

REIMAGINING BUFFALO'S DL&W RAIL CORRIDOR: A COMMUNITY VISION



JUNE 2018





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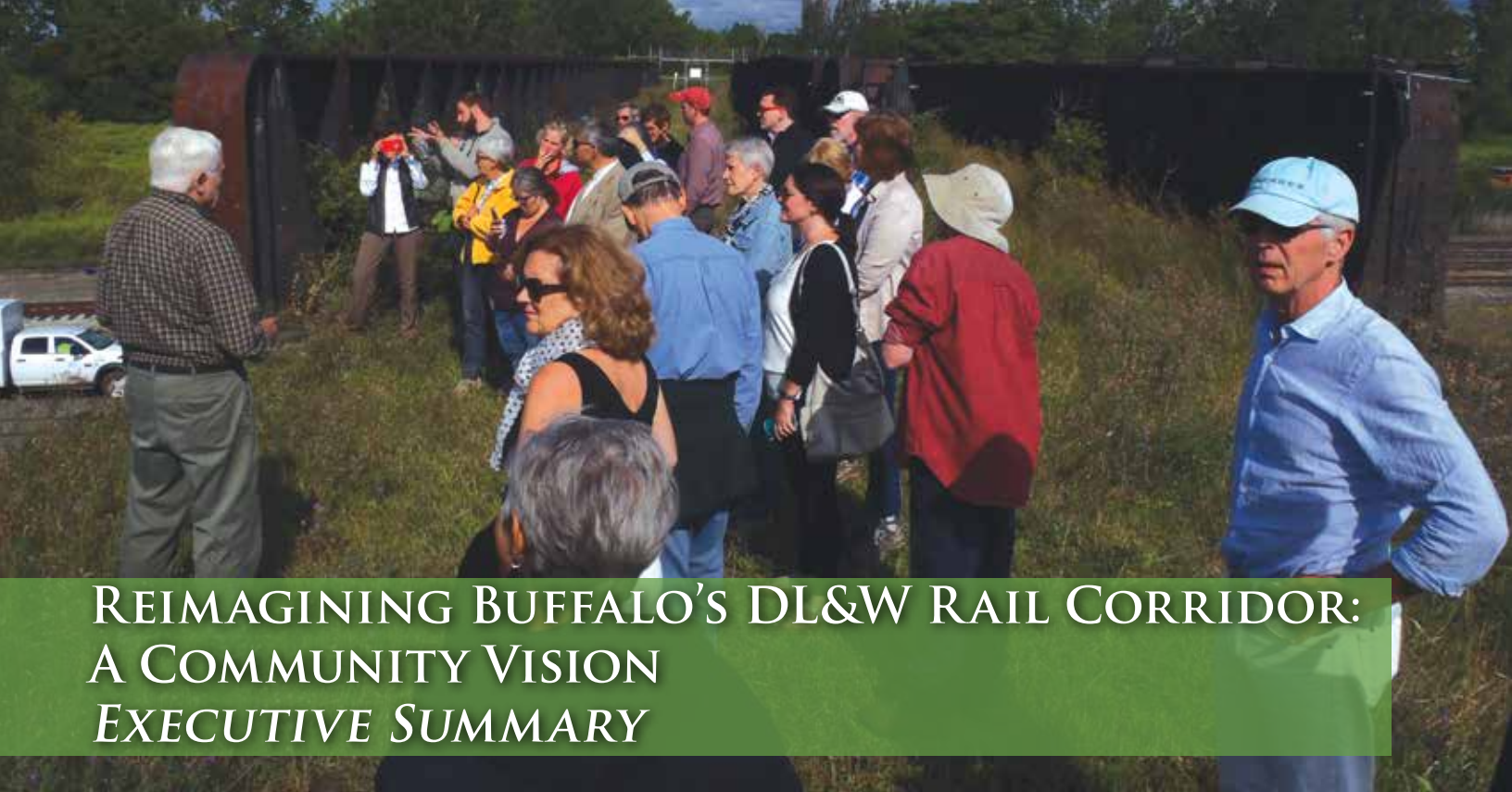
The Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Legacy Funds at the Community Foundation
for Greater Buffalo, and donations from Land Conservancy members.

June 2018



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Inside Image Source: James Hoggard
Cover Image Source: Abby Songin



REIMAGINING BUFFALO'S DL&W RAIL CORRIDOR: A COMMUNITY VISION EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Image Source: Jajeon Rose-Burney

On the edge of downtown Buffalo, wildlife is reclaiming an unused rail corridor. This former rail line runs on an elevated berm through the center of Buffalo's industrial past, connecting the city's history with the future of the communities along its length. The corridor begins downtown near the mouth of the Buffalo River at Canalside and the DL&W terminal, and travels one and a half miles east to reconnect with the meandering river near South Park Avenue.

The Western New York Land Conservancy began meeting with neighbors and community leaders — including the corridor's current owners, the Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority (NFTA) — in the summer of 2017 to start a conversation about what this rail corridor could become. After nearly a year of listening and learning, a vision has emerged — through countless conversations, meetings, surveys, and insights — that points the way to an iconic, innovative, and inspiring multi-use trail and linear park that connects people to each other and to nature, including the Buffalo River, right in the heart of the city.

THE VISION STATEMENT

The new trail and linear park will be an inspiring community gathering place alive with the history and voice of the surrounding neighborhoods.

More than just a trail, the reimagined rail corridor will be a vibrant, safe, and welcoming space for people of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds to connect with each other, with nature, and with the waterfront, throughout the year.

The trail and linear park will be the focal point of a revitalized community and a restored ecosystem.

In this unique slice of Buffalo's heritage, this community vision plan imagines a place where families will be able to take a relaxing stroll or ride their bikes surrounded by trees and wildflowers. Neighbors and visitors will be able watch as seasons change, from the fall migration of songbirds and monarch butterflies, to winter's chilly serenity and summer's warm embrace, marveling at the diversity of nature, our industrial and railroad heritage, and the magic of a sunset on the Buffalo River. Here, with the right investments and connectivity, vitality will return to local commercial districts and streets will become safer and more inviting for everyone. Thoughtful stewardship will breathe new life and new possibilities into this long dormant space — not just for today but for generations to come.



Image Source: Abby Songin



GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- 1) Respect the character and history of local communities and increase quality of life for residents
- 2) Embrace and enhance nature that thrives along the corridor
- 3) Provide different kinds of recreational uses and programming year round
- 4) Create connections to existing assets while planning for future projects, needs and growth
- 5) Design with long-term use, maintenance and safety in mind
- 6) Serve as a catalyst for additional investment and opportunity

The development of the trail and linear park will be informed by precedents in New York State, across the country and around the world. From Detroit to Chicago, and Philadelphia to Toronto, cities within a few hours drive of Buffalo have shown how these kinds of projects can revitalize neglected spaces and inspire neighborhoods — even whole regions. These projects have also demonstrated how local character and residents’ voices can transform liabilities into assets unique to each community.

