



Parks and Recreation Joint Legislative Public Hearing on the New York State Fiscal Year 2026 Executive Budget Proposal

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January 27, 2025

Chairperson Kreuger, Chairperson Pretlow, Chairperson Serrano, Chairperson Kim, 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 Senior Director of Public Lands. Parks & Trails New York is the state's leading advocate for public lands. In the 40 years since our founding, we have strived to improve our health, economy, and quality of life through the use and enjoyment of green space. With thousands of members and supporters across the state, PTNY is a leading voice in the stewardship of New York's magnificent state park and public lands system, as well as the creation and promotion of more than 2,000 miles of greenways, bike paths, river walks, and trails. Our goal is to ensure *all* New Yorkers have access to high-quality outdoor recreation opportunities, for generations to come.

I want to start by thanking the Senate and the Assembly for your firm and steadfast support for New York's public lands. PTNY commends Governor Hochul's proposed investments in New York's outdoor recreation infrastructure—within the FY2026 Executive Budget—as a welcome step forward towards increasing critical programs that support visitation and activation of our beloved public lands.

We encourage support from the Senate and Assembly for:

- A \$500 million Environmental Protection Fund, including a \$4 million Park and Trail Partnership Program and \$4 million for the Connect Kids to Parks program
- \$200 million in capital funding for state parks and historic sites, and
- \$100 million for DEC's Adventure New York program

Supporting these vital initiatives will help ensure that New York's rich and diverse parks, historic sites, and open spaces are able to welcome and captivate a growing number of visitors each year.

Expand the Environmental Protection Fund to \$500 million

New York's Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) is a key source of dedicated funding for environmental programs across the state, ranging from land conservation and outdoor recreation, to clean water and farmland protection. Established in 1993, the EPF is increasingly aligned with the state's efforts to achieve carbon neutrality, enhance public access to natural resources, and support vulnerable communities in adapting to climate change. The EPF generates approximately \$40 billion annually for New York's economy, sustains hundreds of thousands of jobs across various sectors, and is essential for addressing environmental justice and creating healthy, vibrant, livable communities.

We join dozens of coalition partners in calling for the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) to be increased to \$500 million, up from the \$400 million proposed by the Governor. Funded through the state's real estate transfer tax (RETT), the fund provides a reliable revenue stream—over \$1 billion collected in 2024—for critical environmental programs that align with initiatives like the 2023 Environmental Bond Act and the 2019 Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act (CLCPA). Most EPF programs are oversubscribed, highlighting the urgent and widespread demand across New York State.

With uncertainty surrounding federal leadership on environmental protection, this is a pivotal moment for New York to act decisively. Increasing the EPF to \$500 million would solidify the state's commitments to climate mitigation, ensure essential resources for communities in need, and strengthen our environmental legacy for future generations. This investment is not only critical but a demonstration of the values that make New York a national trailblazer in environmental stewardship.

Increase the Park and Trail Partnership Grant to \$4 million

This competitive grant program strengthens and supports grassroots nonprofit organizations affiliated with New York State Parks (OPRHP) and the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC). Since its launch in 2015, the program has awarded \$9.9 million to 245 projects across the state but remains oversubscribed, leaving \$5 million in requests unmet over the last few rounds alone. We commend the Governor for recognizing the success of this program and proposing a \$500,000 increase, bringing the total to \$2.5 million. This significant step forward moves us closer to *our goal of \$4 million, a milestone we strongly encourage the legislature to help achieve this year.*

Expanding funding for the PTPG program would address urgent needs by supporting shovel-ready projects, implementing master plans, and enhancing infrastructure across New York's public lands. With over 120 Friends groups affiliated with OPRHP and DEC seeking larger awards to meet growing demands, this investment is essential to accommodate rising visitation and ensure the continued quality, accessibility, and sustainability of the state's public lands.

Increase the Connect Kids to Parks Program to \$4 million

The Connect Kids to Parks program, launched in 2016, provides grants to schools and youth organizations, covering the cost of transportation and educational experiences at state parks and historic sites. Since its inception, the program has successfully enabled nearly 800,000 students to visit public lands, many of whom would not have otherwise had the opportunity due to rising costs of transportation and limited access to green spaces. Demand for the program has grown exponentially since COVID pandemic restrictions were lifted, with applications increasing by more than 500% from 2021 to 2023. In 2024, field trip requests significantly exceeded available funds which denied more than 250,000 students the opportunity to enjoy and learn from the outdoors.

We applaud the Governor for recognizing the transformative impact this program has on youth across New York. Her proposal of \$3.5 million, reflecting a \$500,000 increase, is a promising advancement toward *our \$4 million goal*. *We urge the legislature to take this opportunity to fully realize this vision in the final budget*, furthering the state's commitments to education, environmental justice, accessibility, mental health, and inclusivity.

Maintain \$200 million in NY Works Funding for State Parks

Capital funding for parks is essential to revitalizing the system, addressing a substantial multi-billion-dollar backlog of critical infrastructure repairs while creating more opportunities for recreation in both urban and rural communities. Over the past decade, park visitation has surged by more than 40%, underscoring the importance of continued investment. These funds will enable the reopening of long-closed facilities, modernize historic structures to meet accessibility standards, and ensure that the Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation (OPRHP) can comply with mandates to transition its facilities to renewable energy sources. This trajectory of reinvestment is vital for preserving the value and functionality of New York's parks for future generations.

This continued investment will deliver profound benefits statewide. New York's public lands are economic powerhouses, with every \$1 million invested yielding \$10 million in sales, \$4 million in labor income, and \$7 million in state GDP. Investments extend well-beyond the boundaries of our parks: they safeguard critical habitats, enhance community resilience, and improve quality of life for millions.

Increase Adventure NY Funding to \$100 Million

Adventure NY funding for the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) has remained at \$90 million annually for a decade. This funding has been effectively utilized to address critical capital needs, including rehabilitating campgrounds, upgrading trail systems, enhancing fishing and wildlife viewing access, and developing other recreational facilities across New York's public lands.

As the DEC places greater emphasis on accessibility and fostering inclusive outdoor experiences for all New Yorkers, *the time has come to expand the state's annual investment in Adventure NY to \$100 million*. This increase will help meet growing demand and support the

continued improvement of our shared natural spaces. We look to the legislature to recognize the increasing popularity of the DEC's sizable 5 million acres of land and accordingly allocate funds for the agency to meet its growing responsibilities as a key component of our state's commitment to safely welcome all New Yorkers to nature.

Conclusion

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide testimony. Parks & Trails New York looks forward to working with the Senate, the Assembly, and the Governor to boldly invest in the future of our public lands and help realize their full potential: making these spaces welcoming, inclusive, and accessible for all. Our vision is clear—foster vibrant communities that embrace and benefit from these shared treasures. Public lands are for everyone, and together, we can ensure they remain vital anchors of health, equity, economic development, and history for generations to come.