

## With State Parks at Risk, Advocates Seek New Funding Sources

by {ga=aschwartz}

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Photo by [Ruthanne Reid](#) After layoffs take effect Dec. 31, Riverbank State Park in Manhattan, the fourth most visited of New York's state parks, will lose all four of its rangers and see its hours significantly cut back.

When Gov. David Paterson threatened to [close](#) 88 state parks and historic sites last spring, he unleashed a torrent of public outrage. Legislators said they received more phone calls, letters, emails and petitions on parks than on any other issue.

The closings were [averted](#) when the Paterson administration agreed to restore \$11 million to the parks budget after legislators consented to slashing the [Environmental Protection Fund](#), which pays for land acquisition, recycling and other environmental needs. But the park system is still at risk.



Several parks upstate are already slated for closing after the latest [round of layoffs](#) that will go into effect Dec. 31.

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### [Riverbank State Park](#)

in Harlem is losing all four of its rangers, and hours are being significantly curtailed.

More than a decade of declining funding for the [Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation](#) has cut its operations to the bone. Further budget reductions will inevitably lead to more closed parks and hours reduced to the point that sites will not be open when people want to visit.

Advocates hope to build on the outpouring of grassroots support last spring to get new funding dedicated to the parks. With the state facing a huge budget gap -- and the new administration vowing not to raise taxes -- parks supporters are looking at new funding mechanisms that could help pay for parks, not just in this current crisis but for the long term.



In his [Cleaner, Greener NY](#) agenda released just before the election, Gov.-elect Andrew Cuomo recognized the importance of parks to the state's economy and environment, and pledged to "work to ensure that they stay open for the benefit of all New Yorkers." He did not, though, offer any specifics other than encouraging private-public partnerships and local community involvement. It remains to be seen whether Cuomo will find a way to put one of the nation's great park systems back on a solid footing.

### **125 Years of Parks**

When Paterson made closing the parks a symbol of the need for fiscal austerity during last year's budget negotiations, his message was "parks are a luxury we can't afford."

Judging from the impassioned response to the prospect of closings and a rise in [park attendance](#), the public has a different view. "Parks are one of the principal public interfaces of government, where people know they get their tax dollars back," said Eric Kulleseid, a former state parks official who now directs the Alliance for New York State Parks, a group recently launched to increase both public and private support for the parks.

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New York established the first state park in the nation, creating the [Niagara Reservation](#) in 1885 to protect the spectacular falls from encroaching industrialization and allow public access. The state park system now includes 178 parks and 35 historic sites. It provides every kind of outdoor recreation and preserves scenic landscapes, a diversity of plant and animal life and the state and nation's political and cultural history.

State parks are also a key component of New York's tourism industry. They attract 57 million visitors a year, bringing an annual economic boost of \$1.9 billion and generating 20,000 jobs (not including parks employees). A [2009 study](#) by the Political Economy Research Institute of the University of Massachusetts Amherst found that every dollar invested in state parks (both operating and capital) returns \$5 in economic benefits.

In many upstate areas hard hit by the economic downturn, parks are a lifeline.

"We're very short-sighted if we don't keep all of the parks open," said [Steve Engelbright](#), chair of the Assembly Committee on Tourism, Parks, Arts and Sports Development.

There are four state parks in New York City, including Riverbank State Park along the Hudson River, the fourth most visited park in the state. City residents also count on state parks for day trips to escape the summer heat and for affordable vacations. Some of the most popular parks in the system, such as [Jones Beach](#) and [Harriman](#), are within easy reach of the city.

### State of the State Parks

Like many other states, New York has not made its parks and historic sites a budget priority even in good times. In the decade leading up to the economic crisis, the operating budget of the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation steadily declined even as the system added 26 new parks.

Over the last three years, the agency took an even deeper hit. Even before the showdown over park closures last spring, repeated budget cuts had forced the agency to shorten the season and hours at 100 parks and historic sites. Since 2008, its operating budget was cut seven times, going from \$195 million to less than \$160 million in the current fiscal year -- an overall cut of 18

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percent that surpasses the reductions in other budget areas.

As a result, the parks agency staff dropped from 5,000 permanent and seasonal workers in 2008 to less than 3,600 in 2010, with additional positions cut as of January. The cuts strike directly at park maintenance and operation because 90 percent of the agency's staff works in the field.

Although last spring's budget deal restored the bare minimum of funding needed to reopen the parks for the summer, the most recent elimination of staff positions will result in the closing of some parks and facilities, and the reduction of maintenance and hours of operation at others, said Acting Commissioner Andy Beers in [testimony](#) at a joint hearing of the Assembly standing committees for Parks, Recreation, and Sports Development, and Oversight, Analysis, and Investigation.



Photo by [Sonja McAllister](#) On Jan. 1, the state will close Know Fram State ark near Buffalo.

