



## **State Parks Commissioner Pro Tempore Randy Simons' Testimony at the Joint Legislative Budget Hearing**

Good afternoon, Chairperson Krueger, Chairperson Pretlow, Senator Serrano, Assemblymember Kim and members of the State Legislature. Thank you for inviting me here today.

I'm honored to represent Governor Hochul on behalf of our state park system, which includes more than 250 parks and historic sites, golf courses, boat launches and recreational trails. The Legislature's enduring support for our operational and capital funding continues to benefit all New Yorkers.

Governor Hochul recognizes the park system's importance to the physical and mental health of our communities. Our agency has proudly worked with her on major initiatives to expand access to healthy recreation and looks forward to building on that success. Last year, we jumped in with both feet for the Governor's NY SWIMS Capital Grant Program. The program had two critical goals: helping disadvantaged communities access safe swimming in an era of extreme heat, and reducing the number of drownings, a leading cause of death in young people. In the largest investment in public swimming since the New Deal, we awarded \$150 million in grants to municipalities to support 37 projects statewide.

NY SWIMS led to another nation-leading recreation program: "Get Offline, Get Outside." Prior to the July 4th weekend, Governor Hochul removed swimming pool entry fees at State Parks for the entire summer. Through Labor Day, over 542,000 people visited a State Park pool, a 36 percent increase. Twenty-two facilities hosted free swimming lessons, tripling the number of sites and increasing the number of students by 400 percent to 2,000. To further protect our patrons at the pools and spray grounds, we gave out roughly 35 gallons of free sunscreen.

These programs didn't just make waves locally. They positioned our agency and this state as the vanguard of public health and recreation. Now, Governor Hochul's 'Unplug and Play' strategy invests \$200 million in this visionary work through NY BRICKS (Building Recreational Infrastructure for Communities, Kids and Seniors), NY PLAYS (New York Places for Learning, Activity, and Youth Socialization) – a grant program to aid municipalities with new and improved playgrounds, and the next phases of NY SWIMS and Get Offline, Get Outside.

It was a pleasure and privilege to lead our park system during its Centennial year. In 2024, we honored influential figures and milestone moments in our system's development. Our teams hosted one-of-a-kind Centennial events (many of which you participated in) and received hundreds of stories and memories from our visitors.

Building on the success of the Centennial, public enthusiasm for our parks and historic sites surged in 2024. We welcomed a record-breaking 88 million visitors, a 4.5% increase from the previous year, marking twelve consecutive years of record attendance. Our parks are doing what the architects of this system intended – serving as affordable destinations for all New Yorkers while also attracting visitors from across the country. The Governor's proposed budget maintains robust capital and operational funding and will enable us to shape our system as we kick off the next 100 years in 2025.



The work of building our system's future never stops. Here are a few highlights from the 100-plus announcements made during 2024:

- More than 1,000 acres were added to our system, with Fahnestock, Moreau Lake, Robert H. Treman, and Lake Taghkanic state parks all incorporating newly protected lands.
- Renovated swimming facilities at Riverbank and Stony Brook State Parks opened to better serve swimmers.
- 45 miles of greenway trails were developed over the past 18 months, with plans advancing for six key trail corridors in New York City's outer boroughs.
- Work is underway on a comprehensive upgrade at Selkirk Shores State Park and significant improvements at Buffalo Harbor State Park. Together, these represent \$58 million in investments.
- New visitor centers enhance Olana State Historic Site, Bayard Cutting Arboretum State Park, and Niagara Falls State Park.
- New accessible park infrastructure at Saratoga Spa and Glimmerglass State Parks provides recreation opportunities to people with disabilities.

As New York's greatest public recreation asset, we are working to remove financial barriers to those who need it most. As of April 1, all New York State Veterans and Gold Star Families became eligible for a Lifetime Liberty Pass. Since 2014, an average of 1,200 Lifetime Liberty Passes have been issued annually. Last year, the number of passes increased by 900 percent, for a total of nearly 12,000 issued and counting.

Visitor safety is a top priority at Parks. In 2024, \$53 million was dedicated to improving safety technology and infrastructure, staff training, and public awareness. The "Junior Ranger" program empowered our youngest visitors to take charge of their personal safety and built connections between the public and our Park Rangers. We significantly expanded our training program to equip more staff with essential skills in visitor engagement, missing person response, and human trafficking awareness. Additionally, we have bolstered our law enforcement presence by recruiting nearly 50 new Park Police officers since last year and we remain steadfast in our commitment to providing our officers with the necessary resources and support to effectively fulfill their critical duties and protect our park visitors.

In the next two years, our system will shine at two national and international events. In September, the eyes of the golf world will be upon Bethpage State Park, as 24 of the top golfers from Europe and the United States compete in the 2025 Ryder Cup. More than a quarter million fans will attend.

And in 2026, we join the nation in commemorating the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution. As co-chair of New York's 250th Commemoration Commission, we are committed to crafting a commemorative experience that is both educational and inspiring. We will do this by engaging all New Yorkers, from students to community members, in this exciting celebration. We will achieve this by embracing the agency's 'Our Whole History' initiative, ensuring diverse perspectives and inclusive storytelling are at the forefront of our efforts.

Throughout our agency's history, we've helped New York meet the challenges of the day, whether supporting our troops during World War II or creating affordable recreation opportunities for the Baby Boom generation. We are meeting today's needs by connecting people in an age of division and fragmentation; fortifying our properties against climate change; and giving New Yorkers affordable ways to improve their physical and mental well-being. I value the time we have spent together over the last year promoting the many ways our parks benefit our communities. I look forward to



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continuing that connection with you in 2025. Our Centennial year was a time to reflect on our past; concentrate on the mission ahead; and grasp the current moment, one which our successors will recognize as among the most pivotal in the history of state parks. For this, we are grateful to the Governor, to each of you and to our 88+ million visitors. Thank you, and I most welcome additional conversation to discuss our great state park system.



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