Power of Partnerships: The 2026 Friends Gathering

Join Parks & Trails New York, the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, the Department of Environmental Conservation, and Friends groups from across the state in scenic Lake George, New York.

When: September 18-19, 2026
Where: Fort William Henry Hotel and Conference Center, 48 Canada St, Lake George, NY 12845

The Statewide Friends Gathering is a one-of-a-kind opportunity for Friends groups, nonprofit leaders, volunteers, and agency partners across New York to come together, share ideas, and learn from one another. What you'll gain:

- Fresh strategies to strengthen your Friends group or nonprofit organization
- Practical tools to enhance stewardship, programming, and community partnerships
- Inspiration from peers supporting parks, trails, historic sites, and public lands across New York
- Meaningful connections with fellow advocates and state agency partners

This gathering is designed to support organizations at every stage of growth. You'll find valuable insights, real-world examples, and a welcoming community of peers. The program blends engaging sessions, hands-on learning, and built-in networking opportunities so you can exchange ideas, build relationships, and return home energized and ready to take your work to the next level.

Draft Agenda

Friday 9/18

10 AM - 12 PM - Field Trips - Three options to explore nearby state parks and historic sites
12 PM - 2 PM - Registration
2:15 - 3:30 PM - Concurrent Session #1
4:30 - 5:30 PM - Happy Hour
5:30 - 7:30 PM - Dinner & Keynote Presentations

- Kathy Moser, *Commissioner*, NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation
- Amanda Lefton, *Commissioner,* NYS Department of Environmental Conservation

Saturday 9/19

Breakfast on own
8:30 - 9:00 AM - Welcome remarks
9:00 - 10 AM - Keynote: Tiffany Rea-Fisher, Adirondack Diversity Initiative
10:15 AM - 11:30 AM - Concurrent sessions #2
11:30 - 12:00 PM - Lunch & Networking
12:00 PM - 1:00 PM - Awards Ceremony and Park and Trail Partnership Time Capsule Reveal (during lunch)
1:15 - 2:30 PM - Concurrent sessions #3
2:45 - 4:00 PM - Power of Partnership Panel
4:00 - 4:15 PM - Closing Remarks
4:30 - **6:30 PM** - Field trips

Keynote Sessions

Kathy Moser, Commissioner of the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation. Prior to joining OPRHP, Commissioner Moser served as Chief Conservation and Policy Officer at the Open Space Institute (OSI), an East Coast land trust headquartered in New York. In that role, she directed OSI's Parks, Stewardship, and Government Relations programs. She previously served as OSI's Senior Vice President of Parks and Policy.

Earlier in her career, Commissioner Moser served as Deputy Commissioner for Natural Resources at the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) from December 2011 to August 2019.

Amanda Lefton, Commissioner of the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation. Amanda Lefton's diverse career spans the public and private sectors, including previously serving as the Director of the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) within the Department of the Interior. Under her leadership, BOEM developed and implemented an ambitious federal offshore wind program creating a new industry of family supporting jobs and generational opportunity. Her collaborative approach brought together various stakeholders to responsibly manage the nation's critical offshore energy and mineral resources.

Tiffany Rea-Fisher, Adirondack Diversity Initiative Director, has earned recognition for her role as a performing artist, community organizer and direct action activist. She was awarded a citation from the City of New York for her cultural contributions to the field. Tiffany was the first woman of color to serve as director of the Lake Placid School of Dance, where she has helped increase class participation and faculty diversity. During this period, she also improved funding support, audience engagement and community impact for EMERGE125, a dance company focused on performance, education and social justice.

Concurrent Sessions

Designed around your feedback and interests, this year's sessions offer actionable strategies, real-world lessons learned, and inspiring success stories from organizations across the state. Many presentations build upon past Regional Gatherings and Statewide Conferences, continuing the conversations that matter most to your work as Friends. Plus, as we celebrate 10 years of completed Park and Trail Partnership Grant projects, every session is aligned with one of the grant program's four core categories.