By remaining true to Buffalo’s history and heritage — and the blossoming natural regeneration of this special place — as a community, we have the opportunity to create an incredible new chapter with and within the storied Old First Ward, Perry, and Valley neighborhoods. The connections that this new trail and linear park can provide will transform a barrier into a unifying feature and create a centerpiece these neighborhoods can be proud of. This will provide an open call to visitors from across Buffalo Niagara and beyond to explore, experience, and engage with nature in the middle of the city.

Based on the principles and strategies highlighted in this vision plan, and with continual engagement of neighbors and stakeholders from throughout the region, the Land Conservancy will lead a design competition to generate ideas and concepts for the corridor. The designs and concepts that arise through this process will help shape the next chapter for this former rail line and the future of the surrounding neighborhoods.



Image Source: Hiro Hata



Image Source: Abby Songin



Image Source: Abby Songin

BACKGROUND AND PLANNING PROCESS

THE VISION STATEMENT

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The trail and linear park will be the focal point of a revitalized community and a restored ecosystem.

The abandoned DL&W rail corridor runs on an elevated berm from Canalside and the Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority (NFTA) train sheds at the DL&W terminal to the revitalized Buffalo River across from the new Tesla solar panel manufacturing facility. It is currently owned by the NFTA. For a mile and a half, through the Old First Ward, Perry, and Valley neighborhoods, this formerly industrial landscape can become a place where people can reconnect with nature and each other.

As demonstrated in cities near and far, unique public places like the former DL&W rail line can be an important part of a vibrant city. They give people a place to come together and build relationships, which leads to more cohesive and thriving neighborhoods. They give people a place to lead a more active lifestyle, and they provide the foundation for investment that increases commercial and economic development.

Thanks to a generous grant from the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Legacy Funds at the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo, and donations from our members, the Western New York Land Conservancy has been working with the community to create this aspirational vision plan for the corridor.

Together, we had many conversations with neighbors and other community members to find out what matters most for the future of this corridor. We are working with residents, local officials, and partner organizations to create new ways of thinking about and working towards a new day for this land.

The Land Conservancy is not the first to propose reinvesting in this location. Various plans, development proposals, community groups, and non-profits have previously flagged this corridor as an ideal place for a signature investment in Buffalo's trail system. This current effort has benefitted greatly from these previous proposals, and the Land Conservancy continues to work with and build relationships with the groups and individuals behind these earlier efforts.

Buffalo's Green Code has created an exciting new framework for integrating a traditional, people-centered urban form with access to productive and well planned green spaces. This unified development ordinance suggests the importance of access to nature and to the waterfront, and provides the overarching planning framework for development in the city and in these neighborhoods. The Land Use Plan included in the Green Code zones the DL&W corridor east of Louisiana Street as Open Space.



Green Code Zoning Map East of Louisiana Street, the DL&W corridor is zoned both Green (D-OG) and Natural (D-ON), both subsets of Open Space zones. Green zones are intended for a formal civic green, often identified as a public park, appropriate for some civic and commercial uses, in support of its primary use as a public space. Natural zones are intended to be set aside as protected areas principally used for the conservation of natural habitat, are at least a quarter of an acre, are characterized by wetlands, flood plains, or sensitive habitats, and are inappropriate for intensive use by the public, and appropriate only for passive recreation that is compatible with natural habitat.

At the same time, the Niagara River Greenway Plan has created a cohesive vision of a connected waterfront trail system running from Lake Erie to Lake Ontario. The portions of this plan that have already been built out, and the vast potential that remains within the city of Buffalo, including at the Outer and Inner Harbors, position this project along the DL&W corridor as a critical piece of regional infrastructure.

Conceptual renderings and notions of a trail along the DL&W corridor have appeared consistently in multiple planning documents. Beginning in the 1980's, the Buffalo River Remedial Action Plan envisioned similar trail systems. The Buffalo River Greenway Plan — created by Buffalo Niagara Waterkeeper in 1996 and updated in 2006 and again in 2014 — proposed a series of pedestrian and bike trails and reconstructed bridges along the corridor near what is now called Red Jacket River Front Park.

This community vision plan also builds on a conceptual plan that was independently produced in the summer of 2010 by Professor Hiro Hata of the University at Buffalo (UB) School of Architecture and Planning as part of his faculty research. Professor Hata continues to be engaged in this planning process.

Other UB School of Architecture and Planning faculty and their students have studied aspects of the corridor, including Harry Warren, Sean Burkeholder, and Joyce Hwan.

In 2013 the Perry Choice Neighborhood Commercial Revitalization Plan specifically cited the potential of a multi-use trail atop the DL&W berm, with connections to an on-street bicycle and pedestrian network as well as the existing waterfront trails to the Outer Harbor and Canalside.

The City of Buffalo has also included various comparable concepts along this corridor in planning documents, such as the Local Waterfront Revitalization Program, and most recently reaffirming the concept in the 2017 Buffalo River Corridor Brownfield Opportunity Area (BOA) plan. This plan developed three alternative scenarios for revitalizing nearby neighborhoods. Two scenarios that featured a multi-use trail on the DL&W corridor received a combined 80% of the public's support. Of these, the top choice received 60% of the overall vote and project planners noted that "key to this support was expanded recreation and access". An alternative scenario that proposed a streetcar/trolley along the corridor received 20% of the public's support.



Vision Plan Goal 1: Engage the community about reusing the DL&W corridor.

The Land Conservancy used a multi-faceted approach to engage neighborhood and community stakeholders. The Land Conservancy and its vision plan consultant, Make Communities, along with Hiro Hata as a design consultant, sought feedback about the revitalization of the DL&W corridor across a diverse set of constituencies.

The Land Conservancy sent letters, called, and hung flyers on the doors of houses directly adjacent to the corridor. They held neighborhood meetings to introduce the project and understand the ideas and concerns of the immediate neighbors. The Land Conservancy also held presentations and feedback sessions at local community centers, engaging members of The Old First Ward Community Center, the Perry Tenant Council, and the Valley Neighborhood Watch Association. In addition, stakeholder meetings were held with business leaders and the leadership of various other non-profit and environmental organizations. A paper and online survey was distributed to gauge the interest and ideas of people from the neighborhood and region, garnering more than 460 responses, 100 of which were from the neighborhoods surrounding the corridor. A public meeting hosted at the Larkin at Exchange building drew nearly 200 people to share their reactions to the emerging vision, as well as additional hopes and ideas for the creation of a new trail and linear park. Shortly after the public meeting, the Land Conservancy organized a presentation with national experts and local community leaders about the project that was attended by another 175 people.

This vision plan is a result of the direct input from the community members who offered their time, ideas, opinions, and their passion for this project and their neighborhood, their city and the region.

