



NEW YORK STATE  
OFFICE OF PARKS, RECREATION AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION

Rose Harvey  
Acting Commissioner

Andrew M. Cuomo  
Governor

March 7, 2011

Senator Elizabeth Little  
Senator Jose Serrano  
Senator James Seward  
Assemblyman Steve Englebright  
Assemblyman John McEneny  
Assemblyman Marc Butler  
New York State Legislature – Albany, NY

Dear Senators and Members of the Assembly:

I write in response to your March 1, 2011 letter requesting information regarding Knox Farm, Joseph Davis, and Woodlawn Beach State Parks and Herkimer Home State Historic Site.

I appreciate your strong interest and support for these facilities and the entire State Park System. I look forward to working with you to advance our shared goal of providing quality recreational and interpretive experiences at New York's state parks and historic sites and providing for their long-term stewardship.

First, let me assure you that I understand the importance of dialogue with the Legislature regarding potential actions at state parks and historic sites. My style is to involve affected parties in key decisions, and I intend to consult with legislators when considering major changes at park facilities. In fact, I am planning to get out to the regions and parks, particularly those most impacted by past budget cuts, to understand firsthand the situation, meet with the stakeholders, and discuss new ways of advancing the agency's mission.

In my first weeks on the job, I am still getting educated regarding the specific issues raised in your letter, but here is what I've learned to date. Under the prior administration, OPRHP's operational capacity throughout the park system (including the four facilities – Knox Farm, Joseph Davis, Woodlawn Beach, and Herkimer Home) was significantly impacted last fall by the agency's need to achieve the workforce reduction savings targets that were part of the enacted 2010-11 state budget.

I understand that at the four facilities, all permanent staff positions were eliminated as a result of the voluntary Early Retirement Incentive program and some layoffs implemented late in 2010. This reduction of staff led the agency to announce that the four facilities would be closed in 2011.

However, we are working on a range of strategies to make these four facilities available to the public in 2011. Of the four, two will operate with the same or even increased public services; and the other two will be managed for more passive uses than the past, but will still serve the public benefit. In the case of Woodlawn Beach and Joseph Davis, town governments will operate the parks and we and they believe that they may be able to provide a better level of service to the local constituency that uses these parks. While the level of public services provided at Knox Farm and Herkimer Home will be reduced, we envision that OPHRP will continue to perform basic property management functions to allow public access and passive recreation, and we are in discussion with partner organizations to determine whether they can provide additional amenities at the facilities. Here is the status of each facility:

Woodlawn Beach State Park. Last December, OPRHP signed a ten-year Memorandum of Understanding with the Town of Hamburg under which the Town will operate the park starting with the 2011 operating season. The Town envisions opening the park's buildings this spring consistent with normal practice and continuing all of the recreational opportunities previously available to the public. In fact, we believe that this arrangement will not only generate cost savings for the state, but will also establish a more effective management strategy for the future. Most of Woodlawn's visitation comes from local residents, and the Town would like to provide services the state was unable to provide (for example public swimming) and be more responsive to local visitor's needs. I will include a copy of the MOU (as well as the Joseph Davis MOU described below) in our response to your document request. I would note that OPHRP has similar municipal agreements at a significant number of parks across the state and these arrangements are working well.

Joseph Davis State Park. In February, OPRHP signed a ten-year Memorandum of Understanding with the Town of Lewiston under which the Town will operate the park starting with the 2011 season. The Town envisions continuing all of the recreational opportunities previously available at the park, and it has initiated discussions with the Audubon Society regarding the possible creation of a new nature center in the park, to be jointly managed by the Town and Audubon.

Knox Farm State Park. In February, OPRHP signed an agreement with the Town of Aurora authorizing the Town to plow roads and parking lots and take other steps to provide public access to the park for winter activities such as cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, and walking (the agreement runs through April). Looking forward to the summer season, the park's parking lots and roads will be open, we will continue to mow the grounds (at a lesser level), and the public will be able to enter and use the park for passive recreation. We plan to continue an existing agreement with the Town of Aurora under which the town will operate the soccer fields located in the park, and discussions are underway to evaluate whether the town can also operate the park's equestrian and polo area. Finally, we have told the Friends of Knox Farm State Park that we are open to considering any proposals they may have for the Friends to contribute to the park's management. In sum, while Knox Farm State Park's buildings will be closed and service levels reduced, the park's grounds will be available to the public under a more passive management approach.

Herkimer Home State Historic Site. This property will be managed as a memorial park in 2011. We will open the site's grounds to the public starting in May – during daylight hours the gate and parking lot will be open and we will continue to maintain the grounds, albeit under a reduced mowing program. The Erie Canalway trail (which runs through the site) and the cemetery will be maintained and open to the public. The Friends of Herkimer Home will continue to organize special events at the site – for example the “Sugaring Off” event is scheduled to occur again this spring. The site's Visitor Center will not open this year, nor will tours be provided of the house – OPRHP does not have staff to operate these facilities. However, we have entered into discussions with the Friends of Herkimer Home to see whether they have the ability to provide additional public amenities (for example, whether the Friends could provide staff or volunteers to open the visitors center on selected days). I believe that our management of the site, while certainly a much more passive approach, still serves an important public benefit.

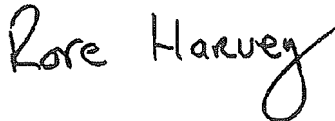
As you know, the state's fiscal challenges have required all state agencies, including State Parks, to implement cost saving measures and efficiencies to manage with reduced staffing and budget. In response, OPRHP is aggressively developing new public/private partnerships to advance our mission of providing diverse recreational and educational experiences to our visitors and to be good stewards of the resources under our care. When a local government, a not-for-profit, or private business is able and willing to help provide those services more efficiently than State Parks can, we will pursue those partnerships. I believe that these four facilities are good examples of how new partnerships can leverage and extend state resources.

In doing so, we are being careful to assure the long-term integrity of our parks and sites. For each of these four facilities, ownership of the property remains with New York State, and OPRHP is retaining responsibility to review and approve any significant operational changes or construction of new facilities proposed by our partners at the facilities.

Your letter requested a significant number of documents and other materials that will require a period of time to compile. In the interim, I hope this letter has given you a sense that OPRHP is taking proactive steps to keep our sites open to the public.

I thank you again for your help and partnership and look forward to a close working relationship in Albany and in the field, and to hearing your ideas for additional steps that should be considered at these facilities and throughout the State Park System.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Rose Harvey". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the word "Sincerely,".

Rose Harvey  
Acting Commissioner