Exact session titles and speakers subject to change.

Friday 2:15 - 3:30 PM - Concurrent Sessions #1

Creating Sensory Inclusive Spaces & Programming
Owen Gilbo, ADA Coordinator/DRA, NYS Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation
Laura DiBetta, Director of Outdoor Recreation, NYS Department of Environmental Conservation
Erin Sausville, Environmental Program Specialist 2, NYS Department of Environmental Conservation
Tracy Schober, Executive Director of the Autism Society Greater Hudson Region

NY State Parks and the Department of Environmental Conservation are committed to ensuring that sites are accessible to all visitors. To support that mission, it is vital for parks, historic sites, and other public lands to provide quality programs and other resources for those with sensory needs. This workshop will review important agency initiatives and provide training for Friends Groups to create their own sensory-friendly programs that help support people with autism and other forms of neurodivergence.

Category: Improving Visitor Experiences on Public Lands (SPAC)

From Passion to Participation: Strategic Ways to Attract and Retain Today's Volunteers
Megan Russell, NYS Commission on National and Community Service
Yenutien Kombian, NYS Commission on National and Community Service
Rob Basch, Hunters Point Park Conservancy

Is your organization struggling to attract younger, more diverse participants with fresh perspectives and energy? You're not alone. The volunteer landscape has fundamentally shifted and as such, building a sustainable volunteer pipeline requires a 'new era' approach. Although research shows a decline in volunteerism, there's still a percentage of people who care deeply about making a difference in their communities; however, the way in which they volunteer has evolved. Passion alone is no longer enough to guarantee long-term commitment. Passion only gets people through the door.

This session will explore ways to transform passion into a great volunteer experience that keeps them coming back to serve. This session will highlight Hunter Point Park Conservancy's annual LIC Bulbfest in November which engages hundreds of community volunteers in planting tens of thousands of daffodils, tulips, alliums, and other flowers that bloom in the spring.

Category: Strengthening Your Organization from the Inside (COE)

Built to Last, Designed to Evolve: Modernizing Legacy Structures and Partnerships
Carl Schoenthal, President, Friends of the Genesee Valley Greenway
Nathan Hayes, Executive Director, Finger Lakes Trail Conference

Legacy organizations face a unique challenge: how do you honor decades of history while adapting to meet a changing world? True organizational evolution requires looking both inward at your org chart and outward at your closest partners.

This session tackles how two established organizations are adapting their long-standing partnership agreements and internal foundations to meet modern demands. We will look at how to clearly map out who does what, who has the final say on decisions, and how to sustain energy and momentum to move projects ahead—especially in organizations where paid staff and passionate volunteers work side-by-side. We'll also look at how to separate your nonprofit's specific role from that of your government agency partner. By clearly demonstrating the unique value your group brings to the table, you can attract more donors, recruit more members, and run more successful community events.

Learning Objectives:

- *Learn how established organizations can utilize new ways to, and how to empower your team to make decisions.*
- *Learn how to draw a clear line between what the government agency handles and what your nonprofit accomplishes, making it much easier to raise money.*
- *Discover how to update your org chart and diplomatically shift traditional roles with long-time volunteers or board members.*
- *Learn how to use innovative tools, including Mentimeter to review and update your five-year plans.*

Category: Professional Development (PD)

Friends Impact Survey Panel Discussion
Patrick Yacco, Partnerships Manager, NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation
Gabriela Wemple, Program Research Specialist, NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation
Shaina Hogan, Director of Programs and Grants, Parks & Trails New York

For the first time in nearly a decade, stakeholders have a clear picture of the value that Friends Groups are bringing to their associated OPRHP sites. This panel will breakdown data and takeaways from the new "Friends Impact Survey," while also discussing ways that your organization can leverage this information to increase fundraising, volunteer participation, and other opportunities that bolster your group's capacity. Time will also be spent highlighting data collection strategies.