Vision Plan Goal 2: Ensure that future use of the rail corridor is good for the community.

Throughout this process, the vast majority of neighbors have welcomed new development and new investment in their community. However, these residents have also made it clear that new development must be guided by those who live and work in the community.

This plan reflects the best efforts to ensure the trail is developed in a way that reflects a broad community vision and directly benefits neighborhood residents. The neighborhoods along the corridor are close-knit communities with a lot of history and pride. Neighborhood residents appreciate being near both nature and downtown. As the residents who offered input welcome new, well planned development, they would also like to see additional commercial and retail opportunities and more families with children living in the neighborhood. At the same time, there are concerns with speeding, parking regulations and pedestrian safety in the neighborhood that residents would like to see addressed. Neighbors would like to see any new trail improve the overall quality of life in the area while addressing negative impacts and respecting the privacy and security of existing homes.

Image Sources from top to bottom: James Hoggard, Dave Spiering, Abby Songin, Paula Sciuik

Vision Plan Goal 3: Create a vision for a new trail and linear park.

On the pages that follow, a vision for a trail and linear park is outlined. This vision points the way for future designers to translate community concerns and desires into a physical and operational plan for bringing this trail to fruition. The vision implies certain considerations and also raises questions that will need to be addressed in creative ways. For example, how can access points be provided that contribute to neighborhood vibrancy while respecting the quiet and family-oriented nature of the narrow streets and blocks in the Old First Ward? How can the reuse of the rail bed provide a space for future generations to create long lasting childhood memories while addressing the challenges caused by its current state? How can the spirit of the wilderness that is reclaiming the space be maintained while limiting the spread of invasive plants, enhancing native plants and pollinator habitat and providing a safe, welcoming environment for local residents? How can the trail design and features like public art reference and respect the rich history of the local community? In what ways can the trail evolve to continually support the community and address unexpected obstacles and opportunities? Though challenges remain, this emergent vision provides a hopeful and achievable outlook for implementing a project of which the neighbors and members of the city and region can be proud.

Vision Plan Goal 4: Secure funding for additional phases of work.

Partial funding has already been secured for the next phase of this project. The Land Conservancy has proposed a design competition to translate this vision document into on-the-ground designs, ideas, and inspirations that reflect the will of the community. M&T Bank, the New York State Environmental Protection Fund through the Conservation Partnership Program, and the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy through the Doppelt Family Trail Development Fund have made a significant commitment to supporting this design competition, and additional funding commitments are also being sought. With a timeline of 12-18 months, this community-centered competition will provide the compelling and innovative blueprint needed to gain the resources required to build and manage the project going forward.

Image Sources from top to bottom: James Hoggard, Calvin Nemeč, James Hoggard



WHAT WE HEARD FROM THE NEIGHBORHOOD AND THE COMMUNITY

Image Source: Paula Sciuk

This process began with the intent of building a community vision for the DL&W corridor. To accomplish this, the broad array of outreach and input opportunities outlined earlier in this document were implemented.

Neighbors of the project have common reasons for enjoying their neighborhood, including both a close knit community that looks out for one another, and a high number of residents who have family members living nearby. This results in a sense of safety, though some community members expressed a sense that this was eroding as disinvestment has continued in many areas.

The proximity to nature — the presence of deer, hawks, and turkeys, for example — was also viewed as positive. The duality of being so close to nature and so close to downtown, while living on a quiet, peaceful street was highlighted as a unique neighborhood asset by those who live here. The history of their communities, both from a regional and family perspective are also a source of pride for residents.

Local residents like that the elevated berm of the old DL&W rail line (known locally as “the Del” to many, or — where there were bridges — the “Trestles”) is in the neighborhood, but it is currently a source of challenges due to its unauthorized and unsupervised use. Residents have a long history and fond memories of being on the Del, for activities as diverse as sledding and sneaking beers as teenagers. These activities still happen, and others such as ATVs riding on the berm, or vandals damaging property from up on the Del, create nuisances and dangers to the neighborhood.

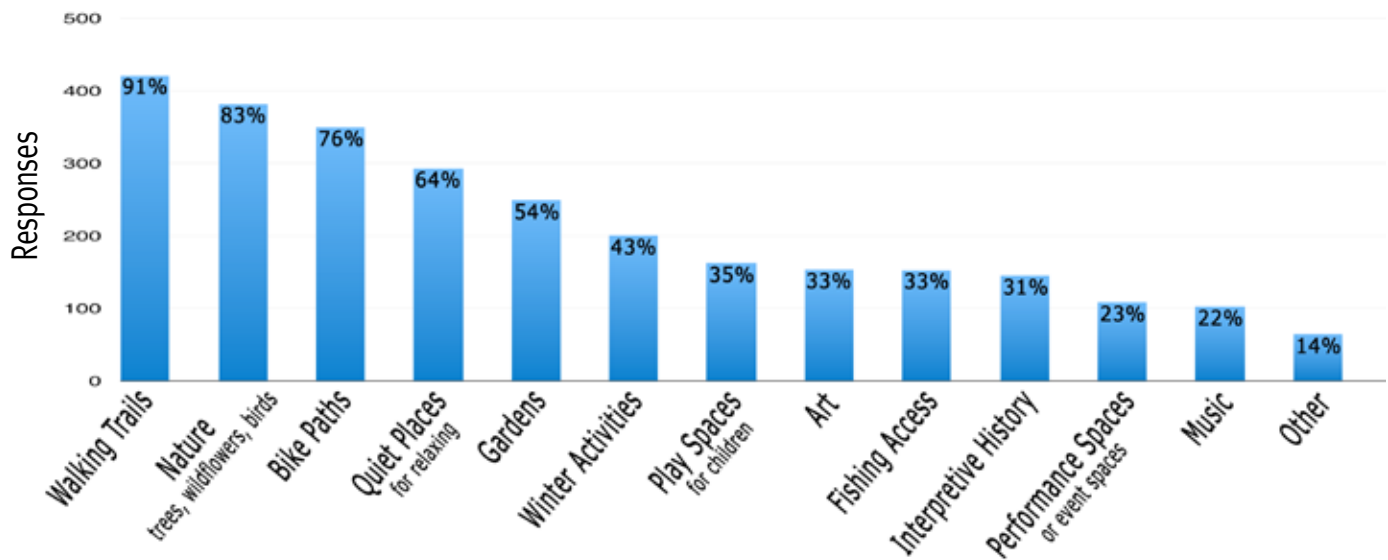


Image Source: James Hoggard

Yet, in general, the Del creates a sense of privacy, and adds a unique character to the adjacent neighborhood. People who live directly adjacent to the Del are happy to have the concrete wall at the base of the berm form a unique feature of their yards. Some have painted a mural on their portion, and universally, people want the wall and the berm to stay.

