

Protect Their Future: New York's State Parks in Crisis

NOVEMBER 2010



ALLIANCE
FOR
NEW YORK STATE
PARKS

STATE PARK	STATE PARK	ARBORETUM STATE PARK	STATE PARK	STATE PARK	STATE PARK	
AND WILBUR STATE PARK	BIG SIX MILE CREEK MARINA	BLAUVELT STATE PARK	BONAVISTA STATE PARK GOLF COURSE	BOWMAN LAKE STATE PARK	BROOKHAVEN STATE PARK	BUCKHORN STATE P
CAMP HERO STATE PARK	CANANDAIGUA LAKE STATE MARINE PARK	CANOE-PICNIC POINT STATE PARK	CAPTREE STATE PARK	CAYUGA LAKE STATE PARK	CAUMSETT STATE HISTORIC PARK	
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DARIEN LAKES STATE PARK	DE VEAUX WOODS STATE PARK	DELTA LAKE STATE PARK	DEVIL'S HOLE STATE PARK	DEWOLF POINT STATE PARK	EARL W. BRYDGES ARTPARK STATE PARK	
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WATKINS GLEN	WELLESLEY ISLAND	WESTCOTT BEACH	WHETSTONE GULF	WHIRI POOL	WILDWOOD	

Introduction

This report is a joint publication of the Alliance for New York State Parks and Parks & Trails New York.

The Alliance is a new initiative founded in 2010 with the mission of protecting and enhancing New York’s state parks and historic sites for present and future generations. The Alliance advocates for New York’s state park system directly and by working to build an organized and effective constituency for parks. It also assists the system by securing public and private financial support. The Alliance is a program of the Open Space Institute.

Parks & Trails New York (PTNY) has been the state’s leading advocate for parks and trails for more than 25 years. PTNY’s influential report, *Parks at a Turning Point*, directed public attention to New York’s chronically underfunded state parks, inspiring a \$200 million park capital spending program in 2008 and 2009, while its subsequent report, *The NYS Park System: An Economic Asset to the Empire State*, documented the parks’ significant economic value to the state. In 2010, PTNY’s grassroots organizing campaign was instrumental in keeping all parks open in the face of severe proposed budget cuts.

The Alliance and PTNY applaud Governor-Elect Cuomo for supporting New York’s state parks in his policy paper *A Cleaner, Greener NY* (part of The New NY Agenda series). Citing the economic benefits of the state park system, Cuomo recognizes that state parks should remain open. We agree, and look forward to working with him, legislative leaders, and all New Yorkers to protect our great state parks and historic sites for the future.



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Opposite
Robert Moses State Park
John Boyd Thacher State Park

Executive Summary

New York's 178 state parks and 35 historic sites are priceless assets. Each year some 57 million visitors come to these places seeking recreation, exercise, cultural enrichment, access to nature, and affordable vacations. Upstate, our state parks are crucial economic engines – creating private sector jobs in tourism and the trades that service park facilities. Downstate parks enhance the quality of life for residents of densely populated communities. Across the state, parks are refuges for people and nature.

Long recognized as one of the finest in the nation, the state's park system is now in crisis. In spring 2010, for the first time in the system's 125-year history, New York closed state parks and was prepared to keep 88 parks and sites – 40 percent of the system – closed for the summer season. Other service reductions loomed. Never before in our state's history – through two world wars, the Great Depression, and numerous recessions and economic downturns – had New York closed parks.

The park closings turned into a call to action for all who love and support our state parks. New York residents, state and local officials, regional park commissioners, friends groups, and community and business leaders banded together in protest. The threat that parks would remain closed through the summer season became one of the most contentious issues of the 2010 legislative session and the symbol of "Albany dysfunction." Not until the day before Memorial Day weekend did the legislature and governor restore \$11 million in state funding to the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP), just enough to reopen the entire system.

Although the last-minute funding avoided the park closures, over the past three years OPRHP has absorbed a series of heavy budget cuts that have harmed the agency and threaten the future of our parks.

At the request of the State Council of Parks, in fall 2010, OPRHP prepared an analysis identifying the backlog of essential capital projects across the system: \$461 million for basic health and safety needs (drinking water, sewage treatment, electrical systems) and \$595 million for worn-out facilities needing rehabilitation (campgrounds, cabins, shelters, pools, bathhouses).

Three actions are needed to protect and revitalize New York's state parks.

