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New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation

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AGENCY DECISION AND STATEMENT OF FINDINGS

Adoption of Final Master Plan / Final Environmental Impact Statement for Grafton Lakes State Park

Designation of a Bird Conservation Area

Designation of a Park Preservation Area

The New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation has prepared a Final Master Plan / Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS), dated January , 2012 for Grafton Lakes State Park located in the Town of Grafton in Rensselaer County.

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

This decision is based on the Findings Statement and the content of the Final Master Plan/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
Grafton Lake State Park Final Master Plan/FEIS

March 7, 2012

Pursuant to Article 8 (State Environmental Quality Review Act – SEQRA) of the Environmental Conservation Law and 6 NYCRR Part 617, the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP), as lead agency, makes the following findings.

Title of the Action:

Adoption and Implementation of a Final Master Plan/Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) for Grafton Lakes State Park

Location:

Grafton Lakes State Park is located at 100 Grafton Lakes State Park Way in the Town of Grafton in Rensselaer County, NY.

Description of the Action:

The Final Master Plan for Grafton Lakes State Park 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: January 25, 2012

Findings:

1. 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; provide a rationale for the agency's decision; certify that the requirements of 6 NYCRR Part 617 have been met; and certify that consistent with social, economic and other essential considerations from among the reasonable alternatives available, the action is one which avoids or minimizes adverse environmental impacts to the maximum extent practicable, and that included within the plan are those mitigation measures that will avoid or minimize adverse environmental impacts to the maximum extent practicable.
2. The Final Master Plan/FEIS was subject to a complete Environmental Impact Statement process including a public information meeting and a public hearing.
3. The Final Master Plan/FEIS contains a chapter on responses to comments on the Draft EIS. This chapter contains clarification of issues raised during the review of the Draft EIS. It also provides information that has been used in the preparation of the Final Master Plan/FEIS.
4. Grafton Lakes State Park is a day use park encompassing 2,545 acres in the Town of Grafton, Rensselaer County. The park was established in 1963 with the purchase of land and lakes from the city of Troy which were no longer necessary for the city's water supply. The park was opened to the public in 1971.
5. Grafton Lakes State Park is located on the Rensselaer Plateau region of eastern New York State, which lies between the Taconic and Hudson Valleys. Grafton Lakes State Park lies mostly between 1400 and 1600 feet above mean sea level and as such has similar climate and plant and animal species as those found in the Adirondacks. The park is mostly forested and is

within the Rensselaer Plateau Forest Legacy Area which was established in 2011. Four significant ecological communities tracked by the Natural Heritage Program are found in the park including beech maple mesic forest, hemlock-northern hardwood forest, spruce-northern hardwood forest and oligotrophic dimictic lake. The park is also part of National Audubon Society's Rensselaer Plateau Important Bird Area and has had documented nesting of three State Special Concern raptor species.

6. There are six lakes in the park, four of which are man made and two are natural. All of the lakes are oligo-mesotrophic except for White Lily Pond, which is eutrophic. Eurasian Water Milfoil, an aquatic invasive species, has been found in two of the lakes: Long Pond and Mill Pond. There are several streams in the park which are tributaries of the Quacken Kill. Several wetlands are also found within or partly within the park.
7. Recently the Dickinson Hill Fire Tower was added to the park. This structure was put on the National Register of Historic Places in 2010. The park also has four local family cemeteries. Scenic resources in the park include expansive lake views and views from hilltops. The major vista in the park is the view from the Dickinson Hill Fire Tower.
8. The park supports swimming, boating, picnicking, playgrounds, pavilions and large format canopy tents for group picnics, court and field games, hunting, fishing, environmental education and interpretation, geocaching, orienteering, ice-skating, ice-fishing and trail activities. Trail activities include equestrian, hiking, bicycling, snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, and snowmobiling. Snowmobile trails include several trails that connect to the statewide snowmobile trail network.
9. The plan identifies a vision statement and goals for the park. The vision for Grafton Lakes State Park is to serve the residents of, and visitors to, New York State by identifying, preserving, protecting and interpreting the natural, scenic, and cultural resources in Grafton Lakes State Park while providing a variety of high quality year round recreation and environmental interpretation opportunities. The park will serve as a statewide model for education and interpretive programming of the natural environment.
10. The plan presents a series of "preferred alternatives" for future development and operation of Grafton Lakes State Park. Cumulatively, the actions described in the plan present OPRHP's long-term vision for the rehabilitation and enhancement of the park.
11. Status quo alternatives were evaluated for each element of the plan as well as other feasible alternatives. The Preferred Alternative combined the preferred options for recreation development and resource protection into one that best meets the goals for the park. This alternative was presented as the Draft Master Plan.

