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Comments by Commissioner Carol Ash
FY2008-09 Parks Capital Funding Budget Hearing:
New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation
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Thank you for inviting me here today to discuss the challenges and opportunities facing New York's State Parks.

I am joined this morning by Andy Beers, our Executive Deputy Commissioner, Pete Finn, our Deputy Commissioner for Finance and Administration, and other members of our Executive Team.

The State Park system – is made up of 178 Parks and 35 Historic Sites. Our system of 325,000 acres of lands and waters – is widely recognized as one of the best in the nation. Our facilities host more than 55 million visitors annually. Among the fifty states, we rank first in the number of operating facilities, and, when campgrounds operated by DEC are included with ours, first in the total number of campsites. We are fifth in total acreage and third in total annual visitation.

Niagara Falls State Park's annual attendance of 7.8 million visitors is greater than that of Grand Canyon and Yosemite National Parks *combined*. And more than six million people visit Jones Beach each year—twice the number that visit Yellowstone. Niagara Falls, established in 1885, is the oldest state park in the nation, and Washington's Headquarters, established in 1850, is the first publicly-owned state historic site. The Bethpage Black was the first publicly-owned golf course to host the U.S. Open Golf Championship in 2002. The 109th United States Open Championship will return there in 2009.

New York's State Parks huge inventory of public recreational facilities include 5,000 buildings, 29 golf courses, 53 swimming pools, 76 beaches, 27 marinas, 40 boat launching sites, 18 nature centers, 817 cabins, 8,355 campsites, more than 1,350 miles of trails, 106 dams, 640 bridges, hundreds of miles of roads, and dozens of historic structures listed on the State and National Registers of Historic Places. Over the last twelve years, the State Parks system expanded by more than 25%, adding 66,000 acres and 26 new parks.

Since my confirmation as Commissioner in May, I've toured all eleven park regions, visiting more than 100 of our Parks and Historic Sites. A major theme has emerged from these visits: our State Parks face huge capital investment needs. Simply stated, the State Parks system is suffering from decades of underinvestment, with the result that our recreational facilities and infrastructure are in dire need of rehabilitation and replacement. Many parks have significant health and safety concerns that require immediate attention. Our park buildings and infrastructure are aging and deteriorating, diminishing the outdoor experience for those 55 million people who come to our parks every year. Furthermore, many of the agency's newest acquisitions lack basic amenities and recreational facilities that would allow the public to enjoy these new parks.

Last fall, a statewide parks advocacy group, Parks and Trails New York, issued an independent report entitled "Parks at a Turning Point: Restoring and Enhancing New York's State Park System." This report recognized New York's magnificent parks and historic sites, but highlighted urgent funding needs for the agency, both on the capital side and the operational side. The Parks and Trails report made several recommendations, most notably calling for a major new capital investment initiative. Since the release of that report, Newsday, the Albany Times Union, the Rochester Democrat & Chronicle, the Schenectady Gazette, the Watertown Times, and other publications have joined in calling for the revitalization of the State Parks.

As the new Parks Commissioner, my first priority has been to gain a comprehensive understanding of the size and scope of the agency's capital needs. Last February, I initiated a

statewide review, gathering detailed information on the most pressing capital improvement needs across our 213 State Parks and Historic Sites. **To date this assessment has identified more than 750 urgent critical capital projects with a total cost in the range of \$600 to \$650 million.** OPRHP's capital needs fall into four categories:

1. **Health and Safety Projects.** The State Parks face a number of health and safety issues. We have outdated drinking water systems that need to be replaced. We have aging sewage treatment systems that have exceeded their useful life. We have dams on the state's "high hazard" list that do not meet modern dam safety standards, and bridges that have been flagged as potential hazards. We have failing electrical systems and underground petroleum storage tanks that must be removed. And we have landfills that, although inactive for many years, were never closed to DEC standards.
2. **Rehabilitation of Existing Facilities.** This category is by far the largest, comprising approximately 65% of OPHRP's total identified capital needs. It encompasses capital rehabilitation of existing infrastructure in the Parks and Historic Sites – replacing facilities that have long exceeded their practical and operational effectiveness and are in various stages of disrepair, including roofs, heating and plumbing systems, contact stations, campgrounds, boat launches, picnic shelters, recreation fields, pools, swimming areas, visitor centers, bathrooms, roads, parking areas, hiking trails, and maintenance centers. It also includes a significant backlog of repair and maintenance needs for historic buildings and structures at our Historic Sites, as well as energy-efficiency investments in aging buildings.
3. **New Facilities Development.** This category captures capital investments needed to develop new facilities – primarily public use amenities at the 26 new State Parks. Many of these new parks consist of a sign, a car pull-off, and little else. Investments are needed to create entrance areas, parking areas, restrooms, trail systems, and picnic and swimming areas, to make these new acquisitions available to the public.

4. **Natural Resource Stewardship.** The State Parks’ natural resources – plants, wildlife, and ecosystems – face varied threats, such as pollution of lakes and rivers, impaired wetlands, invasive species, soil erosion, global warming, and sea level rise. We have identified a number of park-specific projects to restore habitats and ecosystems needed to assure that natural resources in the State Parks remain “unimpaired for future generations.”

In addition, two separate areas in which we are involved require significant capital investments. One is the need to continue the development of the major waterfront parks in New York City. These projects, which are partnerships between New York State and the City of New York, include the Hudson River Park, the Brooklyn Bridge Park, and Governor’s Island. Secondly, the capital needs described above do not include investments needed to maintain state campgrounds and recreational facilities in the Adirondack and Catskill Parks, which are under the jurisdiction of our sister agency, the Department of Environmental Conservation led by Commissioner Pete Grannis.

