



**New York State Office of Parks,
Recreation and Historic Preservation**

The Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller Empire State Plaza • Agency Building 1, Albany, New York 12238
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Andrew M. Cuomo
Governor

Rose Harvey
Commissioner

AGENCY DECISION

AND

STATEMENT OF FINDINGS

**Adoption of Final Master Plan & Final Environmental Impact Statement for John
Boyd Thacher State Park**

Designation of a Bird Conservation Area

Designation of a Natural Heritage Area

The New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation has prepared a Final Master Plan and Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS), dated November 13, 2013 for John Boyd Thacher State Park (including the former Thompson's Lake State Park) located in the Towns of Berne, Guilderland, New Scotland and Knox in Albany County, NY.

By the authority vested in me in State Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation Law, I do hereby adopt the Final Master Plan and FEIS for John Boyd Thacher State Park. I also designate the entire park as a Bird Conservation Area. A portion of the park, as detailed in the Master Plan, is also designated a Natural Heritage Area.

This decision is based on the Findings Statement and the content of the Final Master Plan and FEIS, which have been prepared according to the provisions of Part 617, the regulations implementing Article 8 of Environmental Conservation Law - the State Environmental Quality Review Act.

Rose Harvey
Commissioner
NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation

Date

SEQR FINDINGS STATEMENT

John Boyd Thacher State Park

Final Master Plan and Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS)

December 4, 2013

Pursuant to Article 8 (State Environmental Quality Review Act – SEQR) of the Environmental Conservation Law and 6 NYCRR Part 617, the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP) as lead agency, has prepared this Findings Statement. These findings consider the relevant environmental impacts, facts and conclusions disclosed in the FEIS; weigh and balance relevant environmental impacts with social, economic and other considerations and provide a rationale for the agency's decision.

Title of the Action:

Adoption and Implementation of a Final Master Plan for John Boyd Thacher State Park (including the Campground at Thompson's Lake.)

Location:

John Boyd Thacher State Park and the campground are located on the Helderberg escarpment on NY 157. Portions of the park are in the Towns of Berne, Guilderland, New Scotland and Knox in Albany County, NY.

Description of the Action:

The Final Master Plan for John Boyd Thacher State Park (available at <http://nysparks.com/inside-our-agency/master-plans.aspx>) provides long term guidance for the development and management of the park and protection of its resources as summarized below.

Date of Completion of the FEIS: November 13, 2013

Findings:

1. The Final Master Plan was subject to a complete Environmental Impact Statement process including several public information meetings and workshops, and a public hearing.
2. Chapter 5 of the FEIS contains the agency's responses to comments received on the Draft Plan and Draft EIS. This chapter also includes clarification of issues raised during the review of the Draft Plan and DEIS and provides information on modifications to the Final Master Plan and FEIS as a result of comments received.
3. Several comment letters were received during the Final Plan/FEIS consideration period regarding the lack of information or analysis of hunting in the Master Plan. Response letters were sent to the commenters clarifying that the new Master Plan for the park accommodates a wide variety of recreational activities, including hunting. The Master Plan mentions hunting briefly but does not propose any changes to the existing protocols for hunting in the park. Page 28 of the FEIS indicates that hunting with a state license and a park permit is allowed in the northern section of the park at certain times of the year corresponding to DEC hunting seasons. Page 33 under "permits" says the park issues annual Hunting Permits and allows hunting in the Northern

Trail zone of the park. Hunting permits coincide with the hunting season for wildlife management unit 4H with the exception that spring hunting is not allowed which effectively ends the hunting season on March 31st. About 100 hunting permits are issued annually. It is not anticipated that the new proposed mountain bike skills area proposed in the northern trail zone will adversely affect hunting opportunities as there is already considerable trail activity in this area of the park. However, the final master plan (page 55) also indicates that the Carrick Road trailhead is a possible location for this skills area and that park staff will be working with mountain biking groups to further assess this location. Potential impacts to hunting will be considered during that evaluation. State Parks does recognize the important contribution of fishing and hunting to tourism and the economy. The Agency is currently working with DEC and the State Fish and Wildlife Management Board to increase hunting opportunities on State Park lands. As additional opportunities are identified, these can be advanced on a site by site basis through normal park administration without the need to address changes in the context of a master plan.

