for our tourism industry, but they are much more. They are institutions of optimism in a time of fear and uncertainty. It is imperative that we, as stewards of the people's assets, protect and preserve these public recreational, cultural, and economic treasures, during a time when they are needed most."

Over the past two years, the budget for State Parks has been cut by \$46 million dollars, equating to 25% of the agency's operating budget. This has resulted in service reductions at 100 State Parks and historic sites, and the elimination of 1,000 jobs.

According to a study done by the University of Massachusetts at Amherst's Political Economy Research Institute, New York State's park system generates \$5 of economic activity for every \$1 of state money invested, resulting in millions of dollars in tax revenue statewide.

"Cuts to Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation will also cut jobs for thousands of New Yorkers," Senator Neil D. Breslin (D-Albany) said. "Cultural and recreational establishments are vital to our tourism industry which generates a significant amount of revenue for our state. Cutting these programs could do more harm than good to our economy."

"The parks belong to the people. To take them away during this economic recession, when more and more families are seeking affordable recreation close to home is simply unacceptable," said Senator Brian Foley (D-Blue Point). "State parks constitute one quarter of one percent of the entire state budget. Closing them is not the answer to New York State's fiscal troubles. As an advocate for our parks, I have been proud to lead efforts to defeat the governor's proposal to close our parks. We must continue to stand up for children and families in our state and fight to keep our parks open."

"The economic importance of these parks and historic sites have been grossly underestimated. Within our region, the park system provides a wonderful economic engine throughout the year for vacations and local daytrips - the Capital Region is rich with opportunities for outdoor activities due to our outstanding park system. Most importantly, New York State Parks give the average, working-class family an affordable entertainment opportunity right in their own backyard. In a state where there are very few venues for hard working men and women to see their tax dollars utilized effectively, the State Park System is truly an everyday example of tax dollars working for the taxpayer. To close parks in Rensselaer and Saratoga County along with anywhere in the Capital Region would be an outrage," said Senator Roy McDonald (R-Saratoga).

"There is no question that we are facing tremendous fiscal challenges in New York State, but there is also no question that our parks, museums and arts and cultural organizations provide jobs and contribute enormously to our overall economy," said Senator George Onorato (D-Queens). "From one end of our state to the other, many New York families depend on these wonderful institutions for recreation, education and cultural enrichment, and they are well deserving of our support."

"These proposed cuts are penny wise and pound foolish. There is no doubt we are facing the worst economic crisis in generations, but closing parks, shuttering historic sites and slashing cultural programs will only compound the problem. New York's parks and cultural institutions are the best in the world, and we cannot afford to lose the good jobs, tourism dollars and convenient recreation these attractions provide," said Senator Eric T. Schneiderman (D-Manhattan/Bronx).

"Closing treasured state parks and cutting the jobs of the hardworking people who staff them would be a serious error in my opinion," said Senator William T. Stachowski (D-Lake

View). "The parks positively impact local economies. The long term costs of lost jobs and lost local revenues to area businesses and in local tourism dollars far exceed any short term savings typically gained by reducing staffing and access to state parks. In addition, as much as this is a financial issue, it's also a quality of life issue. State parks are invaluable cultural, historic and recreational resources. I believe we can find other ways to save money and spare our local parks from closure and will continue to fight for their funding as we move into this final stage of budget negotiations."

The lawmakers were joined by parks advocates from across the state, including Parks and Trails New York and Audubon New York.