

Congressman Maurice D. Hinchey Catskills Visitor Center

Request for continued funding from the Environmental Protection Fund as an individual line item

The Congressman Maurice D. Hinchey Catskills Visitor Center (CVC) is the only official Visitor Center for the Catskill Park and operates as a key visitor destination and gateway for the entire Catskills region.

The CVC is the result of a decades-long, highly successful public-private partnership between the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) and the not-for-profit Catskill Center for Conservation and Development (Catskill Center). That partnership began with the purchase of the CVC property by the Catskill Center in the early 1990s and continues in the present through lease and operating agreements. Today, the Catskill Center is responsible for the operations of the CVC, and the DEC is responsible for capital projects. Together, the DEC and the Catskill Center have been able to do more together than we could individually, by welcoming and educating the public coming to enjoy and recreate in the Catskill Park and our Catskill communities.

The CVC opened in 2015, and is situated on 60 acres of forest, fields, and wetlands in the hamlet of Mount Tremper. In addition to the Visitor Center building, the site features over 1.5 miles of accessible walking trails; picnic areas; a covered pavilion; wildlife viewing; access trails to the Esopus Creek; and a Fire Tower. New York State has provided the funding for the buildings on-site (the CVC itself, pavilion, and fire tower), while the Catskill Center covers all costs related to operations, exhibits, interpretation, and education of the public. Those costs include staffing the CVC daily, a seasonal fire tower steward, educational programming costs, operational costs such as utilities, and costs related to improving exhibits and interpretation at the CVC. The CVC currently employs three full-time staff and three-to-four seasonal staff.

Last year's State Budget included \$150,000 for the Catskills Visitor Center. Thanks to this funding:

- Thousands of New Yorkers seeking safe places to recreate outdoors were welcomed to the CVC;
- Interior renovations were completed, offering new exhibits and expanded information about the Catskill Park;
- The Upper Esopus Fire Tower was included in the State's Catskill Fire Tower Challenge and has become a major attraction, with visitors enjoying the views and affiliated interpretive information about Fire Towers in the Catskills;

- Virtual programming has created the opportunity for many more folks who are interested in the Catskill Park to engage with the CVC and learn about the Catskills;
- Major events such as the Catskills Great Outdoor Expo were held at the CVC; and
- The Catskill Center’s Catskill Stewards Program was integrated with the CVC so that staff located at hotspots like Kaaterskill Falls and Peekamoose Blue Hole were able to introduce visitors at these high-use trailhead locations to the CVC and its resources.

In addition to work both on-site and virtually, 2022 saw several efforts to better integrate the CVC into overall Catskill Park stewardship efforts, such as:

- The Greater Catskills Region Comprehensive Recreation Plan, released in late 2020, included the call for more investment, additional outreach, and establishment of Catskill Center satellite locations through the Catskills Visitor Center; and
- The final report from DEC’s Catskills Strategic Planning Advisory Group has recommended building on the current successes of the CVC and utilizing it as a key asset to assist in future efforts to increase visitor outreach and actively assist in ensuring better natural resource protection, while better informing and educating visitors to the Park.

Providing funding for the CVC, as a line item in the Environmental Protection Fund (EPF) is critical to the continued success of this decades-long partnership. A line item is necessary to direct funds to the Catskill Center for Conservation and Development, the organization that is responsible for CVC operations. Failure to fund the CVC through a line item in the EPF would result in uncertainty about annual NYS funding, and would not guarantee that the Catskill Center would be the organization to receive funding due to procurement and contracting rules.

For the next fiscal year, we seek the continued funding under a line item in the Environmental Protection Fund, directed to the Catskill Center for Conservation and Development for the operation and management of the CVC, in the amount of \$200,000. This funding effectively leverages State resources, and makes a significant, positive impact in the ability to provide visitor services and programming at the premier gateway to the Catskill Park, the Maurice D. Hinchey Catskills Visitor Center.

Questions and requests for more information should be directed to:

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