



TESTIMONY

**Testimony on
New Jersey FY2025 Budget
Senate Budget Committee**

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Chair Sarlo and members of the Committee,

My name is Sabrina Rodriguez, and I represent New Jersey Future, a nonprofit organization that promotes sensible and equitable growth, redevelopment, and infrastructure investments to foster healthy, strong, resilient communities.

New Jersey needs consistent and comprehensive planning that helps prescribe where and how communities should grow and develop in accordance with smart growth principles. Good planning will make communities stronger, safer, easier to get around safely, drive economic development and overall, ensure we have great places to live. We strongly encourage the legislature to continue to elevate land use and housing planning to ensure towns are given the guidance and resources to continue improving their communities. Increased planning funding will also enable towns to respond to the Mt. Laurel Fourth Round. Therefore, we recommend that the Office of Planning Advocacy receives \$2 million for the purposes of providing grants to municipalities to engage in comprehensive local planning that integrates affordable housing through redevelopment to create more compact, walkable communities that concentrate development in low-hazard and low-climate change vulnerable areas.

As the nation's most densely populated state, New Jersey packs more people per square mile than anywhere else. The state's most vibrant cities and towns include compact, walkable downtowns and active streetscapes – complemented by accessible, green parks and trails for recreation, a respite from urban life, and healthy, carbon-free travel. Many communities, especially under-resourced communities, lack the capacity to envision new parks and trails. To apply for parks and trails funding, communities are required to conduct planning and feasibility studies. Due to capacity and staffing constraints, many towns cannot carry out these studies, which excludes them from being able to apply for funding in the first place. Therefore, we are asking for a \$20 million dollar appropriation in the FY25 budget for trail planning and design. The monies would support grants to local governments, especially in underserved communities, to envision, plan, and design park projects so they can apply to additional funding opportunities.

Last year, we ran a campaign to build Capital Park behind the State House as a collaboration of four New Jersey nonprofits—New Jersey Future, New Jersey Conservation Fund, ISLES, and the New Jersey League of Conservation Voters; thanks to the support of almost 800 people, the Legislature appropriated \$3 million dollars for the design of the park. The RFP process has been successful, and by May a consultant will be already designing the park. This year we would like to see an appropriation of \$10 million in this budget to build Capital Park behind the State House. We would like to see an

appropriation of \$10 million in the FY25 budget to build Capital Park behind the State House. We believe now is the time to build this park. As Governor Murphy said, “All eyes in the world will be on New Jersey for the 2026 FIFA World Cup”. Trenton and the Capitol will be visited by thousands for being the Capital and because of its rich history. In addition, the State will host events to celebrate the 250th Anniversary of the American Revolution that same summer. Imagine hosting a reenactment battle or putting a giant screen in the park so everyone can enjoy a FIFA game; this can only be possible if you now appropriate \$10 million to construct the park.

Trenton has the highest percentage of children under 6 years of age with an elevated blood lead level at or above 5 micrograms of lead per deciliter (6.4%). Lead Service Lines account for 75% of lead in drinking water exposure. We promote policies for cost-effective, sustainable water systems in New Jersey, and support policies that promote access to safe, clean drinking water. We are committed to identifying and removing all sources of lead in drinking water, including the replacement of lead service lines by 2031 in New Jersey. We seek \$100 million for a planning and design grant program to help water and wastewater systems serving overburdened communities access funding from the New Jersey Water Bank. This funding will help water utilities leverage federal funding to replace lead service lines, identify and remove toxic contaminants, and reduce flooding.

Lastly, we urge you to appropriate \$5 million dollars to establish a Water Infrastructure Center. In order to help the State achieve its water infrastructure goals, there needs to be an appropriation for a state institution of higher education to publish accessible data on New Jersey’s drinking water, wastewater, and stormwater systems, identify critical improvements, and work cooperatively with stakeholders to develop innovative, cost-effective solutions. This research center will bring together data, applied research, and cross-disciplinary stakeholders to accelerate infrastructure solutions and connect all water stakeholders—consumers, utilities, regulators, and advocates—to easily accessible water metrics.

Funding for housing planning, parks and trails, and water infrastructure will be critical for securing New Jersey’s future.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on these important issues.

Sincerely,

Sabrina Rodriguez
Advocacy and Government Affairs Manager
New Jersey Future