



Campaign to preserve New Jersey's parks, natural areas, clean water, farmland, and historic treasures

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GOV. CHRISTIE BUDGET RECOGNIZES IMPORTANCE OF SAFEGUARDING ENVIRONMENT FOR HEALTH OF NEW JERSEY RESIDENTS AND BUSINESSES

TRENTON – Members of the Keep It Green Coalition (KIG) reacted favorably to Gov. Chris Christie’s proposed 2012 budget, which provides a modest increase in funds for the state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), calls for an increase in parks and forestry appropriations and continues funding for several programs charged with protecting the state’s natural resources.

When state budget figures were released Tuesday, it appeared that funding for the DEP was being cut by 9.8 percent. A cut of this size would have crippled DEP in its efforts to safeguard our natural resources. Due to the restructuring of the department’s debt service burden, which declined by nearly 90 percent, available funds for programs, staffing and operations actually would increase 5.3 percent, from \$329.2 million to \$346.9 million. No program or staffing cuts are proposed.

In addition, \$6.2 million in funding for the operations of the State’s parks and forests is being restored from the state’s general fund, assuring that all state parks will remain open. Many of the 54 state parks have been operating with critically low staff levels, which the Governor has proposed increasing to better serve the more than 17 million visitors who make use of these sites annually. Capital development projects required to improve facilities at state parks would be allocated \$2.6 million in Gov. Christie’s budget, helping to assure that visitors can use them safely and enjoyably.

“New Jersey’s parks and natural areas are a smart investment,” said **Tom Gilbert, KIG chairman**. “In these tough economic times, it is even more important for our citizens to have inexpensive places to recreate close to home, and parks provide that. Park improvement projects can also create jobs and help to revitalize struggling communities.”

Several sources of funding for environmental programs that in the past had been diverted to other purposes will be stabilized, restored or even increased in Gov. Christie’s budget.

While no longer contained in the DEP budget, Payments in Lieu of Taxes (PILOT), which were cut by one-third in last year’s budget, would see no further cuts this year and would continue to provide funds for towns where tax bases are reduced when land is preserved by the state or by conservation organizations. These open spaces support area land values and provide valuable long-term recreation and economic benefits to all citizens.

“The PILOT program has long served as an integral part of New Jersey’s overall commitment to preserving large expanses of open space in places like the Pinelands, Highlands and the coast,” said **Tim Dillingham, executive director of the American Littoral Society**.

Toms Wells, director of government relations for The Nature Conservancy, said that stabilization of funding for environmental protection was a move in the right direction. “In light of deep reductions over a period of many years in funding for DEP’s Division of Parks and Forestry, the proposed budget is a good first step,” he said. Stressing the need “to stabilize funding to protect and preserve New Jersey’s vast natural resources on which we all depend for clean water, clean air and outdoor recreation.”

The commitment to parks funding was well received, even while advocates pointed to continuing impacts from declining appropriations over the past two decades.

“We applaud the administration’s commitment to keep state parks open for the benefit of all resident of New Jersey,” **said Gilbert**. “However, the chronic lack of adequate funds to care for and maintain our parks and natural areas is severely undermining their ecological and recreational value. A long-term stable funding source is needed for the stewardship of these lands, so that we can do more than keep the gates open.”

The DEP would see a boost in funds from the corporate business tax, an increase of more than \$17 million in Gov. Christie’s budget plans. That would include the \$2.6 million earmarked for sorely needed capital improvements in the parks, which now encompass 422,000 acres. It would begin to address a large backlog of projects that have been deferred during periods of funding cutbacks.

“The financial resources dedicated to managing New Jersey’s state parks, state forests, historic sites and wildlife management areas have steadily declined over the past decade, yet public visitation to these areas has dramatically increased,” said **Bill Foelsch, co-chair of the public affairs committee for the New Jersey Recreation and Park Association**. “It’s a case of being ‘loved to death.’ We must find a way to commit new resources to providing the highest quality stewardship, safety and interpretive services for the crown jewels of the state.”

State parks and forests offer opportunities for outdoor recreation that has a beneficial impact on the state’s economy. Such activities as fishing, hunting, wildlife-watching, canoeing and hiking generate nearly \$4 billion annually with some of this amount coming from out-of-state visitors attracted to New Jersey’s treasured places.

“As outdoor recreation continues to be a growth industry in New Jersey, it makes both environmental and economic sense to support our public lands and access to them for New Jersey’s families,” **said Margaret O’Gorman, executive director of Conserve Wildlife**. “But, we must strive for a higher level of public investment in our parks and natural areas to better provide for great programs, safe places and robust ecosystems that support the visitor experience.”

In part, parks operations have been served by volunteer groups that have supplemented paid employees, According to **Edward Goodell, executive director of the New York-New Jersey Trail Conference**. “New Jersey’s elected officials have recognized that state parks are one of the best examples of well-managed, cost-efficient, public-private partnerships,” he said. “Park budgets have been trimmed to the bone and nonprofit groups, including the Trail Conference, subsidize operating and capital costs, saving the taxpayers millions. But volunteers can’t do it alone.”

KIG has long advocated for a stable, long-term source of funding that would provide reliable and adequate support to purchase, protect and maintain the parks, forests and watershed that provide priceless benefits to all citizens.

“We are pleased that this Administration is taking a step in the right direction with this budget. We are glad to see that, combined with fewer cuts to DEP, the Governor is moving steadily forward with the next round of funding for preservation of open space in response to the voter mandate of the 2009 Green Acres Bond Act,” said **Kelly Mooij, NJ Keep it Green Coalition Coordinator**. “These are lands that help to protect our water, conserve habitat, provide us with fresh, locally grown food and places to recreate. They are a vital part of what makes New Jersey attractive to residents and businesses and are an important part of the legacy we leave for our children and grandchildren.”