1. Stop cutting and restore funding for park operations.

Over the past three years, OPRHP's operating budget has been cut from \$195 million in FY2008–09 to less than \$160 million for FY2010–11. This \$35 million cut amounts to an 18 percent reduction in the agency's annual budget and has caused the loss of more than 1,400 permanent and seasonal staff.

In addition, service reductions – shortened days and seasons of operations – have already been implemented at 100 state parks and historic sites. It is clear that any further budget reductions will result in park and site closures (and will do virtually nothing to ameliorate the state's fiscal situation).

The governor and legislature should make strategic increases to OPRHP's budget so that the agency can perform critical park functions.



Opposite
Letchworth State Park
Montauk Lighthouse
Montauk Point State Park

2. Increase capital funding for facilities.

In two anomalous years, 2008 and 2009, the governor and the legislature created the State Parks Capital Initiative, which allowed OPRHP to complete nearly \$200 million worth of essential park rehabilitation and improvement projects. In 2010, however, OPRHP's capital spending will fall to \$31 million – the smallest amount in the agency's 40-year history – against a documented capital backlog of more than \$1 billion.

The state should invest at least \$100 million annually – for a total of \$1 billion over the next decade – to restore the park system's deteriorated facilities and address pressing health and safety issues.

3. Secure parks' funding for the future.

To offset decades of insufficient budgets, OPRHP has aggressively increased its earned revenues from fees for parking, golf, and other activities, from \$35 million in 1994 to \$90 million in 2010. Over the past three years, as its overall budget declined by \$35 million, earned revenues have increased \$10 million, allowing OPRHP to avert more severe cuts to operations. Fees cannot be increased further without the risk of making the parks unaffordable for New Yorkers.

A new, dedicated funding mechanism is needed to adequately support the state park system. There are precedents in other states and cities that New York can look to. After studying the experience of these other jurisdictions, New York must develop the new funding mechanism best suited to its circumstances.

New York should establish a new, dedicated funding stream for the state park system.

Both the challenge and the opportunity are clear. New York must take back its rightful role as the nation's leader in providing outdoor recreation, access to nature, and cultural education. The Alliance for New York State Parks and Parks & Trails New York are committed to helping the state restore its leadership, and to engaging all New Yorkers – individuals, corporations, nonprofits – in the effort.

The Value of New York's Park System

Long before there was a National Park Service, New York recognized the need to protect its natural and cultural legacy and created state parks that are American treasures. Today, New York's state park system is among the finest in the nation. Our 178 state parks span the state's most scenic and iconic landscapes. For more than a century, places like Niagara Falls, Jones Beach, Bear Mountain, Letchworth, Saratoga Spa, Hudson Highlands, Riverbank, Bethpage, Allegany, Watkins Glen, Harriman, and Green Lakes state parks have awed, inspired, and welcomed New York residents and visitors from around the world.

Thirty-five state historic sites recall and interpret New York's leadership role in the nation's history and development, from Native American culture (highlighted at Ganondagan) to the state's pivotal roles in the Revolution, the War of 1812, and the opening of the continent via the Erie Canal. Our cultural history is celebrated at sites like Frederic Church's Olana in the Hudson Valley and Frank Lloyd Wright's Darwin Martin House in Buffalo.

The system is also emblematic of New York's leading role in the nation's conservation and historic preservation movements. Niagara Falls is America's oldest state park, created in 1885. Washington's Headquarters in Newburgh was the country's first publicly protected historic site. Our park system reflects the vision of national leaders from Theodore Roosevelt and Franklin Delano Roosevelt to Robert Moses and Nelson Rockefeller.

New York's state parks provide diverse recreational and educational opportunities to residents and visitors looking for nearby, affordable destinations to play, exercise, swim, camp, hike, explore, and relax. Each year, New York state parks welcome more than 57 million visitors. The summer of 2010 saw a 3.5 percent increase in park visitorship as people took close-to-home "staycations" and headed for New York's great outdoors.

Park landscapes also shelter a tremendous variety of natural resources. Some 43 percent of all rare species in New York State are found in state parks. Of those rare species, 20 are found only in our parks, and one, the Chittenango ovate amber snail, is found nowhere else in the world.

Our parks are not only natural and historic treasures; they are also good for the economy. They drive tourism – one of New York's strongest industries – and promote community development and economic well-being. An independent 2009 study commissioned by Parks & Trails New York revealed that spending in and around New York state parks has an estimated economic impact of \$1.9 billion annually and that the economic activity they generate contributes to 20,000 jobs statewide.