In broader outreach activities, an overwhelming majority of people who attended events and answered the on-line survey were supportive of the notion of a nature centered multi-use trail. In fact of the more that 460 people (100 of whom lived in the 14202 and 14210 zip codes where the DL&W corridor is located) who answered the survey, 91% indicated they'd like to see a walking trail, 83% indicated they would like to see nature highlighted and 76% indicated they would like to see a bicycle path. More than 80% of respondents also indicated that they would like to remain involved in the planning process as it moves forward.

Survey Responses: What amenities would you like to see?



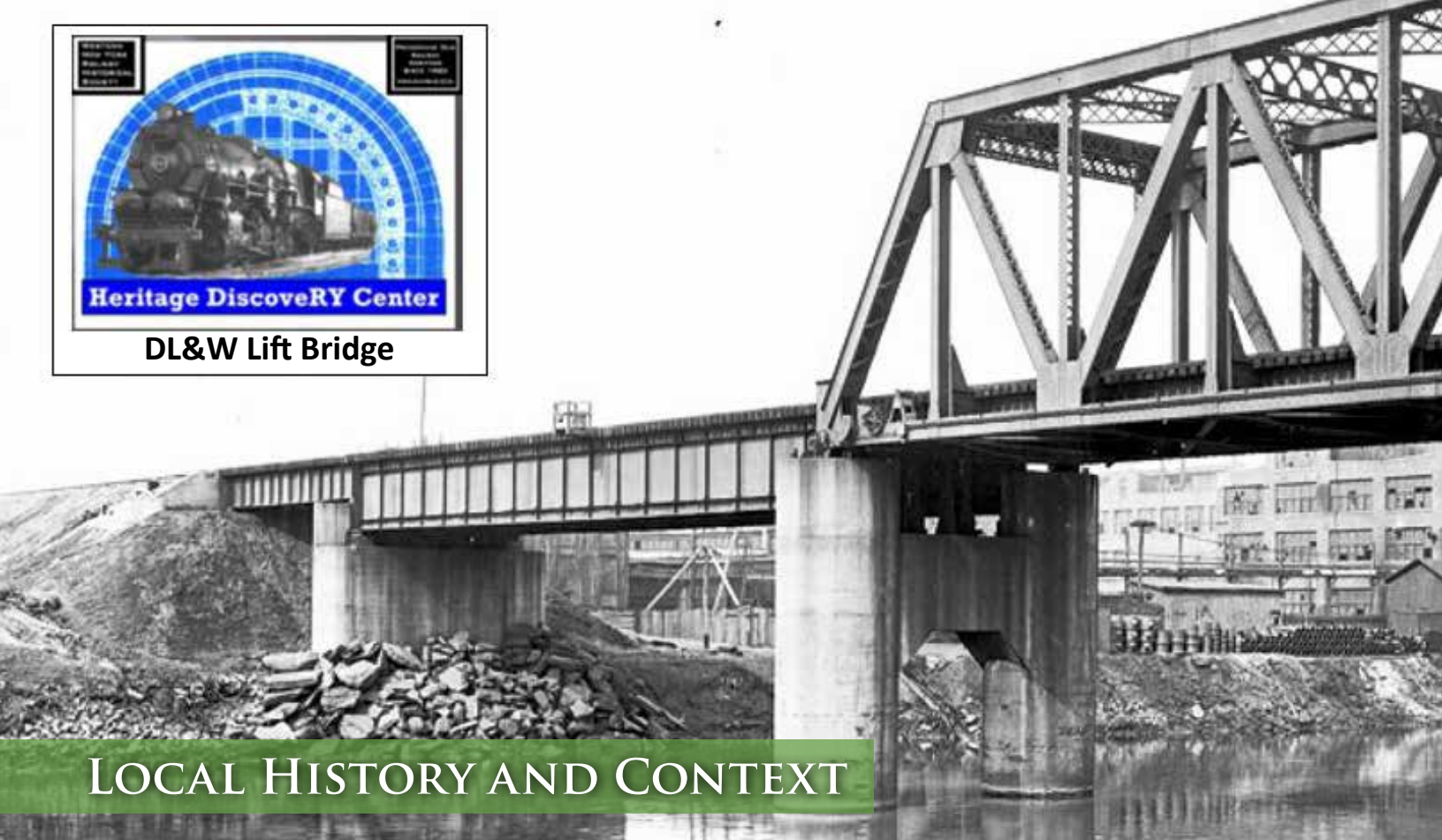
Neighbors raised concerns about maintaining their privacy and ensuring proper security along the length of the corridor. For immediate neighbors, the prospect of creating a space that was over-programmed or continually attracted festivals and crowds to their blocks was not welcome. People have concerns about ongoing maintenance, and they value and want to protect the elements of nature that currently exist. There are already problems with speeding and parking in the neighborhood, so a broader look at access, complete streets, and walkability is a potential by-product of this effort that people believe is long overdue. Creating distinct features and characteristics in separate sections of the trail was one way residents believed these concerns could be addressed.

Neighbors believe the trail should not be conceived or designed in a vacuum. It is important to neighbors that the neighborhood's history is reflected and that art and local artists are incorporated to celebrate and elevate the important and colorful role this area has played in the region's development. Connections to other existing parks, such as Father Conway Park, River Fest Park, Valley Nature Park, Mutual Riverfront Park, and Red Jacket River Front Park should be considered. The design should create a new experience in the community, a place to walk, hike, or bike. The design should consider how the trail can accommodate passive and active recreation across ages and abilities, from children through adulthood and for seniors. And the design should consider more than just the summer months, planning activities and design considerations for year round use.

In each of the adjacent neighborhoods, residents speak fondly of the ties to neighbors and family. Many residents have lived their whole lives in these neighborhoods, and some even recall with nostalgia the childhood rivalries between adjacent blocks or communities. Yet, these long-term residents also now recognize the interdependence of the neighborhoods. As each looks forward to new investment, each also acknowledges that changes must take place with their input to fit within their vision of a revitalized community. Many residents hope that the creation of a shared public trail will help enhance community connections and cohesion among neighborhoods.



This image represents one potential arrangement for different uses and design needs for the trail and linear park based on geographic context. Section A has been flagged for a potential "rails-with-trails" configuration by the NFTA; Section B is in close proximity to homes and should be designed to consider appropriate privacy and screening; Section C will need to address how to traverse active rail lines; and Section D is most immersed in a park and natural setting and has direct access to the Buffalo River.



LOCAL HISTORY AND CONTEXT

Image Source: Heritage Discovery Center

The history of the land surrounding the DL&W corridor is long and storied, involving indigenous heritage, waves of immigration, economic innovation, and working class residents of various backgrounds who contributed to the building of Buffalo and the United States.

