



Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation

KATHY HOCHUL
Governor

ERIK KULLESEID
Commissioner

MEMORANDUM

TO: Karen Persichilli Keogh, Secretary to the Governor
Elizabeth Fine, Counsel to the Governor

FROM: Erik Kulleseid, Commissioner

DATE: October 20, 2021

RE: OPRHP's Transparency Plan

INTRODUCTION

The Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (State Parks or OPRHP) is pleased to submit this proposed plan summarizing our review of current agency practices and detailing the efforts OPRHP will undertake in response to your call for greater transparency and accountability in New York State government. As the custodian and steward of 250 State Parks and Historic Sites, our statutory mission is to protect and enhance the natural, ecological, historic, cultural, and recreational resources of our state and to provide them for the public's enjoyment. OPRHP opens its doors to more than 78 million visitors every year, and to do so successfully requires agency staff to be actively engaged with the public every day. While OPRHP is continually focused on providing relevant and timely information to the public in its current practices, OPRHP identifies here additional actions that can be taken to move the agency toward greater transparency, and therefore accountability, moving forward.

I. REVIEW OF AGENCY'S CURRENT PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

- What information does the agency make available on its website and in social media?
- What are the information requests most commonly sought from the agency?
- What are the areas of greatest public interest in the agency's work?

State Parks utilizes several channels of communication with the public, and each method presents opportunities for increasing access to State Parks information. Agency compliance with the Public Officer's Law, and submission of data to publicly available databases also provide openings to improve communication and supply timely information for the public's use. Each existing means of public engagement used by OPRHP is described below and where applicable, OPRHP outlines new steps to be taken in the coming months.

A. Media Communications

i. OPRHP's Website

Visitors have a keen interest in obtaining information to learn how to best access and enjoy our parks, trails, campgrounds, swimming facilities, golf courses, historic sites and other recreational facilities. OPRHP seeks to provide regular and timely updates about these facilities through press releases, media events and digital content. The OPRHP website (parks.ny.gov) saw 12.2 million in sessions in 2020 and provides daily updates on events around the state. The drop-down menu on the homepage allows users to easily find parks, historic sites, camping opportunities, nature centers, golf courses and events, and one click from the OPRHP homepage users can locate our facilities by region, name or amenity. Review

of the most trafficked pages on OPRHP’s website mostly aligns with expectations, as Watkins Glen, Letchworth and Jones Beach are signature parks.

The top 10 traffic pages in order in 2020 were:

1. Parks Homepage	6. Bethpage Golf
2. Parks Search Page	7. Camping, campsites
3. Watkins Glen State Park	8. Jones Beach State Park
4. Covid 19 Info Page	9. Golf, main page
5. Letchworth State Park	10. Bear Mountain State Park

ii. Social Media

OPRHP also utilizes social media to communicate with the public through our main channels, @nystateparks across three different platforms. Below is a snapshot of 2020:

Facebook	Instagram	Twitter
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 105,352 followers • 23.4% follower increase from 2019 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 75,255 followers • 38.3% increase from 2019 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 26,200 followers • 20.1% increase from 2019

iii. Explorer App

In Summer 2020, State Parks launched the New York Parks Explorer App, a new mobile app for smart devices to provide visitors useful information about the destinations and activities available throughout our parks and historic sites. The free app provides quick access to park information, including directions, hours, amenities, fees and rates, trail maps, helpful know-before-you-go details, important updates and alerts, as well as direct links to online camping reservations. There have been more than 106,000 downloads to date, and improvements for the app are already in development this year.

