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City Transfers 815 Acres to State for More Recreational Use

Watershed Land in Greene County Will Continue to Ensure Water Quality Protection While Offering Public Access for Recreational Activities

New York City will convey title to an 815-acre property located in the Town of Windham to New York State for expanded recreational use, NYC Department of Environmental Protection Commissioner Carter Strickland and NYS Department of Environmental Conservation Commissioner Joe Martens announced today.

DEP and DEC have worked cooperatively over several years to transfer ownership since DEC expressed interest in managing the property for recreational use consistent with watershed protection. The site was selected due to the extensive network of pre-existing dirt roads that are suitable for biking and other recreational opportunities.

DEC will seek to manage the property as “Wild Forest” that will allow for activities that will help foster positive relationships among the City’s watershed partners due to its location just outside the Catskill Park. The 59-lot property was acquired by the City in 2002 and 2005 under its Land Acquisition Program to protect water quality for more than nine million New Yorkers. Following this mandate, DEC’s protocols will ensure that water quality protection is maintained. DEC will solicit public input regarding future recreational uses as part of its Unit Management Plan process.

“New York City tap water continues to be among the highest quality and best tasting in the world thanks in part to the Land Acquisition Program that protects the water at its source,” said DEP Commissioner Carter Strickland. “Transferring this property to state management provides a unique opportunity to enhance recreation and tourism opportunities for the Town of Windham and the surrounding Catskills while doing so in a manner that will not compromise the water supply.”

DEC Commissioner Joseph Martens said, “DEC has worked collaboratively with NYC DEP to open up watershed lands to greater public use, consistent with meeting water quality goals. The transfer of Mt. Hayden will enable DEC to provide outstanding public recreational opportunities, including hiking and mountain biking on this property.”

Town of Windham Supervisor Stephen Walker said, “The town is interested in pursuing more trails for mountain biking, cross-country skiing and other recreation activities. It’s been a pleasure working with DEP and DEC toward those mutual interests.”

Under DEP’s ownership the property had been open for recreational uses instead of development as it was slated for prior to the City’s acquisition. As part of the transfer, DEC plans to designate the property as a “Detached Forest Preserve” property and will maintain the property in a manner that protects water quality while allowing watershed residents and visitors to enjoy the land.

Protected as “forever wild,” New York’s Forest Preserve lands have exceptional scenic, recreational and ecological value. Rugged mountain peaks, remote lakes and ponds, millions of acres of unfragmented forests, and hundreds of miles of trails provide ample opportunity for many types of recreation while providing a variety of habitats for plants and wildlife. Striking a balance between recreational use and resource protection, the Catskill Forest Preserve is achieved through a park-wide land classification system and individual unit management plans. With the transfer, DEC will assume tax and stewardship obligations.

Watershed protection is widely considered the best way of maintaining high quality drinking water in the long term. New York City’s program, one of the most comprehensive in the world, has been so successful at protecting the integrity of New York City’s water supply that the United States Environmental Protection Agency awarded the city a 10-year Filtration Avoidance Determination (FAD) in 2007. Since the beginning of the FAD, New York City has committed \$541 million to purchase land to protect its unfiltered drinking water which supplies roughly half the population of New York State.

The 2007 FAD requires the city to continue an active Land Acquisition Program, focusing on properties selected for their water quality protection benefits. The city only acquires land and easements from willing sellers, and pays fair market value based on independent appraisals. DEP has made unprecedented efforts to balance water quality preservation with the interests and economic vitality of watershed communities, and has agreed to avoid acquisitions in and around existing hamlets where towns have designated such properties as important for their future growth. The success of New York City’s Watershed Protection Program is a primary reason New York City remains one of only five large cities in the United States that are not required to filter their drinking water. The other cities are Boston, Portland, San Francisco and Seattle.

The Land Acquisition Program is governed by a Water Supply Permit, which was extended for 15 years by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation in 2010. The Water Supply Permit issued by DEC allows the city to continue to acquire additional properties and conservation easements to ensure that the undeveloped, environmentally-sensitive lands in the watershed remain protected. In 2010, almost 12,000 acres were signed to contract by DEP, making it the most successful year for signing contracts since the Land Acquisition Program started in 1997.

DEP manages New York City's water supply, providing more than one billion gallons of water each day to more than nine million residents, including eight million in New York City, as well as residents of Ulster, Orange, Putnam and Westchester counties. The water comes from the Catskill, Delaware, and Croton watersheds that are located up to 125 miles from the City, and include 19 reservoirs, three controlled lakes, and numerous tunnels and aqueducts. DEP has nearly 6,000 employees, including almost 1,000 scientists, engineers, surveyors, watershed maintainers and others professionals in the upstate watershed. In addition to its \$68 million payroll and \$153 million in annual taxes paid in upstate counties, DEP has invested more than \$1.5 billion in watershed protection programs that support sustainable farming practices, environmentally sensitive economic development, and local economic opportunity. In addition, DEP has a robust capital program with over \$13 billion in investments planned over the next 10 years that will create up to 3,000 construction-related jobs per year. For more information, visit www.nyc.gov/dep, like us on Facebook at www.facebook.com/nycwater, or follow us on Twitter at www.twitter.com/nycwater.