Category: Strengthening Your Organization from the Inside (COE)

Saturday 9/19 10:15-11:30am - Concurrent Sessions #2 (Peer Circles)

Structured interactive sessions to share wins, troubleshoot challenges, and connect with peers facing the same unique landscape. Each session will begin with a lightning round of introductions from each organization.

State Parks Peer Circle
Moderator: TBD

State Historic Sites Peer Circle
Moderator: TBD

DEC Sites Peer Circle
Moderator: TBD

Greenway Trail Peer Circle
Moderator: TBD

Saturday 9/19 1:15-2:30pm - Concurrent Sessions #3

Building Resilience in Our Communities
Lori Robertson, Walkway Over the Hudson
Stephan Hengst, Walkway Over the Hudson / Big Gay Hudson Valley

Public parks serve as vital platforms for building strong, resilient, and inclusive communities. In this presentation, Stephan Hengst (Big Gay Hudson Valley) and Lori Robertson (Friends of the Walkway) explore how diversity and intentional programming drive community engagement, boost tourism, and strengthen regional resilience.

Through real-world case studies like Pride in the Sky, attendees will gain actionable strategies for leveraging local assets, designing inclusive events, and creating resilient promotion and marketing. Join this session to learn how "Friends" groups, non-profits, and community organizations can co-create authentic experiences with, and not just for, their communities.

Category: Improving Visitor Experience on Public Lands (SPAC)

Making the Jump from All-Volunteer to Hiring Your First Staff Member
Kathleen Martens, Adirondack Rail Trail Association

John DiNuzzo, President, Lake George Battlefield Park Alliance
Martha Swan, Executive Director, John Brown Lives!

This session will feature a panel of organizations who have made the leap from being run entirely by volunteers to hiring their first permanent staff position. It will explore the processes, resources, and other elements needed for making the decision, hiring, and maintaining first staff. Although we could highlight it as a session for "first-time" staff, it could also benefit many existing organization situations that may have few part-time staff.

Category: Professional Development (PD)

Centering Indigenous History on NY's Public Lands
Meg Joseph & Jeanette Jemison, Friends of Ganondagan
Carol Rathbun & John and Linda Kantrowski, Friends of Letchworth State Park
David Carson, Executive Director, Friends of Rogers
Kim Hill, Liaison, Office of Indian Nation Affairs

Friends groups and agency partners are finding new and innovative ways to elevate Indigenous voices, knowledge, and cultural perspectives. Join representatives from Ganondagan State Historic Site, Letchworth State Park, Friends of Rogers Environmental Education Center, and the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation for a conversation about building authentic partnerships with Indigenous communities through education, interpretation, and public programming.

Category: Improving Visitor Experience on Public Lands (SPAC)

The Power of Park Programs: Connecting Community Youth, Academic Programs and all People to Great Outdoor Programs and Building Environmental Education and Recreation Partnerships.
Samantha Buzash, Environmental Educator, NYS OPRHP
Andy Fyfe, Public Programs Bureau Director, NYS OPRHP
KeJuan Harmon, Section Head, Ladders to the Outdoors
Tom Hughes, Section Head, Academic Partnerships/FORCES

In direct service of its mission, OPRHP delivers thousands of NYS learning standard- based interpretive and recreational programs each year, through a powerful network of environmental educators and other site staff. The agency is increasingly involved with community-facing health and wellness and environmental stewardship efforts. It looks to partner with Friends Groups to amplify and enhance its existing programs wherever and whenever possible.

Hear from agency programming experts from OPRHP's new Public Program's Bureau. The Bureau was created in 2025 to enhance community-facing environmental education and recreational programming across the system. Representatives from the Bureau's sections will explain the current scope of their programs – from curriculum platforms, available grant funding, to new approaches for outdoor skills.

Presenters will unpack trends, challenges, and opportunities for Friends/Agency partnerships to create great outdoor programming.