State Parks will soon launch an update with a new mapping feature that includes offline maps for use when connectivity is a challenge, and live maps for use on Wi-Fi or with good connectivity.

iv. ParkConnect Newsletter

In 2012, OPRHP began publication of an electronic newsletter, *ParkConnect*, which is issued five to six times a year. The publication is used to highlight noteworthy improvements at our facilities, introduce our staff and provide an in-depth view of the state’s recreational and cultural resources. There have been 67 editions of ParkConnect since its inception, an archive of past issues can be accessed at: <https://parks.ny.gov/publications/>. There are currently 704,607 subscribers, and over 4.47 million impressions to date.

v. NYS Parks Blog

In 2014, OPRHP launched its NYS Parks Blog (Nature Times Blog), which offers weekly informational feature articles on Parks’ staff, projects, flora, fauna, and historical places and events. <https://nystateparks.blog/> Since inception, there have been more than 400 posts made to the blog, which can be accessed by the public at any time. Annual visitorship has been increasing, from 41,628 total visitors in 2017 to more than 140,000 visitors for 2021 through the end of the third quarter. Current cumulative views now stand at nearly 790,000.

vi. Language Access

Executive Order 26.1 was signed in March 2021, which requires state agencies to identify and translate vital documents in the ten most common non-English languages spoken by people with limited English proficiency in the State of New York. This is based on the most recent United States census data and was amended from a previous Executive Order that had only required six languages.

The following were identified as vital documents and translated accordingly:

- Acknowledgment of Risk and Release
- General Comment/Complaint Form
- Accessibility Policy
- Language Access Complaint Form

Our Language Access page was also updated to reflect the ten languages and include links to the online complaint portal. Executive Order 26.1 also required covered entities to adopt a Language Access Plan by August 1, 2021. The agency's Language Access Plan is available on our website, which reflects these changes as well: <https://parks.ny.gov/documents/inside-our-agency/PublicDocuments/GuidancePolicies/OPRHP2021LanguageAccessPlan.pdf>

Our language access breakdown for the reporting period from October 1, 2020 to September 30, 2021 follows:

Telephone Calls		
Language	Calls	Minutes
SPANISH	239	1405
MANDARIN	4	62
KOREAN	3	23
POLISH	2	20
PORTUGUESE	1	29
CANTONESE	1	7
FUZHOU	1	12

Document Translation	
Language	# of Documents
Spanish	23
Korean	5
Haitian Creole	3
Chinese	3

Yiddish	3
Arabic	3
Polish	3
Bengali	2
Russian	2
Japanese	1
French	1
Italian	1

vii. Increasing Transparency in Media Resources and Language Access

As resources allow, OPRHP will update and expand technology to improve the guest experience at state parks and historic sites. OPRHP’s review of existing website and media communications highlighted the need to continue our ongoing efforts to organize our website so that potential park visitors can quickly find information relevant to their visit. To this end, State Parks will refresh our most visited pages to improve organization and develop a schedule to ensure listed amenities remain current. Pages visited less frequently by the public will be identified, reorganized and relocated to improve navigation. OPRHP will follow through with enhancements to the Parks’ Explorer mobile App with events, online permits and wayfinding and update the popular virtual tours of at least 100 state run properties.

Language access presents another opportunity to improve agency communications. OPRHP is in compliance with the Executive Order 26.1 but there is room to expand on our translation services. OPRHP will in the coming year continue to identify additional documents for translation and will survey regional staff to identify other opportunities to provide signage and programming geared to visitors with limited English proficiency.

B. Publicly Available Databases

Beyond the day-to-day visitor information conveyed to the public through our website and social media, OPRHP also assessed our efforts to publish information through applications such as Open Data NY, Project Sunlight, and the Cultural Resources Information System.

i. Open Data NY

OPRHP has fully integrated Executive Order 95 compliance into our business practices and is actively engaged in identifying new datasets for public disclosure. OPRHP finalized and adopted a policy to implement EO 95 in 2020, and in accordance with this policy, OPRHP will annually survey agency leadership and bureau directors for additional datasets that may be posted. Currently, OPRHP has posted 23 datasets to Open Data NY, including National Register of Historic Places listings, park attendance data, concession contracts, swimming beach water testing results, and recreational facility mapping data.