The history of indigenous people in the region dates back centuries, if not millennia. Long prior to European colonization, the Haudenosaunee called lands across the present day state of New York home. The Seneca Nation (known as Onondowahgah) was one of five member nations of the Haudenosaunee and resided in Western New York dating to the birth of a confederacy of nations 500 years ago, including a significant village in what is now the City of Buffalo. The Seneca Nation became known as the Keepers of the Western Door, protecting themselves and other nations united under the Confederacy whenever the Sacred Tree of Peace (the constitution which governed the Haudenosaunee) was threatened. The Seneca Nation's history of collective and individual achievement within and around Buffalo includes Red Jacket (Sa-go-ye-wat-ha) who now has a park named in his honor adjacent to the DL&W corridor. Today, the Seneca Nation maintains a presence in the neighborhood and operates a sovereign territory at the Seneca Buffalo Creek Casino on the edge of Buffalo's Cobblestone District.

The present day Old First Ward, Perry, and Valley neighborhoods have their own individual and distinct history, but also a shared trajectory based on the rise and fall of shipping and commerce along the Buffalo River and Lake Erie. Buffalo's rise as a city was spurred by the Erie Canal, which provided a water route from the Great Lakes of the mid-west to the port cities of the East Coast. The scale of the canal, however, required the transfer of cargo from

larger freighters of the lakes to the smaller packet boats that were capable of navigating the canal. Later, with the rise of the railroads, the means of transport changed. It was with this growth that the industrial neighborhoods along the river were bisected by heavy rail lines along and through residential and commercial areas.

The DL&W corridor — short for the Delaware, Lackawanna, and Western Railroad Company — was just one of the many rail lines that were active in the community. It connected Buffalo to Hoboken, New Jersey, and transported both freight and passengers between the East Coast and the Great Lakes. It operated from the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s.

This industry also led to major industrial innovation, including the birth of the grain elevator. These historic elevators, many of which still stand along the river, not only revolutionized grain storage and shipping, but also had a major influence on modernist architecture of the 20th Century. The shipping industry also spurred many additional sectors and businesses throughout the city, such as the creation of the American Express and Wells Fargo companies.

But perhaps no neighborhood in Buffalo is as closely linked to this water-oriented industrial heritage as the Old First Ward. Even as technology and the means of transport changed, the fundamentals of the shipping industry remained the same. As a transshipment point, large numbers of blue collar jobs were needed along the waterfront, many of them centered along the Buffalo River and the Old First Ward. These jobs provided a draw for many European immigrants, giving the neighborhood its Irish heritage that persists to the present day.



Historic grain elevators on the Buffalo River.

Image Source: Calvin Nemeec

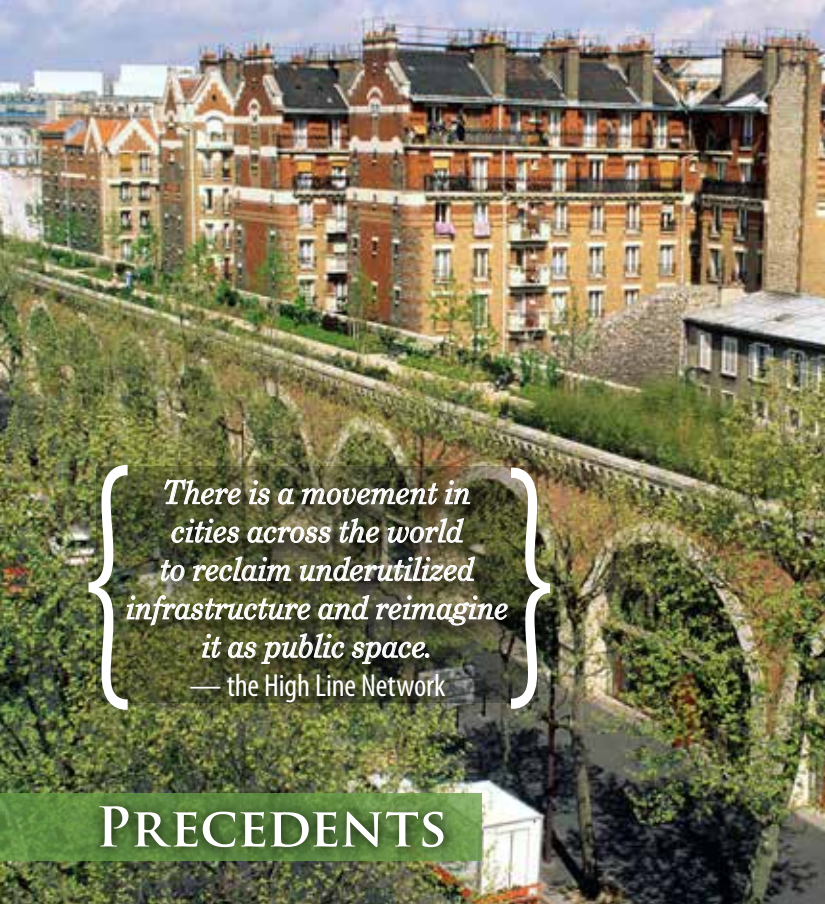
In the late 1950s, with the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway, a direct water route was opened between the Great Lakes and the shipping channels of the Atlantic, removing Buffalo's relevance as an inland transshipment point — and the economy it supported. Job loss, outward migration to the suburbs and out of state, commercial and residential vacancy, and infrastructure disinvestment followed. However, pride in the community has not wavered or waned. Recent investments — in parks and greenways, in restaurants and bars, in historic architecture, in new housing, and in public arts and events — have created a new sense of opportunity and revival. These investments have come from current and new residents of the Old First Ward, outside investors, and the diligent work of the Old First Ward Community Association and the Valley Community Association, among other groups.

The Perry Neighborhood, to the western and northern ends of the DL&W corridor, was constructed in the late 1930s within an early 20th century modernist vision of housing and is comprised almost exclusively of properties owned and managed by the Buffalo Municipal Housing Authority. The style of housing in Perry was created within large scale superblocks and it was not well integrated with the existing neighborhoods or with the commercial areas on South Park Avenue along its southern edge. The neighborhood is likewise bounded by the I-190 interstate to the north, creating a somewhat isolated area. The neighborhood has been impacted by the larger trends in Buffalo's economy and population. According to residents, in the 1980s things began to deteriorate in the neighborhood's upkeep. Since then, the community has suffered disinvestment and population loss, including the demolition of a significant number of housing units from the neighborhood. Many buildings in the community remain vacant and unkempt. Residents retain pride in their history, in their shared experiences, and in their present

day efforts to improve their neighborhood, including a community history project and an annual Perry Days celebration spearheaded by the Perry Tenant Council that draws hundreds of current residents and Perry alumni.