Certainly, over the past decade some capital improvements have been made in some of our parks and historic sites. New visitor centers have been built, bathhouses have been rehabilitated, utilities have been upgraded, water systems have been replaced. But clearly the agency has not had sufficient resources to meet the need.

In my travels across the state, I’ve seen many sobering things. I’ve seen bathrooms that don’t work and shower buildings I’d be embarrassed to take my family to. I’ve seen leaking roofs, crumbling foundations, and worn out facilities. I’ve seen a 52-year old swimming pool that we had to close and demolish because it was leaking 30,000 gallons of potable water a day. I’ve seen basketball courts made unusable by cracked asphalt, rusted backboards, and bent rims. I’ve seen water spigots in our campgrounds marked with signs reading “do not drink this water or use it to wash dishes.” I’ve seen badly eroded hiking trails and woodlands and marshes choked with invasive plants. I’ve seen asbestos tiles and insulation that must be removed from public spaces. I’ve seen the remains of historically-significant buildings that were demolished due to a lack of maintenance funds. I’ve seen

paved parking lots that have deteriorated to the point where we actually have to mow them, to prevent grass and weeds from igniting visitors' cars into flame. And I've seen cabins, that we charge the public a fee to use, that are literally held together with duct tape and spray-foam from a can.

Let me emphasize that these findings are not a criticism of State Parks staff. To the contrary, we are fortunate to have a highly dedicated, hard-working staff of 2,240 men and women – many of whom have dedicated their careers to the State Parks system. Within the resources provided to the agency, staff has done an admirable job of keeping our facilities open and available to the public. Our State Parks and Historic Sites remain beautiful places – accessible and affordable to all New Yorkers who want to enjoy nature, take a hike, pitch a tent, have a picnic, throw around a baseball, or learn about our history and environment.

But while the challenges facing the State Parks and Historic Sites systems have grown, our capital budget has not. Over the past 15 years, the size of our system expanded from 184 sites in 1992, to 213 today – an increase of 29 new facilities. The lands and waters under our stewardship went from 257,000 acres in 1992 to 326,000 acres today – an increase of 27%.

But over this same period, our capital budget was cut. Our actual capital expenditures in 1992 were \$60 million. This year, our capital expenditures from all sources will be \$40 million. Adjusted for inflation, our capital budget today buys 50% less than it did in 1992.

Let me reiterate this. Over the past 15 years the State Parks system expanded by 27%, including 29 new parks, and yet our capital budget, adjusted for inflation, has been reduced by half. The impact on the ground is obvious– we have underinvested in our State Parks and Historic Sites, and they are showing it.

Fortunately, OPRHP's current year budget, proposed last April by Governor Spitzer and enacted by the Legislature, was an important first step in reversing this trend. The budget restored 52 of the 250 staff positions lost for facility maintenance, park operations, and

natural resource stewardship, and increased the agency's capital budget by approximately \$5 million. These increases are greatly appreciated.

However, even with this year's increase, the agency's total available capital funding this year – including state funds, federal support, mitigation funds, and private contributions – is approximately \$40 million. Measured against the size of the need – a backlog of some \$650 million in urgent capital needs – \$40 million cannot begin to reverse the decline facing our State Parks and Historic Sites. Therefore, I intend to work with the Governor, Executive Chamber staff, the Division of Budget, and the Legislature to develop a comprehensive plan to revitalize New York's State Parks and Historic Sites. Key elements should include:

- A multi-year plan is needed to address the large backlog of capital projects facing our parks. This problem developed over several decades. It will require a sustained effort to solve, with a multi-year, dependable commitment of funds.
- The federal government must be a partner in this effort. Federal funding for State Parks projects has all but disappeared. This year, New York State's allocation from the primary source of federal parks funding – the Land & Water Conservation Fund – is only \$2 million. We must work closely with our Congressional delegation to increase funds allocated to New York from the LWCF and other federal programs.
- While New York State will be the primary source of capital funds, we should also increase our efforts to raise private contributions – from private individuals, foundations, Friends Groups, and the corporate world. New York's State Parks and Historic Sites have benefitted from more than a century of private philanthropic support. We need to continue this legacy.

I am fully aware of the difficult financial climate facing New York State. Nonetheless, I believe a major initiative to restore our Parks is a sound economic investment for New York State. Parks can and do make a major contribution to the Governor's efforts to revitalize local communities across the state. Numerous studies have shown that quality of

life and livable communities are a major driver in attracting and retaining businesses, large and small.

In addition, recreational and heritage tourism is a major component of our state's economy, particularly throughout upstate New York. In fact a survey undertaken this past summer indicates that nearly eighty percent of park visitors participate in dining, shopping and recreational activities outside the park during a park visit.

And, finally, investment in parks capital projects will create engineering and construction-related jobs across the state, many involving small businesses.

In closing, I want to underscore that New York has a magnificent State Parks system. The majesty of Niagara Falls, the dramatic cliffs of Bear Mountain, the windswept ocean shoreline at Jones Beach, the deep woods of Allegany State Park, the historic charm of Saratoga Spa, the sweeping vistas in Letchworth State Park – these are New York's defining landscapes.

But the fact remains that we haven't invested sufficient funds to maintain our parks. New Yorkers deserve more – they deserve nothing less than a commitment to return our State Parks to pre-eminence as the finest park system in the nation.

Thank you, and I'd be happy to answer any questions you may have.