Opposite from top left clockwise
Bridal Falls,
Niagara Falls State Park
Robert H. Treman State Park
Minnewaska State Park Preserve
Watkins Glen State Park
Photo by Ron Rothman
Walkway Over The Hudson
State Historic Park
Photo by David Rocco
Allegany State Park
Red House Area
Waterson Point State Park
Minnewaska State
Park Reserve

The Effect of Operating Budget Cuts

Today, despite their importance, New York's state parks are in crisis. In spring 2010, for the first time in the park system's 125-year history, New York closed parks and was prepared to keep 88 state parks and historic sites – 40 percent of the system – closed for the summer season, among other service reductions. Although the closures were projected to generate only \$11 million in net budget savings, the governor argued that the action was necessary to address the state's fiscal challenges.

Never before in our state's history – through two world wars, the Great Depression, and numerous recessions and economic downturns – had New York closed parks. New York residents, state and local elected officials, and community and business leaders banded together in protest. The threat that parks would remain closed through the summer season became one of the most contentious issues of the 2010 legislative session and the symbol of "Albany dysfunction." Not until the day before Memorial Day weekend did the legislature and governor reach an agreement to restore just enough funding to OPRHP to reopen the entire system.

Although the last-minute restoration of \$11 million kept the parks open, OPRHP's persistent lack of resources harms the agency and threatens the future of our parks.

A column in need of repair at Saratoga Spa State Park



“At a time when many New York families are struggling due to the economic downturn, our State Parks provide affordable, close-to-home recreational and vacation opportunities.”

—Lucy Rockefeller Waletzky, M.D., Chair, New York State Council of Parks ¹

The current crisis is the acute phase of a problem that has been building for decades. In 1993, the Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government drew attention to the system's stretched resources in a report titled *Preserve & Protect: Challenges Facing New York's State Park System*. Thirteen years later, circumstances had not improved, as reported by Parks & Trails New York, whose *Parks at a Turning Point* raised the alarm that our park facilities and infrastructure were aging, deteriorating, and in some cases failing, posing risks to public health and safety and compromising the quality of park visitors' experiences.

Over the past three years, cuts have accelerated as New York State faced the worst economic downturn in at least a generation. In April 2008, OPRHP's annual operating budget was an already lean \$195 million. Over the prior 12 years, as a result of Governor Pataki's legacy of acquiring one million acres of open-space lands, the park system expanded by 25 percent, and 26 new state parks were created. However, OPRHP's operating budget declined over this period, and its staff and funding were spread from existing parks into newly opened facilities.

Then, from May 2008 through September 2010, OPRHP's operating budget was cut seven times. Its operating budget for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2011, is less than \$160 million – a cumulative cut of \$35 million, or 18 percent. The agency took steps to absorb the budget cuts:

- reducing operating hours and seasons at 100 state parks and historic sites;
- cancelling popular programs, such as the Jones Beach fireworks;
- cutting permanent and seasonal staff;
- eliminating the Green Thumb program, which employed financially disadvantaged senior citizens in the parks;
- eliminating the 2009 Empire State Games;
- cancelling the Americorps–Student Conservation Association contract;
- closing the State Park Police training academy, which graduates new officers, for three years;
- eliminating support for the heritage areas system; and
- eliminating purchases of maintenance equipment.

OPRHP's staffing levels tell a similar story. In April 2008, the agency had 2,271 permanent staff. Since then, it has lost nearly 400 employees, or 17 percent, including staff positions eliminated in the recent early retirement incentive program. Another 76 workers have been lost in the just-announced layoffs.

The loss of seasonal staff positions compounds the damage. Each year OPRHP hires seasonal workers – park assistants, lifeguards, maintenance and cleaning staff, campground staff, historic site guides – who are essential to running the park system. Since 2007, budget cuts have forced the agency to eliminate more than 1,000 seasonal staff positions. These cuts directly diminish the safety and quality of the public's experience.

Over the past two years OPRHP has lost more than 1,400 staff positions, permanent and seasonal (not counting recently announced layoffs).

¹From The State Council of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation 2009 Annual Report

Because 85 percent of OPRHP's budget is spent on the direct costs of operating the parks and historic sites, the \$35 million cut in operating budget and staff losses have had clear consequences:

Service Reductions

Shortened seasons, days, and hours of operation have been implemented at 100 state parks and historic sites. Beaches and pools are open for swimming on fewer days and for fewer hours. Campgrounds open later in the season and close earlier. Nature centers and historic sites offer fewer educational programs to school groups.