The Valley neighborhood, on the eastern end of the DL&W corridor, takes its name not from natural features, but from the elevated bridges that formerly provided the only road access into the neighborhood. Criss-crossed by rail lines and bordered to the south by the meandering Buffalo River, this community, like the Old First Ward, has a history closely tied to the industry on and along the riverfront. As industry has receded, nature has begun to once again take hold. Red Jacket River Front Park provides a green space on the edge of the neighborhood and along the DL&W corridor, and new investment in the nearby Larkin District and a massive solar panel plant that houses Tesla across the river are bringing new energy to this community that has been primed for renewal by its strong network of neighbors and the work of the Valley Community Association.

Neighborhood residents and stakeholders have not just watched but have participated in the revitalization of local places, undertaking transformations that would have been unfathomable even a decade ago: from the crowds at Canalside to the festivals at River Fest Park; the kayakers and fishing aficionados in the waterways; the tour groups, cyclists, and joggers along Ohio Street and the pocket parks developed along the river; and the new businesses popping up within the neighborhoods and along South Park Avenue. Yet disinvestment still mars many blocks, and infrastructure reflects the needs and neglect of earlier eras. While the history of these communities represents stories of both pride and of loss, the present is a time of promise and potential.



There is a movement in cities across the world to reclaim underutilized infrastructure and reimagine it as public space.
— the High Line Network

PRECEDENTS

Left Photo: Paris' Coulée verte René-Dumont (Image Source: The Guardian);
Right Photo: Manhattan's High Line (Image Source: Friends of the High Line)

Converting underutilized or abandoned transportation corridors into recreational use and lush areas for nature is a relatively new phenomenon, but this growing trend is among the most significant urban planning and design transformations in the early part of the 21st century.

The first project credited with converting an abandoned rail line for public use is Paris' Coulée verte René-Dumont (Green Course) which opened in 1993. However, the High Line in New York City is likely the most well-known project. Recognizing that each of these infrastructure reuse projects — many crafted from the remains of abandoned rail lines — has similarities and common challenges, the leadership at the High Line launched the High Line Network, a collection of 19 related projects across North America. This network seeks to define best practices, develop tools and tips, and help localities undertaking these kinds of projects adapt to local needs and conditions.

Though the High Line draws seven million visitors each year, and has sparked an unprecedented building boom on New York's west side, other projects in the network have had very different experiences and exist within vastly different geographic and market conditions. Each has a unique and instructive story to tell. Common among them is the desire to inject new places of respite, life, and vitality that prioritize the human experience over the traffic and noise that too often dominates urban spaces. A sampling of these projects provided guidance for developing this vision plan. None among the examples that follow have sought to recreate long decommissioned rail usage. Shared among them is their ability to knit together neighborhoods and form connections where disused places from earlier eras lingered as scars on the fabric of the community.



Image Source: The High Line Network

DEQUINDRE CUT GREENWAY, Detroit, Michigan detroitriverfront.org/riverfront#dequindre

- Type:** Sunken former railbed
- Access modes:** Pedestrian and cyclist
- Features:** 20ft path with striped walking and biking lanes; seven access ramps from street level; some existing street art retained, other works commissioned for the corridor
- Length:** 2 miles
- Opened:** 1st Phase — 2009; 2nd Phase — 2016
- Structure:** Nonprofit and private partnership
- Managed By:** Detroit Riverfront Conservancy
- Funding:** Federal government, City of Detroit, the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan and the Detroit Economic Growth Corporation
- Of Note:** The 2016 LINK Detroit project (funded in large part by a \$10M federal grant) connects Dequindre Cut with midtown & Hamtramck, as well as Eastern Market Streetscape enhancement and bridge reconstruction; bike rentals available



Image Source: The Trust for Public Land



Image Source: Studio Bryan Hanes

THE 606/ BLOOMINGDALE RAIL TRAIL,

Chicago, Illinois

the606.org

Type: Mixed grade former railbed

Access modes: Pedestrian and cyclists, snowshoeing, cross country skiing

Features: Connects Logan Square, Humboldt Park, Wicker Park, and Bucktown neighborhoods; also includes 6 ground level parks, a wheel-friendly event plaza, an observatory, art installations, educational programming

Length: 2.7 miles

Opened: 2015

Additional Phases: Ongoing

Structure: Nonprofit and public partnership

Managed By: Chicago Park District in partnership with the Trust for Public Land and the City of Chicago, Friends of Bloomingdale Trail

Funding: Federal, state and local funding, as well as private and corporate philanthropy; \$56M in public funds and \$20M in private donations (\$19M TBD).

Of Note: 2 foot rubberized running strips in both directions; light snow is cleared from the trail, but snowshoeing, cross country skiing are allowed and encouraged on the trail when snow exceeds 3 inches

PHILADELPHIA RAIL PARK,

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

therailpark.org

Type: Mixed grade former railbed

Access modes: Pedestrian and cyclists (primarily separated)

Features: Will connect 10 neighborhoods and downtown, elevated and potentially below grade portions; will include industrial style design, gardens and amenities such as porch swing benches

Length: 3 miles

Phase I: The Viaduct (1/4 mile) - 2018

Phase 2 (the Cut) & Phase 3 (the Tunnel): ongoing

Structure: Nonprofit and public partnership

Managed By: City of Philadelphia, Department of Parks & Recreation (basic landscaping); Center City District (cleaning & public safety); Friends of the Rail Park (specialized maintenance services, programming & communications)

Funding: Phase 1 (\$10.3M) Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, the City of Philadelphia, the William Penn Foundation, the Knight Foundation, Poor Richard's Charitable Trust, The McLean Contributionship, a host of individuals and the Friends of the Rail Park

Of Note: Portion nearest downtown focus of Phase I with support from downtown district management non-profit, with an explicit focus on economic development and housing development for downtown adjacent neighborhoods



Image Source: DLANDstudio & WXY



Image Source: Public Work

QUEENSWAY, Queens, New York

thequeensway.org

Type: Mixed grade former railbed (elevated & at grade)

Access modes: Pedestrian and cyclist (primarily separated)

Features: The plan calls for six distinct areas: The Clearing; North Passage; Metropolitan Hub; Forest Park Grove; South Passage; and The Elevated; most of these sections include a call to be “locally focused”

Length: 3.5 miles

Current Phase: Advocacy and design

Structure: Nonprofit and public partnership

Managed By: City-owned and managed; Friends of the Queensway, Trust for Public Land to create QueensWay Conservancy to manage programming and outreach for park events and philanthropic fundraising

Funding (planning phase): NYS Office of Parks, Recreation & Historic Preservation; Regional Economic Development Council; NYC Department of Environmental Protection; and various private foundations

Of Note: Vision for the QueensWay grew out of five large public meetings, 30 workshops and meetings with community groups, and hundreds of stakeholder discussions; the QueensWay was designed to respond to neighbors privacy and safety concerns, while providing openness and visibility for park users

THE BENTWAY, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

thebentway.ca

Type: Ground level, under elevated expressway

Access modes: Pedestrian and cyclist, ice skating trail in winter

Features: Recreational amenities, public markets, public art, special exhibitions, festivals, theatre and musical performances