4. Additional comments were received during the Final Plan and FEIS consideration period concerning Cross-Country skiing and Ice climbing. Letters were sent to the commenters indicating how their comments had been addressed within the master plan and EIS documents.
5. John Boyd Thacher State Park and the camping area formerly known as Thompson's Lake State Park are managed as a complex. Together they encompass 2,452 acres along the Helderberg Escarpment in Albany County. Additional information on the park may be found in the Master Plan and FEIS documents on the OPRHP website page provided above.
6. The vision for the park complex identified in the Master Plan is that John Boyd Thacher State Park and Thompson's Lake State Parks will merge into one cohesive park, providing a wide range of complimentary recreational amenities including hiking, swimming, climbing, camping, picnicking and educational programming. The Park will also grow as a well-known and appealing destination for exploration, protection, interpretation and education of the public about the geologic, natural, scenic and historic resources of the Helderberg Escarpment.
7. The plan presents a series of "preferred alternatives" for future development and operation of John Boyd Thacher State Park. Status quo alternatives were also evaluated for each element of the plan as well as other feasible alternatives. The various preferred alternatives were combined to create a single preferred alternative that best met the long-term vision for the rehabilitation and enhancement of public use facilities and the protection and preservation of cultural and natural resources. This alternative represents the Final Master Plan.
8. The Final Master Plan considers the historic, cultural, natural and recreational resources of the parks and responds to the needs and safety of park patrons, protection of natural, cultural and scenic resources and the principles of sustainability. It also details designations, recreation and stewardship elements. The plan also prioritizes implementation actions and recognizes that implementation will be dependent on the level of public and private funding available to OPRHP in future years.
9. Several criteria for recognition of Natural Heritage Areas (NHAs) are met in portions of the park. Most prominent is the statewide significance of the Calcareous Cliff community along the escarpment. The Master Plan will designate an NHA that includes the calcareous cliff community, the cliff face and all areas at the bottom of the cliff that are within the Park boundary. This designation provides additional recognition of this important natural community within the park.
10. Portions of both John Boyd Thacher State Park and the campground at Thompson's Lake had previously been designated Bird Conservation Areas (BCAs) under Environmental Conservation Law Section 11-2001 which authorizes the designation of BCAs in order to integrate bird conservation into agency planning and management. Under the Master Plan the BCA boundary will be expanded to include the entire park, including the developed areas. This strategy more closely illustrates the importance of the entire park for bird habitat. The designation provides recognition on a statewide level relative to other state parks and sites. The BCA designation itself does not preclude existing or future

recreation uses or park operations. The Management Guidance Summary provides guidelines for management of various areas in the park for bird habitat.