The catalog of OPRHP datasets is available at: https://data.ny.gov/browse?Dataset-Information_Agency=Parks%2C+Recreation+and+Historic+Preservation%2C+Office+of&category=Recreation&utf8=%E2%9C%93.

ii. Cultural Resource Information System (CRIS)

CRIS is a GIS (Geographic Information System)–based web application that provides access to the historic property information maintained by the New York State Division for Historic Preservation, also known as the New York State Historic Preservation Office. The system includes digital images of more than 2 million pages of National Register documents, building and archaeological inventory forms, survey reports, over 6,300 National Register nominations, and a wide variety of additional legacy data. Most of these records are also depicted on maps throughout the system, allowing one to browse through historic properties anywhere in New York State.

In addition to providing a repository for information about historic properties and archaeological resources, CRIS serves as an interactive portal for agencies, municipalities, and others who use historic preservation programs such as the State and Federal Income Tax Credits for Historic Properties, the New York State Register and National Register of Historic Places, the Section 14.09 (New York State Historic Preservation Act) and Section 106 (National Historic Preservation Act) environmental review processes, the Certified Local Government Program, and building and archaeological survey initiatives.

iii. Project Sunlight

As required by the Public Integrity Reform Act of 2011, state agencies must disclose certain contacts with outside entities that concern one of five subject areas (procurement, rate making, regulatory matters, agency-based judicial or quasi-judicial proceedings, adoption or repeal of a rule or regulation). The categories of contacts most relevant to OPRHP’s operations are procurement and rulemaking, as the Office does not engage in rate making or routinely hold judicial or quasi-judicial proceedings.

OPRHP generally considers all designated policymakers to qualify as covered individuals under Project Sunlight, though far fewer staff are directly involved in the procurement process or advise on the procurement process, and even fewer have signing authority for procurements and rulemakings. A review of the Project Sunlight database shows a limited number of entries for OPRHP in the last few years, suggesting staff would benefit from additional training on contacts that should be reported in the database.

iv. Increasing Transparency in Public Databases

As noted above, OPRHP has made EO 95 compliance a part of the agency’s business practices and as provided in the agency’s adopted policy, surveys are conducted to identify high-quality data appropriate for inclusion in the state’s database. This year, OPRHP identified three additional datasets during our annual survey and plan to supply data on solar power generating facilities within parks and historic sites, statistics on boating accidents, and snowmobiling accidents to Open Data NY. The expected time frame to supply the data will be the end of calendar year 2021.

For Project Sunlight, OPRHP’s plan to increase use of the database begins with outreach and training of covered individuals. All covered individuals are required to sign an affirmation attesting to completion of the training and OPRHP intends to offer additional training opportunities in early 2021. OPRHP’s goal is to complete all training of covered individuals and receive all attestations by the end of the fiscal year.

C. FOIL and the Open Meetings Law

Like most public entities, the Freedom of Information Law is the most common route for the public to gain direct access to agency records, apart from what is published on the agency’s website. OPRHP receives approximately 600 to 700 FOIL requests each year, and a review of FOIL requests received in the past year indicates that accident or incident reports are a frequently sought record as well as copies of invoices and procurement related documents. While these records are transactional and do not warrant proactive publication, OPRHP will do an annual review of FOIL requests to identify whether any particular records could be proactively released.

As to the agency's FOIL response times, the vast majority of FOILs are timely processed. However, our review indicated that responses to requests for accident reports can be delayed because requesters are not aware that identification is needed in order to receive unredacted copies of records. While the fact that an accident occurred on park property is not protected information, identifying details of the persons involved in the accident may be redacted if the request is made by an unauthorized recipient. To facilitate the agency's response to these types of requests, the Office plans to update the instructions on its webpage, paying particular attention to ways to highlight this requirement to our users.

The agency also plans to update the Subject Matter List posted on the OPRHP website to further define the types of records which are publicly available. Although contracts, leases and licenses are already listed, a more specific breakdown of the types of entities that contracts or partners with OPRHP will be added to the list.