Learning Objectives:

- *Partnership: Best Practices for Programs: Friends/Agency/Community.*
- *Structure: Understanding Agency Structure for Public Programs.*
- *Funding: Available Agency Funding & Staffing for Programming.*
- *Trends: Trends in educational curriculum and outdoor programs.*

Category: Strengthening Your Organization from the Inside (COE)

Saturday 9/19 2:45-4:00pm - Power of Partnerships Panel

Moderator: Shaina Hogan, Director of Programs & Grants, Parks & Trails New York
Diane Topkis, President, Friends of Mills at Staatsburgh
Kelly Quimby, Adirondack Architectural Heritage
Janine Moon, President, Friends of Schuyler Mansion
Marty Garbarino (Bayard Cutting Arboretum), Greg Hancock (Friends of Heckscher State Park), Janet Soley (Friends of Connetquot)

This final session of the conference will feature a panel of Friends organizations from across the state sharing 10-minute presentations on diverse, successful partnerships at their sites. Ranging from an impactful site manager–Friends relationship to effective community engagement efforts and a collaborative One Day, Three Parks event on Long Island, these panelists will demonstrate practical strategies for leveraging partnerships to advance your organizational goals.

Following the presentations, we will dive deeper into these strategies through a moderated panel discussion before opening up the floor for audience Q&A.

Making Connections & Getting Outside

Friday & Saturday - Field Trips

There will be four options for field adventures showcasing the ADK/Capital Region by foot or bike. Two activities will be offered the morning of Friday 9/18 and Saturday afternoon 9/19 after the conclusion of the conference.

Friday 9/18 10AM - 12 PM

🚶‍♀️ **Lake George Battlefield Park**
Just a short walk from the conference venue, this guided field trip offers a unique opportunity to explore one of the region's most historically significant landscapes.

Led by the Lake George Battlefield Park Alliance, participants will take a 1–2 hour walking tour covering approximately ¾ mile, beginning and ending at the park's museum (75 Fort George Road). The tour will highlight the park's layered history, including the newly established Repose of the Fallen memorial site, dedicated in May 2026, where 44 who perished from smallpox at Lake George in 1776 have been respectfully reburied.

The park is located roughly ¼ mile from the Fort William Henry Conference Center, making it an easy walk for most attendees. Parking is also available at the museum for those who prefer to drive.

🚶‍♀️ **Moreau Lake State Park**
Stretch your legs at Moreau Lake State Park, where participants will experience the natural beauty that makes this park a favorite destination in the southern Adirondacks.

Led by Friends of Moreau and Park Staff, this hike will explore the park's forested landscape while highlighting stewardship efforts, visitor use, and the role partnerships play in caring for and enhancing public lands. Along the way, participants will learn about the park's natural features, management strategies, and opportunities for Friends groups and community partners to support programming and conservation.

Saturday 9/19, 4:30 - 6:30 PM

🚶‍♀️ **Fort William Henry**
Located adjacent to the conference center, Fort William Henry offers a chance to step directly into the region's rich colonial history.

This field trip will explore the reconstructed fort and its surrounding grounds, providing context for the pivotal events of the French and Indian War that took place here in 1757. Participants will learn about the fort's history, its strategic role along the Lake George corridor, and how interpretation and preservation efforts help bring this history to life for modern visitors.

🚴‍♀️**Warren County Bikeway**
Enjoy a scenic ride along the Warren County Bikeway, a premier multi-use trail that connects the foothills of the Adirondacks to the shores of Lake George.

Originally built in 1978 along the former route of the Delaware & Hudson Railroad, this 9.4-mile paved path holds the distinction of being the first "rail trail" in New York State. This guided excursion will highlight the trail's transition from a historic industrial corridor to a vital recreational resource, showcasing its role in regional connectivity and outdoor tourism.

The bikeway is located less than ½ mile from the Fort William Henry Conference Center, making it easily accessible for attendees. Participants are welcome to bring their own bicycles, and information regarding local bike rental options will be provided soon.