Deferred Maintenance

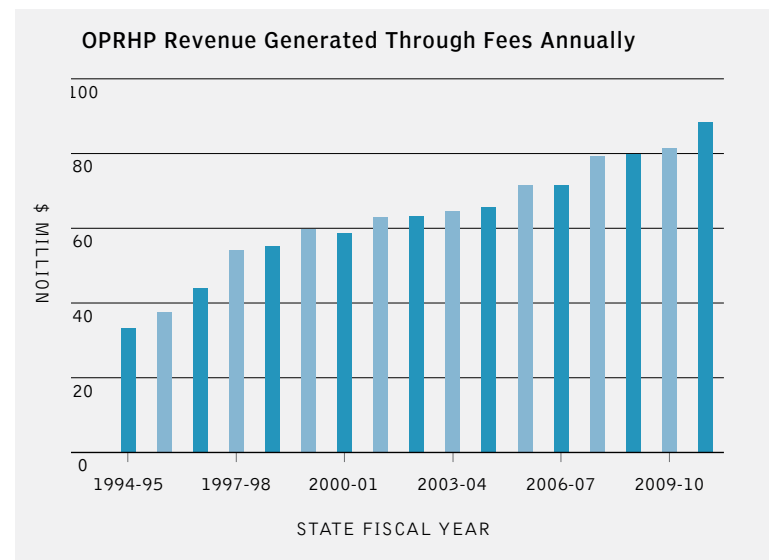
Fewer roof, electrical, plumbing, and building maintenance projects are being completed. Potholes in park roadways and parking areas go unfilled. Bathrooms, shower buildings, and park buildings are being cleaned less often.

Compromises in Public Safety

In 2003, OPRHP employed 590 park police officers during the summer operating season. As of September 2010, the police force numbered 254 officers – a decrease of 336, or 57 percent. The dramatic reduction in the park police force is jeopardizing the safety and security of the 57 million people who use the parks each year, particularly visitors at large events like the Jones Beach Airshow and fireworks, and concerts at the Saratoga Performing Arts Center and ArtPark.

Since the 1990s, by law, all revenues generated in the state parks and historic sites (entrance fees, golf fees, and the like) are retained by OPRHP. Over the past decade, the agency has aggressively increased these revenues, from \$35 million in 1994 to \$90 million in 2010. OPRHP has increased park user fees by an average of 25 percent over the past two years, raising \$10 million in new annual revenue. Fees have been raised in all park user categories, including charges for parking, camping, cabins, golf, marinas, and picnic shelters. Discounts for seniors and individuals with disabilities have been reduced. Further price increases will threaten affordability and depress park visitation. With park user fees now at "market rate," the agency will have difficulty raising additional revenue through fee increases.

OPRHP can no longer absorb budget cuts through administrative savings and additional service reductions. It is clear that any further budget reductions will result in park and historic site closures while doing little to ameliorate the state's fiscal situation.



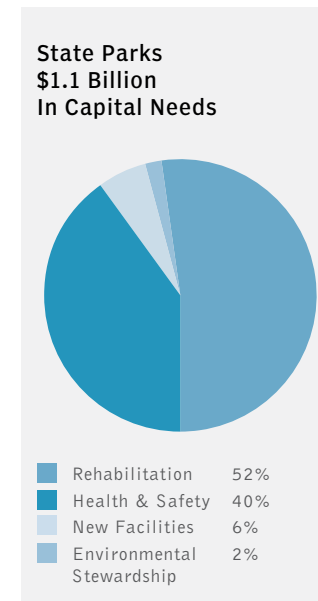
The Need for Capital Investment

The threat of park closures is only half of the crisis. The other half is that the New York State park system has aging, deteriorating, and failing facilities and infrastructure that pose risks to public health and safety and compromise the quality of park visitors' experiences.

Many parks have significant health and safety problems, such as outdated water supply systems, aging wastewater treatment plants that don't meet current standards, outdated electrical systems, landfills that were never closed to state standards, underground petroleum storage tanks that don't meet current regulations, and dams that have been placed on the state's high-hazard list.

Too many of our park buildings and facilities – visitor centers, recreational facilities, cabins, campgrounds, swimming pools, bathhouses, playgrounds, nature centers, boat launches, and historic buildings – are deteriorating. Major investments are needed to repair basic infrastructure, such as roofs, heating and plumbing systems, park offices, recreation fields, bathrooms, roads, parking areas, and maintenance centers.