Finally, OPRHP reviewed its compliance with the Open Meetings Law (OML). There are three entities associated with OPRHP subject to the OML, specifically, the Natural Heritage Trust, the State Council of Parks, and the State Review Board for Historic Preservation. Currently, OPRHP posts all meeting information on the agency's website under "Public Meeting Notices" at <https://parks.ny.gov/newsroom/meeting-notice/>, irrespective of whether the meeting entity qualifies as a public body under the OML. Meeting materials are also posted in advance to the extent possible and OPRHP will meet the requirements of Chapter 481 of the Laws of 2021, which was very recently signed into law.

D. Agency Policies and Guidance

Among the resources available on OPRHP's website is a reading room containing all public-facing OPRHP guidance and policy documents. These documents, which can be found at: <https://parks.ny.gov/inside-our-agency/public-documents.aspx>, cover a wide range of topics from the agency's accessibility policy to our vendor responsibility review process. Agency leadership, including the Office of Internal Audit, regularly reviews existing guidance documents to ensure published policies are consistent with agency practices. However, a review of the agency's public documents page underscored that one of the more commonly used forms by the agency, the use permit application, is not published. Use permits are issued for temporary access to OPRHP facilities. Currently, the website directs the public to reach out to regional offices for a permit application, as many permit applications are tailored to specific uses in each region. Given the frequency of permitting across the state, standardizing and publishing this form on OPRHP's website will benefit both the public and agency staff.

E. Community Engagement

OPRHP regularly encourages public participation in the planning efforts for its facilities through the master planning process, or public input sessions for major capital projects. The master planning process establishes long term direction and implementation strategies for individual parks and historic sites. The process reaches beyond the physical development of our facilities to create an overarching vision: including land use practices, resource management and interpretation, operations, boundary protection, programs and services. Since public input is vital to the process, State Parks engages the general public, local government officials, friends groups, user groups and other interested parties about their thoughts through public meetings and comment solicitation.

Additionally, OPRHP engages with the public to develop several statewide plans including the New York State Historic Preservation Plan (SHPP), which is currently out for public comment. The SHPP helps guide preservation efforts at the local, regional, and state levels and serves as a blueprint for identifying and preserving New York's historic and cultural resources and is updated every five years. Other statewide plans adopted by OPRHP include the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan, and the Statewide Greenway Trails Plan. The Statewide Greenway Trails Plan, adopted in April 2021, identifies trail user types, addresses trail trends and issues, and discusses the benefits of trails.

Whether it's the development of master plans for specific regions or statewide plans, OPRHP will continue to actively engage the public in plan development.

II. Proposed Plan to Expand Transparency and Expected Timeline

- What is the timeline for implementation of those plans?
- What resources will you use to implement your plan?

For each category of public engagement described above, OPRHP identified improvements to our communications and systems to increase transparency in our operations. For ease of reference, those improvements are repeated here along with a more specific timeframe for implementation.

- Media Communications
 - Identify web pages that need to be refreshed; March 2022
 - Issue update to Parks Explorer App; Spring 2022
 - Create workplan for updates to virtual tours; April 2022
- Public Databases
 - Supply datasets for solar facilities, boating and snowmobile accidents to Open Data NY; December 2021
 - Project Sunlight training for administrative staff and covered individuals; March 2022
- Public Officer's Law
 - Update instructions for accident/incident reports; December 2021
 - Posting materials at least 24 hours in advance of any public meeting; Beginning November 19, 2021
 - Update Subject Matter List; January 2022.
- Publications
 - Standardize use permit form across regions and upload to website; June 2022

III. Measures of Success and Long-term Monitoring

OPRHP will monitor staff tasked with implementing this plan on a monthly basis until the milestones are completed. The transparency steps outlined above cover actions that will be taken in the next calendar year. For longer term projects, like the updates planned for OPRHP's website, staff will monitor progress on an annual basis and will update the transparency plan as needed.