Length: 1.1 miles upon completion

Phase I: First section opened January 2018

Structure: Nonprofit and public partnership

Managed By: The Bentway Conservancy; Developed in cooperation with City of Toronto, Waterfront Toronto, Judy and Wilmot Matthews, Ken Greenberg Consultants, PUBLIC WORK, Fort York National Historic Site, and Artscape

Funding: Catalyzed by a \$25 million dollar grant from a private donor

Of Note: Focus on year round programming and events, connects historic and entertainment sites in downtown Toronto with a focus on arts, culture, and recreation



11TH STREET BRIDGE, Washington, D.C.

bridgepark.org

Type: Elevated former highway bridge

Access modes: Pedestrian and cyclist

Features: Situated 30 feet above the river connecting disparate neighborhoods, design will be based on a set of community sourced design principles and values; envisioned as a park and cultural venue and including 21st century play spaces

Length: ¼ mile crossing the length of the Anacostia River and comprising 3 acres

Current Phase: Advocacy and design, projected 2019 opening

Structure: Nonprofit and public partnership

Managed By: Non-profit Building Bridges Across the River and the Washington DC government

Funding: Estimated \$55 million construction costs, current funding relies primarily on foundation and individual philanthropic donations

Of Note: Following a year long community process, released an equitable development plan and partnered to launch a \$50 million Local Initiatives Support Corp. DC program: Elevating Equity which is “devoted to fostering equitable and inclusive development in the neighborhoods within a 1-mile radius” of the future park



Image Sources from top to bottom: OMA+OLIN, OMA+OLIN, Jeff Salmore



Image Source: Abby Songin

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

With precedents from across the country, and with direct input from neighbors and the broader Buffalo–Niagara community of stakeholders, this vision plan outlines a set of guiding principles to shape the design, building, operations, and maintenance of a new trail and linear park on the DL&W corridor. Once drafted, these principles — and the strategies that follow in the next section of this plan — were brought back to the community at an open house. Nearly 200 people attended this session, providing feedback on each proposed principle and filling out questionnaires on their general reaction to the evolving vision plan. After listening to the presentation and discussing the principles and strategies with staff and volunteers, 94% of the people who responded to the questionnaire agreed that they were excited by the possibility of a trail on the DL&W corridor. The same percentage said they were mostly or very happy with what they had seen at the open house, and that the initial draft vision statement was either just about right (57%) or completely on point (37%).

1) Respect the character and history of local communities and increase quality of life for residents

The history of the community is a great source of pride for local residents, from some of its earliest inhabitants, the Haudenosaunee, through the early European (predominantly Irish) settlements to the Great Migration’s impacts on Buffalo’s African–American heritage, and from its early innovation to its shipping and manufacturing peak and post-industrial reinvention. The DL&W rail line itself played an important role in this history, connecting downtown Buffalo and its industrial powerhouses east to the New York Metro area at Hoboken, New Jersey.

The communities surrounding the DL&W corridor — the Old First Ward, Perry, and Valley neighborhoods — possess local, regional, and national significance. The neighborhoods are largely close knit communities, and the stories of generations of intertwining residents and families likewise provide a character and camaraderie that is a product of and a contributor to this history.

These neighborhoods also face shared challenges. The decline of the manufacturing base and shipping industries, combined with outmigration and systemic disinvestment, have created job access and quality of life concerns. Though signs of new investment have popped up along Buffalo’s waterfront, these communities have yet to fully participate in the revitalization that has begun to spread throughout the city.

By responding to the context of each of these neighborhoods, and by providing a source of revitalization and an anchor for reinvestment, a new trail and linear park can celebrate the past and present of these remarkable places, and help lay the groundwork for a more vibrant future.

2) Embrace and enhance nature that thrives along the corridor

Local residents and nature lovers from across the region have voiced their appreciation for the natural beauty that has flourished where industry once dominated. The juxtaposition of the area’s industrial heritage alongside the return of plants and animals provides a unique and accessible window into the beauty and the history in these contrasts. The dualities of being so close to nature and so close to downtown, while living on quiet, peaceful streets are highlights that make the community special.

Significant and pioneering reclaimed natural areas, such as Tift Nature Preserve and Times Beach Nature Preserve are nearby on Buffalo’s Outer Harbor. These assets contribute to an internationally designated globally significant Important Bird Area and migration pathway, putting the Niagara River corridor on par with places like the Galapagos and the Everglades. The restoration of the Buffalo River has provided for the return of both wildlife and people to its banks and its water, and many local residents are clamoring for additional access points for canoes and kayaks, and for recreational fishing. The re-envisioned corridor can contribute to this regeneration and provide a new and compelling place for people to interact with and experience nature in the city.



Image Source: James Hoggard

In celebrating the proximity of nature — the presence of deer, hawks, and turkeys, for example — residents value and want to protect the elements of nature that currently exist. But non-native invasive plants and questionable soil conditions threaten the sustainability of the biodiversity that has been regenerating. This project will enhance biodiversity and address invasive species, while providing the conditions for native plants and wildlife — from butterflies to birds and more — to thrive.

3) Provide for different kinds of recreational uses and programming year round

The design of the corridor will accommodate passive and active recreation across ages, abilities, and interests. Neighbors want play spaces for children as well as a place for seniors to stroll and relax. In developing a place to walk, hike, run or bike, the design should consider how the trail can include both recreational users and people walking and cycling to work, while continuing to provide passive recreational opportunities. Bird watching, fishing, watching trains pass under the double bridge or small boats and kayaks drift by on the Buffalo River, or finding a spot to read a book or contemplate nature should all be comfortable and inviting activities on the trail.

Though there are concerns about large scale events conflicting with private areas along the corridor, more work should be done to determine what kinds of events, concessions, tours, classes, or other programming may be feasible on this space — or in parks and public spaces along its length — to make it a vibrant destination. At the same time, the offerings on the trail and linear park should complement, rather than replicate, those available at other locations near the waterfront.

The project should plan for design and programming that celebrates year round use. The DL&W corridor has a history of supporting winter activities — such as sledding along the berm — and the natural landscape shifts and changes throughout the seasons, with each bringing a new perspective and experience to those who return again and again.

With innovative design and intentional relationship building, the old rail corridor should also be a place that engages new users with public and natural spaces. Whether through local schools, youth organizations, block clubs, or other community groups, building an inclusive and welcoming space will require being deliberate about engagement and responsiveness.