At the request of the State Council of Parks (a panel consisting of the commissioners of State Parks and the Department of Environmental Conservation, the chair of the State Historic Preservation Board and the chairs of the regional state park commissions), OPRHP prepared an analysis identifying a backlog of essential capital rehabilitation needs across the 213 state parks and historic sites. It found \$461 million in basic health and safety needs and \$595 million in deteriorated and worn-out facilities needing rehabilitation. The backlog is listed in the appendix to this report, available at www.allNYSparks.org and www.ptny.org.



Peebles Island State Park



“Due to the nature of parks capital projects, the vast majority have been undertaken by small and mid-sized local construction firms, creating a greatly needed economic stimulus for construction contractors in local communities across the state.”

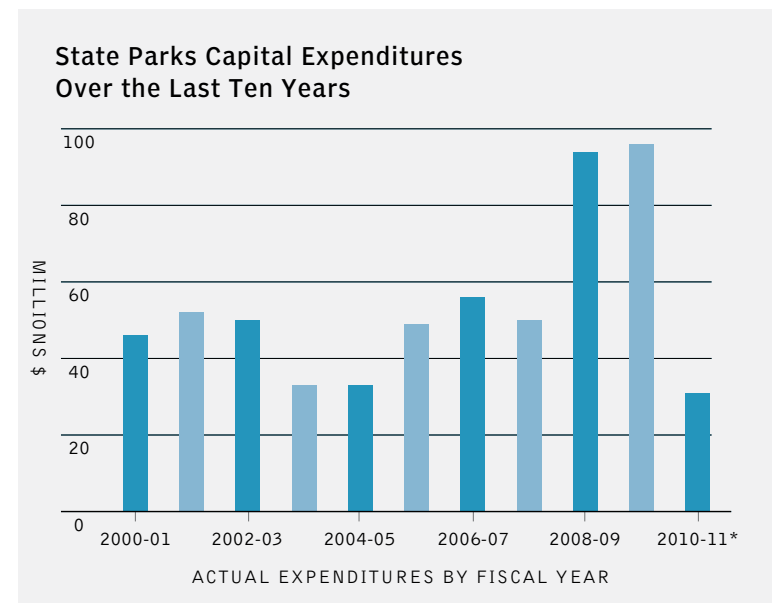
—Lucy Rockefeller Waletzky, M.D., Chair, New York State Council of Parks ²

The infrastructure problems have developed over several decades, the result of years of underinvestment in the system. In 1992, OPRHP’s capital budget was \$60 million. Fifteen years later, in 2007, capital spending was only \$50 million. Adjusting for inflation, OPRHP’s capital budget had declined by 50 percent over the 15-year period. This is particularly remarkable when contrasted against the situation in New York City, where the Bloomberg administration has increased its parks capital budget enormously and is in the midst of one of the greatest park restoration and expansion programs in the city’s history.

In two anomalous years, 2008 and 2009, the governor and legislature recognized the role that state parks play in New York and created the State Parks Capital Initiative, which provided nearly \$200 million for restoration and improvement projects. The initiative was intended to break the downward trend in park capital funding since 1990, and it enabled OPRHP to complete urgently needed capital construction projects in more than 100 parks and sites across the state, creating 1,500 private sector engineering and construction jobs along the way.

However, the state’s commitment to restoring our parks was short-lived. The FY2010–11 state budget again cut the state parks’ capital budget, constraining OPRHP to spend only \$31 million on capital projects. This is the smallest capital spending plan OPRHP has had in the 40 years since its creation in 1970. The \$31 million to be spent this year is insufficient to begin addressing the \$1 billion capital backlog. In fact, OPRHP is falling further behind.

Moreover, because its basic infrastructure is failing, OPRHP is unable to undertake new initiatives and position itself for the future. State parks and historic sites could be showcases of sustainability for their nearly 60 million visitors, for example, with green buildings and historic structures retrofitted for alternative energy sources, recycling and composting demonstrations, reduction in carbon footprint, environmental education centers, invasive species control, and habitat restoration. An extraordinary opportunity is being lost.



² From The State Council of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation 2009 Annual Report

Niagara Falls Reservation State Park

America’s oldest state park, Niagara Falls Reservation State Park, celebrated its 125th anniversary in 2010. Each year 8 million visitors come to marvel at the spectacular majesty of the falls, experience its awesome power via the Cave of the Winds and enjoy the pleasures of the “green side” of the falls and the Niagara River. New York’s Niagara offers visitors the chance to roam Goat Island and its Olmsted-designed landscapes, taking in both the Canadian and American falls.

