



No Turning Back

Restoring and Enhancing New York's State Park System

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I'm Robin Dropkin, Executive Director of Parks & Trails New York --a statewide parks and trails advocacy organization.

New York's system of state parks is an unmatched legacy from past generations. Though parks account for only about 1/5 of one percent of the total NYS budget, that small investment delivers major benefits to New Yorkers. The recreational opportunities parks afford are important to the health and well being of our citizens. The tourism and lifestyle assets they deliver are important to efforts to rebuild our state's economy, especially Upstate. Plus the priceless landscapes and ecosystems that parks preserve are **our** legacy to future generations.

Last November, after a year-long study which included field visits to 36 parks, Parks & Trails New York published a special report, *Parks at a Turning Point*. We found wonderful parks, and dedicated park staff, but also serious problems – visitor facilities that had been shut down because of safety or health problems, serious deterioration in buildings, parking lots and playing fields, and a general sense that our parks needed serious upgrading. And then of course there were the two dozen or so new park acquisitions that had not yet been opened to the public.

When we examined state park finances, we found that state support for the park system had been essentially flat for more than a decade. Also, the parks agency's capital budget had been growing even more slowly than its operating budget – just the opposite of what you would expect in a system that over the last decade has added 27 new parks.

Most parks still made for a pleasant visit but the system as a whole was clearly at a turning point, where further delays in making essential investments could do real damage to its long-term viability.

The 2007-2008 NYS budget increased support for state parks, with an 8 percent increase in General Fund support, a \$5 million increase in appropriation from the State Park Infrastructure Fund, and 52 new staff positions, for which we laud the Governor and the Legislature.

But still a crisis looms in the under-funding of capital improvements and repairs in our parks. At the time of our report, we estimated the need for a five-year capital plan of at least \$300 million.

Newspapers across the state endorsed this recommendation, and a number of papers did their own stories on parks in their regions, confirming our findings.

New analysis has found that the needs of our state park system are about double that – in the range of \$500 to \$750 million, with a significant amount needed for safety issues such as aging dams and outdated water and sewer systems that are not obvious to the casual park visitor.

We hope that last year's budget will be seen in the years ahead as a turning point – the time when New York began making the essential investments necessary to give our citizens the outdoor opportunities they have a right to expect, and to pass the system on in top shape for future generations.

Last year, the administration and Legislature took a great step forward to return New York's parks to preeminence as the best state park system in the nation. We cannot turn back now.

We look forward to working with the administration and the Legislature, as well as the NYS Council of Parks and park friends groups throughout the state, to restore and enhance our magnificent park system, and expand the state's network of greenways and trails to connect parks, open space and communities, so that our children and grandchildren can continue to experience the joys of the outdoors.

Thank you.