11. The Final Master Plan includes the development of a comprehensive invasive species management plan and continuing to follow the recommendations of agency staff and biologists to control existing invasive species and for early detection and rapid response to new invasive species occurrences in the park.
12. The plan calls for the following improvements to recreation resources:
 - The central area of the park, which once accommodated a public swimming pool and bathhouse which were removed in 2010 due to deterioration and underutilization, will be redesigned to include the following new recreation: A new “challenge course” type recreation area including publically accessible challenge elements at the former pool site; development of the grassy open area for passive recreation including walkways, picnic areas, relaxing and events; and a new basketball court on the site of the current makeshift court in the Pear Orchard picnic area.
 - Rock climbing will be opened at the park in selected areas. The activity will be by permit and will be managed by the park in cooperation with a local not-for-profit rock climbing group. Details of the activity, including specific areas open to climbing will be developed as part of a Climbing Management Plan. Areas to be considered for climbing will be assessed for endangered species, accessibility and rock face stability. Ice climbing will also be assessed as a part of the Climbing Management Plan.
 - The plan also includes soliciting proposals from concessionaires to develop a high ropes adventure course in the park. Areas being considered for this proposal are Yellow Rocks, Greenhouse and Hop Field picnic areas.
 - The Glen Doone picnic area will be redesigned to improve the visitor experience including: rehabbing the existing comfort station and constructing a new comfort station near the upper parking area used by most patrons; rehabbing the concession stand; rehabbing the patio area and building a roof over the lower patio level; leaving the lawn area for placement of rental tents; selective vegetation removal to improve views; removal of the lower parking area and road when it becomes deteriorated and construction of a new playground near the upper parking area.
 - The Final Master Plan also calls for major trail improvements including: realign/reroute several trails; reroute or upgrade trails for sections of trails that are often wet, muddy or eroded and replacement of some sections of trails on old roadbeds with sustainably built single-track trails; designate specific uses for each trail; close and restore various connector and remnant trails; develop the Tory Cave Trail to the north of the Indian Ladder Trail; Develop the Hailes Cave Trail providing visual access to the cave opening; Extend the Escarpment Trail southeast along the top of the escarpment to Greenhouse picnic area; develop a 4.6 mile bike path connecting Thacher and Thompson’s Lake campground along mostly existing trails; enhance access to park resources along trails such as scenic vistas, the escarpment, wetland and other water resources; improve accessibility of the trail system; enhance trailhead and intersection signage along trails and directional signage along roadways; enhance interpretation throughout the trail system; explore external trail connections with adjoining landowners; expand partnerships with local organizations and user groups for development, maintenance and monitoring of the trail system.
 - A new mountain biking skills park will be designed and installed that will provide technical facilities that pose challenges in a graduated level of difficulty and a series of looped trails where riders can practice their skills. The proposed location for this skills park is in the northern area of the park near the Carrick Road Trailhead. The development of looped trails with features will utilize sections of existing trails in the vicinity.
 - Because of potential damage to existing trails and resources, funds needed to upgrade trail surfaces and lack of local demand, there will be no designated equestrian trails in the park.

- The plan will allow authorized representatives of the Northeastern Cave Conservancy, Inc. (NCC) to locate and map the caves in the park. Once caves are mapped a management plan will be developed to formalize strategies for permitting guided cave exploration. This plan will include seasonal restrictions for protection of hibernating bats. Hailes Cave will be gated with an approved bat gate that will allow bats to fly in and out but will prevent human access except in special circumstances. The cave management plan will also include protocols to protect bats from the spread of White Nose Syndrome by visitors to the caves.
- Snowmobiling will continue to be allowed along the main north-south corridor from Paint Mine to the trail south of Beaver Dam Road and north from Paint Maine to connect to northern Thacher.
- A new camping loop will be constructed north of the existing camp loops at the Thompson's Lake campground. The camp sites will be smaller than standard campsites and designed primarily for tent camping. Selected sites in the "A" loop will be provided with electric hookups.
- The sandy beach area at Thompson's Lake will be expanded to the north to approximately the drainage ditch at the property line. This will add about 1350 square feet of beach area to reduce crowding during peak times.

13. The plan includes the following improvements and changes:

- Merge John Boyd Thacher and Thompson's Lake State Parks.
- Build a new visitor center/park office/park museum to include a welcome/information center, a multi-function meeting room, outdoor classroom, geological historical and other exhibits, gift shop, connections to the trail system, fireplace for winter warming, four season enclosed rental space with kitchen facilities, restrooms also accessible from the outside and park office. This building will be located near the Indian Ladder Trail to take advantage of the view from the escarpment while minimizing visual impacts to the view of the escarpment from outside the park.
- Parking area improvements will include: removal and restoration of unused parking lots including upper Paint Mine, Minelot, and Stone lot; reconfiguration of the Hailes Cave parking area; rehabilitation of the Meadow parking lot.
- Construction of a new pavilion at the nature center to provide more outdoor education space.
- Construction of a new pole barn at the Thompson's Lake maintenance area
- Replacement of the comfort stations in the park with newly designed, ADA accessible comfort stations and transitioning from the central wastewater treatment plant to individual septic systems at the comfort station locations.
- Continued installation of uniform signage throughout the park.
- Reduction of pedestrian/bicycle/vehicular conflicts through collaboration with DOT on the installation of traffic calming devices on the road through the park.
- Removal of unused structures including the old manager's house and garage, the small building near the former pool area, the barn and horse shed across from the rental house, and the upper Paint Mine comfort station.