Behind its world-renowned façade, however, lies more than \$80 million in needed overhauls. One item alone, the historic Goat Island Bridge, closed to all but foot traffic since 2004, needs to be rebuilt at an estimated cost of \$25 million. In that year a chunk of the bridge the size of a car fell into the Niagara River and a temporary bridge was built to hold up the structure. Since then what had been a welcoming attraction at the park has become a detraction.

Elsewhere in the park, water and sewer systems need to be upgraded, roofs repaired and visitor circulation improved. The subterranean elevator that shuttles visitors to the Cave of the Winds and the base of the falls needs to be replaced. Work is needed to restore historic overlooks and pathways.



Goat Island Bridge, Niagara Falls State Park

Jones Beach State Park

Jones Beach State Park is the most heavily visited beach on the East Coast, frequented by 6 million sun-and-sea seekers a year. One of Robert Moses’ first major public work projects, it is also among his most beautiful and pristine; arriving visitors are struck by its unbroken vista of sea, sand and dunes (thanks partly to Moses’ insistence on relocating the few residences that occupied the island prior to park development!). The Art Deco park facilities, including pools, the iconic water tower, and a beloved boardwalk helped define the vision for public beaches nationwide.

Jones Beach’s facilities are in need of more than \$65 million in rehabilitation. One of two bathhouses – with a large pool, locker rooms and welcoming facilities – needs \$7 million in work alone to allow it to be re-opened. Changing rooms, rest rooms and other visitor facilities at several of the park’s parking fields are in need of replacement and rehabilitation.

West Bathhouse, Jones Beach State Park



Recommendations

Three actions are needed to protect and revitalize New York's state parks:

1. Stop cutting and restore funding for park operations.

Over the past three years, OPRHP's operating budget has been cut by \$35 million, an 18 percent reduction, from \$195 million in FY2008-09 to \$160 million in FY2010-11.

As a result, the agency has lost more than 1,400 permanent and seasonal workers (before recently announced layoffs), and park operating budgets have been deeply cut. For the public, this means dirtier bathrooms, fewer cultural and educational programs, and less maintenance throughout the system. Service reductions – shortened hours, days, and seasons of operations – have been implemented at 100 state parks and historic sites.

OPRHP has already eliminated all nonessential expenditures; there is nothing else to cut. Further budget reductions will result in park and historic site closures and yet do virtually nothing to ameliorate the state's fiscal situation.

Restoring funding for the parks will enable OPRHP to fill vacancies in skilled park maintenance positions and establish a new Park Police training academy.

The governor and legislature should make strategic increases to OPRHP's budget so that the agency can perform critical park functions.

Victoria Pool at Saratoga Spa State Park



2. Increase capital funding for facilities.

The state's commitment to restoring our parks must be renewed. Without renewal, New York's parks are at risk of declining to a second-rate system. There are roles for the federal government, which should restore state funding under the Land and Water Conservation Fund to adequate levels, and private philanthropy, which affords opportunities to amplify public funding. Regardless, New York State must show leadership by renewing its investment in the state park system.

The state should invest at least \$100 million annually – for a total of \$1 billion over the next decade – to address the park system's deteriorated facilities and pressing health and safety issues.

From top left clockwise
Greenhouses at Caumsett State Historic Park
Schoharie Creek Aqueduct
Schoharie Crossing State Historic Site
Sunken Meadow State Park
Mills Mansion at
Staatsburgh State Historic Site



3. Secure parks' funding for the future.

New York has relied primarily on two mechanisms to fund OPRHP's operating and capital budgets: park revenues generated from user fees, and General Fund support from state taxes and revenues. Although self-generated revenues have increased, General Fund support for the park system has dramatically declined, wiping out potential gains. While New York must avoid further General Fund cuts to the parks budget, it is clear that an additional funding stream – a new dedicated funding mechanism – is needed to adequately fund the state park system.

There are dedicated funding models in place elsewhere. After studying the experience of other jurisdictions, New York must develop the new funding mechanism best suited to its circumstances. The future of state parks depends on it.

New York State should establish a new, dedicated funding stream for the state park system.

Both the challenge and the opportunity are clear. New York must take back its rightful role as the nation's leader in providing outdoor recreation, access to nature, and cultural education. The Alliance for New York State Parks and Parks & Trails New York are committed to helping the state restore its leadership, and to engaging all New Yorkers – individuals, corporations, nonprofits – in the effort.

Letchworth State Park



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