# New York State announces cuts in public parks, historic sites

**William Moore**
**2 March 2010**

As part of New York State Governor David Paterson's proposed budget of over $130 billion for the coming fiscal year, the Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation (OPRHP) has announced plans for a large number of closures and service reductions in the state's extensive system of parks and historic sites. New York's state park system dates back 125 years, the oldest in the country, encompassing 178 parks and 35 historic sites.

New York State is facing a projected budget deficit of more than $8 billion in the coming year. The state was hit especially hard by the financial crisis because of its substantial dependence on revenues from Wall Street. While the big banks' profits and bonuses for their top executives have bounced back substantially due to the bailout from Washington, state revenues have not seen a commensurate rebound. Indeed, tax revenues are significantly down even from the scaled back estimates used for the current fiscal year, which is now expected to end with a $2 billion deficit.

According to the official announcement, "OPRHP's plan includes the closure of 41 parks and 14 historic sites, and service reductions at 23 parks and one historic site." Service reductions, including at such popular locations as Long Island's Jones Beach and Niagara Falls, on the Canadian border, will include such measures as eliminating educational programs, cutting back on maintenance, and reducing access to picnic and camping facilities. "The plan also assumes $4 million in park and historic site fee increases that will be identified at a later date, and the use of $5 million in funds from the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) to finance OPRHP operations." EPF is used to fund a variety of environmental projects and initiatives, which will, due to the transfer of funds, also be impacted.

As numerous opponents of this proposal have pointed out, it is especially important in difficult economic times that easily accessible and free or low-cost recreation and education facilities be available to masses of people who cannot afford the facilities available to the wealthy. Indeed, usage of the state park system has increased markedly since the beginning of the economic crisis. According to the Albany *Times Union*, "Last season, the park system had about 56 million visitors, an increase of almost 2 million that set an all-time record. Bookings at cabins and campsites also set records."

Among the proposed cuts will be the closure or reduction of hours at numerous swimming pools and beaches, which will have its greatest impact on children during the coming summer season. The closures and cuts will also have severe consequences for many local community economies which are heavily reliant on the tourism generated by the parks and historic sites. It is estimated, according to a 2009 report by the Political Economy Research Institute, that every dollar spent on the park system returns five dollars to the surrounding communities. Reduction of this revenue will have a substantial negative impact since much of rural New York State was already economically depressed before the current crisis.

Furthermore, the proposed cuts appear to have been devised with little consideration of the practical consequences and costs of closing or cutting expenditures at parks and historic sites. No details have been provided regarding how, for example, it will be possible to "close" (i.e. prevent access to) parks, some encompassing thousands of acres. Will existing facilities simply be allowed to deteriorate? What is to be done about the safety of those who may choose to

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venture into the parks despite the official closure? In addition, what will happen to historic buildings and the antique furnishings, artwork, and artifacts they contain? Will the climate controls simply be turned off, resulting in potentially irreparable damage to the buildings and collections?

The planned cuts will make only a modest contribution to deficit reduction, an estimated $6.3 million. Robin Dropkin, executive director of Parks & Trails New York, a statewide advocacy organization, told the Albany *Times Union*, "The minuscule savings from closing 57 parks—four-thousandths of 1 percent of the total state budget—is laughable and pales in comparison to the hardship parks closings will cause New Yorkers, both in spirit and in pocket." The OPRHP as a whole is facing a reduction of $20 million in the Governor Paterson's proposed budget. This would result in a total of 40 percent in cuts over the last three years according to OPRHP Commissioner Carol Ash. These cuts mean that the parks would be operating with more than a thousand fewer workers.

The New York State's park system was established as part of a broad trend in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The creation of various kinds of public open space, both in urban and rural settings, expressed the understanding of the more far-sighted sections of the bourgeoisie of the time that something had to be done to improve the living conditions of the working class in order to dampen class conflict. Known in the United States as the Progressive movement, it encompassed reforms aimed at improving health, and providing recreational and educational opportunities for those living in the squalor and misery created by rapid industrialization and extreme exploitation. A substantial portion of the funding and land used in the early development of the New York State park system came from Robber Baron families such as the Harrimans, Rockefellers, and Morgans.

The establishment of public parks during this period is exemplified by the work of the famous landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, the designer of Central Park in New York City, among many others. Public parks both in New York and elsewhere in the United States served the twin goals of environmental conservation and recreation.

No New York State parks were closed during the Great Depression. Indeed, both in New York and nationally, major projects were undertaken in the parks by such New Deal programs as the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) to provide jobs for the unemployed. A substantial part of the existing infrastructure in many parks across the country dates to the 1930s—infrastructure, it might be added, that in many cases is now desperately in need of repair and renovation. It is a telling indication of the decline of the United States that facilities for the masses of the population, such as national, state, and local parks are allowed to deteriorate and are even being closed.

OPRHP staff has been told that no layoffs are planned at this time. However, there will be a sharp reduction in hiring of temporary staff for the summer season, thus depriving many young people of summer jobs. In addition, it was announced that employees at closed facilities will be given the opportunity to transfer to other locations, but no specifics have been provided regarding how dislocated staff will be employed at those facilities which remain open, or what will happen to those workers for whom the next possible location is a substantial distance from their homes.

Governor Paterson has loudly announced his determination to make "painful decisions." Acknowledging, in effect, that the park and historic site closures and cuts are part of the overall attack on the working class, Paterson stated that, "In an environment when we have to cut funding to schools, hospitals, nursing homes and social services, no area of state spending, including parks and historic sites, could be exempt from reduction."

By contrast, the governor has repeatedly boasted that his administration has and will continue to do everything necessary to keep the banks happy and, thereby, avoid a downgrade of the state's credit rating.

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