14. The Master Plan recognizes that implementation of all of the actions will require substantial investment of state funds, along with additional funding from other public and private sources. The implementation of the Master Plan is divided into three priority phases. The initiation and completion of these priority phases will depend upon funding and demand and will be balanced with the need to make ongoing capital improvements to maintain and rehabilitate the park's roads, bridges, utilities, buildings and infrastructure.

15. The following environmental impacts and mitigation measures associated with the implementation of the plan were identified in the FEIS as follows:

- The plan will result in some physical change and disturbance to land where new construction is proposed, such as the new comfort stations with septic systems, new visitor center, basketball court, adventure courses, camper registration building, and new campsites. However, the plan also calls for the removal and restoration of several trails, parking areas, roads and unused buildings. The overall net new developed area in the park is thus only about ½ acre. Most of the new facilities will be in areas that are already developed or lawn and the amount of grading necessary will be minimized. Some new projects will be constructed in areas with soil or slope limitations for development, and in these cases special considerations will be provided in their design to minimize impacts. All projects which involve ground disturbance, whether new or within an existing developed area, will minimize sedimentation and erosion impacts through the use of Best Management Practices.
- The Master Plan implementation is expected to have minimal impact to water resources. None of the projects in the Master Plan will result in adverse impacts to Thompson's Lake, the small pond or any of the streams in the park. Best Management Practices for erosion and sediment control will be used to reduce impacts to water quality during construction and a Stormwater SPDES general permit will be obtained for any projects disturbing more than one acre. There will be some beneficial impacts in that the Agency will work closely with DEC and the Thompson's Lake Association on aquatic invasive plant control in the lake through signage, aquatic weed disposal stations and other methods as necessary. There will be an increase in impervious surfaces at the park by approximately 1.53 acres as a result of new master plan improvements including the surface area of buildings with impervious roofs and new camping loop pads and road. Permeable materials will be used whenever practicable especially for parking areas and roads that do not need to be plowed in winter (e.g. campground roads). New roads and parking areas will have drainage infrastructure designed to mitigate stormwater runoff. The new visitor center will have rain gardens installed to help reduce direct runoff. During field layout of new trails stream crossings will be minimized to the extent possible and retain a buffer between trails and water bodies. Trails near wetlands will be relocated to reduce impacts.
- Impacts to air quality are expected to be minor due to some increase in the number of vehicles travelling to the new visitor center and a small increase in smoke from campfires in the new camping loop.
- The expansion of the Bird Conservation Area (BCA) will provide added recognition of the importance of the park for bird habitat. The designation of the calcareous cliff community as a Natural Heritage Area will provide further recognition of the importance of this ecological complex.
- Limited new development is proposed and therefore direct impacts to biological resources are expected to be minimal. Projects have generally been sited in areas with previous development, limited environmental sensitivity and which generally possess accessibility to and use of existing infrastructure. However, the proposed park improvements will result in disturbance of approximately 0.31 acres of significant ecological community types. These impacts will be mitigated through site specific design to minimize vegetation removal.
- The area proposed for rock climbing is within a significant ecological community and contains a rare plant species. The major mitigation measure to protect the rare plants will be careful route selection to avoid areas where this plant is present and to protect the important community as much as possible. This will be addressed in more detail within the climbing management plan.
- Construction of new facilities will result in some vegetation removal. Most of these are located in developed or lawn areas where very little tree removal will be required. There will be some loss of vegetation for the opening of vistas along the escarpment. However, most of this vegetation consists of an invasive species – buckthorn, so this impact will be beneficial. For new trails, tree removal will be minimized through on-site selection of the most appropriate route through the area.