As of Jan. 1, the state will shutter [Knox Farm State Park](#) outside Buffalo. Two other Buffalo-area parks, [State Park](#) and [Woodlawn Beach State Park](#), will also close unless an agreement is reached for local governments to operate them.

In addition to the reductions in services at Riverbank State Park, the cuts would eliminate the sole ranger at Roberto Clemente state park in the Bronx.

Beers said that several state historic sites that close for the winter probably will not open in 2011. The agency expects to reduce days and hours of operation, facility maintenance and upkeep, and interpretive programming at some locations, and close swimming pools, nature centers and campgrounds at others, but has not yet determined which sites will be affected.

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The agency also has a \$1 billion backlog of necessary repairs and infrastructure upgrades, according to its own 2010 analysis. Decades of deferred repairs to deteriorating bridges, roads and pools, and sewage, drinking water and electrical systems risk the public's health and safety and make parks less enjoyable to visit.

When parks are closed and minimally maintained, they become vulnerable to damage from neglect and vandalism. It endangers the public, creates liabilities for the state and puts the taxpayers' financial investment at risk. Getting bathrooms, buildings, pools, trails and other facilities back in usable condition would likely cost many times the amount saved by budget cuts.

### Searching for Solutions

Gearing up for the next legislative season, park advocates hope they can once again harness the enormous public support for state parks to prevent further cuts. To ensure the system's future viability, they would like to put in place a dedicated funding source for state parks.

In November, the Alliance for New York State Parks and [Parks & Trails New York](#), the statewide advocacy group that organized the opposition to park closings last year, issued a [report](#) calling for an end to cuts and restoration of funding for park operations, an increase in capital funding and a new dedicated mechanism to secure parks funding for the future.

"It's time to step back and think creatively about the ways to remedy the situation," said Robin Dropkin, executive director of Parks & Trails New York. "A new, dedicated funding mechanism for parks seems to us the best chance to adequately support our iconic state park system, for ourselves and future generations."

Advocates have been gathering ideas from other states in hopes of developing a funding mechanism that would work in New York. One model that bears looking at, they say, is a voluntary vehicle registration fee. Montana has a state parks fee of \$4 people pay when they register a vehicle. Drivers can waive the fee by filling out an additional form, but few choose to opt out. In October, Michigan began offering residents an optional \$10 annual ["recreation passport"](#) in addition to the vehicle registration fee. The passport gives free access to all state parks, recreation areas and boat launches.

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Washington, D.C. took another approach last January when it became the first place in the U.S. to establish a [plastic and paper shopping bag fee](#) . The nickel per bag fee raised \$1.1 million in the first half year toward efforts to clean up the Anacostia River and dramatically curtailed plastic bag use.

Engelbright said that he would like to see the new administration's budget presentation include supplementary revenue sources such as these. "If we did something like plastic grocery sacks at a penny apiece, and a motor vehicle registration fee and made them both declinable, it could bring in between \$60 and \$100 million a year," he said. "The interesting thing about the Montana model is, when they made it voluntary and kept the fee nominal, participation was somewhere north of 90 percent."

Another way to support the parks, Engelbright said, is by encouraging the creation of highly professional nonprofit organizations supporting individual state parks. He cited the conservancies and friends groups that turned around Central Park and other New York City parks neglected during the fiscal crisis of the 1970s. Cuomo placed a strong emphasis on this approach in his environmental agenda.

Encouraging park partnerships and raising private contributions is also one of the goals of the newly formed [Alliance for New York State Parks](#) , which itself operates as a public-private partnership under the auspices of the nonprofit [Open Space Institute](#)

Private funding can only go so far. It has become more controversial in New York City, where opponents charge that an increasing reliance on nonprofit park partners and private donations has led to reduced public access and oversight. But Kulleseid noted that the state park system always has had significant contributions from the private sector, going back to the early donations of property for parkland by prominent New York families.

Park supporters are heartened by the Cuomo campaign pledge to keep parks open. They are waiting to see what solutions he offers.

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"I'm hopeful that the new administration takes a look at the outcry that happened last year, understands that parks are an economic driver rather than a drain, and has a different approach," said former parks commissioner Carol Ash in a television [interview](#). Ash resigned as commissioner in October and now serves as an advisor to the alliance.

With the state facing years of continuing budget deficits and Cuomo determined not to raise taxes, the challenge is enormous. But in hard times, people need parks more than ever. And, as advocates point out, the state can't balance the budget with further cuts to an agency that represents just a tenth of a percent of the total budget.

"New York has one of the finest state park systems in the country," said Kulleseid. "What we do here is going to have implications everywhere."



Anne Schwartz, in charge of the parks topic page since its inception in 1999, is a journalist who specializes in environmental issues.