12. The Draft Master Plan recommended the introduction of camping into the park and proposed the construction of approximately three traditional tent and trailer camping loops along the east side of Long Pond Road between the road and Long and Second Ponds. As a result of input received during review of the Draft Master Plan/DEIS, the Agency conducted additional evaluation regarding the location of the proposed camping area. Upon further evaluation, it was determined that an area to the north and west of the existing beach parking lot would be a better location for camping. The Final Master Plan calls for a smaller camping area and results in a smaller area of disturbance and less environmental impact.
13. Additional comments on the decision to provide camping at the park were received during the consideration period for the Final Master Plan from private campground owners concerned with potential competition from the state. An analysis of available camping opportunities was conducted, the results of which were considered prior to the decision to introduce camping to the park. Based on this analysis, although there are several campgrounds within 20 miles of the park, they cater to large RVs and include many amenities. There appears to be a shortage of basic tent and trailer campsites of the type that are proposed for Grafton Lakes State Park. The revised smaller proposed camping area has been retained in the Final Master Plan. As noted within the plan, actual construction of new campsites at the park is based on available funding and may not occur for several years.
14. The Final Master Plan considers the historic, cultural, natural, geological, and recreational resources of the park and responds to the needs and safety of patrons, protection of cultural and natural resources, and 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 public and private funding.
15. The Bird Conservation Areas program is established in Environmental Conservation Law Section 11-2001, and authorizes the designation of Bird Conservation Areas (BCA's) in order to safeguard and enhance significant bird habitats located within state parks and other state-owned lands. The entire Grafton Lakes State Park is designated as a Bird Conservation Area. The BCA designation provides recognition on a statewide level relative to other state parks and sites. The BCA designation does not prohibit existing or future recreation uses or park operations.
16. Article 20 of the Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation Law outlines the process for designation of entire parks or portions of parks as part of a statewide Park Preserve system. The purpose of such designations is to conserve and protect park lands containing wildlife, flora, scenic, historic and archeological sites that are unique and rare in New York State. Given the extent of development in the portion of the park north of Route 2, OPRHP determined that Park Preservation Area designation is inappropriate for those portions of the park. The Park Preservation Area for Grafton Lakes State Park encompasses the entire park south of Route 2 with the exception of the existing road and the C9 snowmobile trail. This designation is consistent with the current management of the park and represents the Agency's commitment to continue the park's historical and present management philosophy into the future.
17. The Final Master Plan provides protection of natural resources through several means including: the designations discussed above; identification of the entire park as an Invasive

Species Prevention Zone (ISPZ) where special efforts will be made to remove any invasives that exist and to keep out new invasives; continuation of a water quality testing program, including nutrient loading will be continued in all the park's lakes; reduction of stormwater runoff at the beach area through the use of constructed rain gardens; and increased aquatic invasive species prevention through increased monitoring, the installation of boat washing stations and invasive species disposal stations as well as user education provided at lakes and at the park entrance.

18. The plan also calls for several improvements to recreation opportunities at the park including:

- As mentioned previously, camping will be initiated in the park at an area on the north side of the beach area along the road to the water tower. The actual number of sites will be determined through more detailed design that will assure protection of the park's natural resources while addressing demand for camping.
- Cabins will be installed at the site of the former YMCA campground at the White Lily Pond area entrance and across the access road to the new campground. Those at White Lily Pond area will be all season cabins and will be accessible from the park trail system as well as Babcock Lake Rd. The cabins at the new campground area will only be operated during the park's regular season.
- A new, all season, nature center will be constructed on the main park road near the area of the trailhead of the Woodland Trail. The nature center will accommodate the environmental education & interpretation functions of the park.
- A feasibility study is being recommended for trail crossings on the outflow of Martin Dunham Reservoir.
- If needed, a feasibility study will examine the possibility of adding a second beach to Long Pond
- The south picnic grove will be rehabilitated, the Amphitheater Pavilion will be replaced with a larger structure and a new playground will be installed. The north picnic grove will be dismantled and allowed to revert to natural community.
- All large canopy tents will be replaced with permanent pavilion structures and a new, second pavilion, will be installed at Deerfield.
- Full basketball courts will be installed at Rabbit Run and Deerfield. A Bocce court will be installed at Deerfield.
- The Dickinson Hill Fire Tower will continue to be restored and will be open to the public when the restoration is complete.
- Shaver Pond nature center will be converted for other uses. The DEC monitoring station will become part of the new nature center, providing the public with another educational opportunity.