- The Master Plan calls for an invasive species management plan at the park to focus on prevention, identification of invasives, early detection, rapid response, and eradication from sensitive habitat areas. Best Management Practices will be implemented during construction to limit the potential for introduction or spread of invasive species by construction equipment.
- The master plan will have no adverse impacts on historic buildings or districts on or eligible for the State or National Registers of Historic Places. Educational signs and materials will be developed to interpret the historic resources in the park.
- Any ground disturbing activities in the park will be reviewed by the State Historic Preservation Office to determine if they are near areas of archeological sensitivity and if any surveys are needed. Steps will be taken to avoid or mitigate any adverse impacts to any archeological resources discovered.
- The master plan is expected to result in beneficial impacts to the scenic character of the park by restoring and opening up some new vistas along the escarpment. The master plan also provides for the protection of views of the escarpment from outside of the park.
- Implementation of the Master Plan will result in substantial beneficial impacts to recreation at the park by providing for a wide variety of new and improved recreational facilities and visitor amenities and a better organized trail system.
- Implementation of the Master Plan will not result in any adverse impacts to open space. Additional acquisitions will be considered as they become available to further protect open space in this area of increasing development pressure.
- There may be minor increases in traffic due to the increased number of campsites; however, access and transportation resources will not be impacted.
- New and improved facilities will be designed to meet all applicable health and safety codes including the Americans with Disabilities Act. The health and safety aspects associated with rock climbing and caving will be addressed in the management plans and permits for those activities.
- Sustainability principles and energy efficiency will be incorporated into the design of all new park buildings. Implementation of the Master Plan may result in some minor temporary increases in noise during construction.
- Implementation of the plan will result in some unavoidable adverse impacts including a minor permanent loss of pervious soil surface and vegetative cover as a result of construction of the new visitor center, additional camping area, trails and other proposed new facilities.
- The planning, development and implementation of the Master Plan will involve the irreversible and irretrievable commitment of public resources in the form of time, labor and materials as well as a long term commitment to the operation and maintenance costs of the park.
- Implementation of the master plan will result in some increased visitation to the park. This is expected to enhance economic impacts to the communities surrounding the park in the form of added business to local gas stations, restaurants and convenience stores.

16. The plan describes the process for supplemental environmental review and provides for guidance as to when additional environmental review may be required and identifies the types of actions that are likely to require additional review. These include new actions not addressed with the Final Master Plan/FEIS that are not Type II actions within Part 617; any change from the preferred alternative for natural resource protection, recreational and facility development (including trails) or other elements of the plan which could result in significant environmental impacts; and any leases, easements or other agreements between OPRHP and other entities that would affect resources in a manner that is not adequately addressed in the Final Master Plan and FEIS.

Certification To Approve/Fund/Undertake :

Having considered the Draft and Final Environmental Impact Statement and having considered the preceding written facts and conclusions relied on to meet the requirements of 6 NYCRR Part 617.11, this Statement of Findings certifies that:

- The requirements of 6 NYCRR Part 617 have been met; and
- Consistent with social, economic and other essential considerations from among the reasonable alternatives available, the action is the one that avoids or minimizes adverse environmental impacts to the maximum extent practicable, and that adverse impacts will be avoided or minimized to the maximum extent practicable by incorporating as conditions to the decision those mitigative measures that were identified as practicable.

cc: Town supervisors:

Town of Knox – Mike Hammond

Town of Berne – Kevin Crosier

Town of New Scotland – Thomas Dolin

Town of Guilderland – Kenneth D. Runyon

DEC Region 4 Permit Administrator – William Clarke