19. The Final Master Plan also includes a detailed Trails Plan which will increase the total mileage of designated trails by 5.5 miles. This increase includes development of 1.5 miles of previously approved trails, 4.5 miles of new trails, designation of 0.9 miles of existing but undesignated corridors, and closure of 1.7 miles of trails. Key elements of the Trails Plan

include: maintaining the trail system for designated uses including hiking, biking, horseback riding, snowshoeing, cross-country skiing and snowmobiling; providing increased trail opportunities and connections within the park's trail system as well as external connections to trails on nearby public lands; enhancing trail opportunities and accessibility in high-use areas; improving trail signage including trailhead and trail intersection signage throughout the park to enhance the visitor experience and increase patron safety; and enhancing interpretation of natural, cultural and historical resources along trails.

20. Park operations, maintenance and infrastructure will be improved including: a new park office will be built on the main park road north of the current contact station. It will include facilities for camper registration (including adequate parking and traffic circulation), park information services, and park administration offices. Upgrades will be made to several park maintenance buildings.
21. In addition, the 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.
22. Environmental impacts associated with the implementation of the plan were addressed under general areas.
 - The plan will result in some physical change to land particularly where new recreation facilities and trails will be constructed. Proposed developments in areas of the park that are already developed will result in minimal new disturbance. Proposals potentially involving new land disturbance include the introduction of camping, new nature center, new cabins and some new trails. Since soils in the park are limiting factors for recreational development, careful planning and site-specific design will be applied as mitigation for all facilities to minimize the potential for erosion.
 - The master plan will result in beneficial impacts to Long Pond and Second Pond by reducing stormwater runoff into the lake from the beach through the installation of rain gardens and improvement of the drainage system. Projects with the greatest potential to impact lake water quality include the new Nature Center in the Shaver Pond watershed, the introduction of camping in the Long Pond watershed, and the proposed cabins in the White Lily pond watershed. The existing water quality monitoring at the park's lakes will continue in order to help detect and mitigate changes due to development. Wide vegetated buffers will be retained between these developments and the lakes. Pervious pavements and green designs such as rain gardens will be used to reduce the velocity of stormwater runoff. Design of new trails will minimize stream crossings and provide buffers between trails and water bodies. A more detailed survey will be conducted to determine the locations and extent of Eurasian watermilfoil and steps will be taken to remove it from Long and Mill Ponds and prevent their spread to other park lakes.
 - Some minor, localized and temporary impacts to air quality may occur. These impacts will be mitigated through design and operational elements.

- The Bird Conservation Area and Park Preservation Area will provide recognition, increased recreation and an additional natural resource protection.
 - Approximately 16 acres of vegetation could be impacted by proposals within the master Plan. This amounts to approximately 0.6 percent of the parkland. Some of the proposed developments will impact significant ecological communities. The total area impacted will likely be reduced through designing facilities and trails to minimize the amount of tree removal wherever possible. Surveys for rare plants and animals will be conducted prior to development of any new trails or facilities. Grafton Lakes SP is part of the Rensselaer Plateau which contains the fifth largest unfragmented forest in the state, an important habitat for many wildlife species. New developments proposed in the master plan were carefully located to minimize forest fragmentation to the extent possible. The park currently has considerable diversity of native plants and animals and also very limited invasive species population as a result, the Master Plan calls for creation of an invasive species prevention zone (ISPZ) for the entire park where efforts will be made to eliminate the existing invasives and prevent new invasions.
 - The Master Plan calls for continuing the restoration of the historic Dickenson Hill Fire Tower and surveying and protection of the four cemeteries in the park. A Phase 1A archeological survey will be conducted prior to any new ground disturbing development. Scenic resources will be protected through the development of a scenic resource management plan.
 - Implementation of the Master Plan will result in substantial beneficial recreation and open space impacts through improved and expanded recreation facilities and amenities.
 - Introduction of camping into the park could increase traffic during the summer months. As mitigation, camping patrons will be encouraged to walk to day use facilities on improved trails and day users will be encouraged to take the bus to the park. New facilities will be designed to meet all applicable health and safety codes as well as incorporate sustainability principles and energy efficiency.
23. 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 recreational and facility elements of the plan that may result in significant adverse 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/FEIS.