4) Create connections to existing assets while planning for future projects, needs and growth

In the last decade, many of Buffalo's neglected assets — from its historic grain elevators to its miles of waterfront along the Buffalo River and Lake Erie — have been reactivated with many new public spaces being created: River Fest Park, Canalside, Mutual Riverfront Park, Wilkeson Pointe, and Red Jacket River Front Park to name a few. New bike lanes and pedestrian pathways now crisscross these neighborhoods, from South Park Avenue to Ohio Street and leading to the Outer Harbor; and a major restoration initiative has made the Buffalo River cleaner and more enjoyable than in decades. This new public investment has also sparked private sector development, from Silo City to Riverworks and Harbor Center, to Larkinville and Tesla, along with breweries, distilleries, restaurants, and cafes as well as new riverfront housing. These new amenities add to the cultural sites and job centers within these neighborhoods and nearby in downtown.

Residents and visitors alike will benefit from the enhanced linkages the trail can provide, and these connections will help spur additional revitalization. In addition to accommodating current demand and future development, the presence of a new trail along the DL&W corridor also has the potential to increase the number of visitors to other existing facilities. In fact, 83% of survey respondents indicated they would use local parks and amenities more often if there were increased connectivity between these sites. To maximize this potential, it will be important to have a clear and coordinated wayfinding system to better promote and connect local and regional assets.

A new trail should not preclude other types of connectivity elsewhere in the area. While 3% of survey respondents wrote in "light rail" as an amenity they would like to see along the length of the corridor, the NFTA has indicated the section of the corridor west of Louisiana Street may be needed for this purpose. To accommodate future potential light rail expansions that would link with the existing light rail along Main Street, this section of the corridor, which has not been designated Open Space in the City's Land Use Plan, should be designed in a way to accommodate a possible "rail-with-trail" configuration.



Image Source: Larry Brooks



Image Source: James Hogard

6) Serve as a catalyst for additional investment and opportunity

The decline of industry in Buffalo and along the Buffalo River severely impacted the surrounding neighborhoods, reducing employment opportunities and fostering a cycle of residential and commercial disinvestment. Today, as these neighborhoods show signs of revival, neighbors are hopeful that development of the trail and linear park could spark new businesses and retail while providing an incentive for young families to move into the neighborhood. Neighbors long for the return of commerce to South Park Avenue and other retail nodes throughout the area, and would like to have places where they can meet their daily needs (such as a supermarket and bank) without leaving their neighborhood.

The development of the trail should connect trail users to the existing neighborhoods to increase local economic activity while also providing a safer, more inviting environment for current residents. Examining connectivity, complete streets and walkability as a part of — or as a companion to — this process can be yet another seed of revitalization and reinvestment. Repairing and modernizing infrastructure for a more inviting and livable community can also help to restore a sense of pride and participation in public space throughout the neighborhood.

It will be important to be aware of unintended consequences of new attention and new development in the neighborhoods. Other infrastructure reuse projects throughout the country have sparked displacement in addition to investment. Ensuring that current residents — and working class Buffalonians — can continue to live in and enjoy the neighborhoods along the corridor will require the cooperation and support of neighbors, non-profits, the development sector, and the government.

As in the broader neighborhoods, the consensus among the direct neighbors seems to be that they are not opposed to development in the area and, in fact, welcome new investment. What is crucial as investment accelerates, though, is making sure that residents maintain a voice and a presence in the decision making process as plans are created and implemented.

5) Design with long-term use, maintenance and safety in mind

Residents like that the DL&W corridor is in the neighborhood, but it is currently a source of challenges due to unauthorized and unsupervised use. Neighborhood residents have a long history and fond memories of being on the DL&W, for activities as diverse as sledding and their first tastes of freedom as teenagers. These activities still happen, and others (such as ATVs speeding along the trail, or vandals damaging property from up on the berm) create nuisances and dangers to the neighbors. Creating a safe environment begins in the design stages, but also includes partnerships, programming, and other measures to create a space that is inclusive of and respected by all.

The vast majority of people engaged in this process — through community meetings, focus groups, surveys, and public meetings — were supportive of a publicly accessible trail, but many adjacent residents raised concerns about maintaining their privacy and ensuring proper security along its length. For immediate neighbors in the Old First Ward section of the corridor, the prospects of creating a space that was over-programmed or continually attracted festivals and large crowds to their blocks were not welcome. Concerns with parking and access were also frequent, so designing access points that accommodate visitors without being overly disruptive to neighbors will be important.

Various people and groups have also expressed concerns about ongoing maintenance and stewardship of the corridor. New parks and trails along the waterfront have been generally well received and well maintained. However, these spaces do require a plan and a budget for upkeep, and should be designed in a way that they are inviting yet durable.



STRATEGIES

Image Source: Jacob Jordan

The guiding principles of this vision plan provide the conceptual framework for moving the trail and linear park project forward to the next steps. A series of strategies has also been compiled from the community's ideas and feedback that create ways to move these principles toward specific action steps. Some of these strategies can be enacted early in the process, while others will be activated at later stages. Some will be consistent issues and some will evolve over time. Some can be championed by the Western New York Land Conservancy and some will require organizational partnerships or neighborhood based initiatives. No matter the timing or the people carrying them out — if enacted — each of these strategies can move the effort closer to the vision created by the community.

1) Respect the character and history of local communities and increase quality of life for residents

- Celebrate the heritages of the neighborhoods - the Haudenosaunee, the industrial and railroad history, and the working class character - through design elements, interpretive features and signage, programming, events, storytelling, and art.
- Design each area of the trail to fit the context of the surrounding neighborhood; ensuring privacy and screening for closely populated areas, while creating activity centers and larger gathering places for appropriate events in less densely populated areas.
- Partner to produce public art and wherever possible engage local artists to complement the stories of the neighborhoods and the people who live there.
- Minimize the impact of potentially disruptive elements to the local neighborhood, such as traffic, parking and noise, and determine if additional infrastructure improvements (i.e., sidewalks, signage and road redesigns) and regulatory changes (i.e., revised traffic or parking restriction modifications) can enhance the livability of the neighborhoods.

- Retain the elevated berm and cement wall along the berm's base; these are distinct and cherished elements to the neighborhood.
- Explore ways to bring additional recreational opportunities to the land adjacent to the rail corridor, such as playgrounds, well designed pocket parks, gardens, and natural adventure spaces as appropriate.
- Though the railroad bridges spanning streets were removed long ago, consider the feasibility of restoring these connections and other ways to create safe crossings for trail users if these bridges are not immediately rebuilt.

2) Embrace and enhance nature that thrives along the corridor

- Emphasize nature, increasing biodiversity and ecosystem health and improving water quality along the length of the corridor.
- Retain and reinforce native trees, shrubs, grasses, and wildflowers — keeping as many mature trees as feasible — while removing non-native invasive plant species.
- Create observation points that allow visitors to take in scenes of the plants and animals along the trail and adjacent parks.
- Facilitate river access and fishing spots where possible, and create connections where direct access from the corridor is not present, in coordination with the Buffalo Blueway initiative.
- Create awareness of the wildlife that resides within the corridor through information resources (such as signage or web-based platforms) and through programming and tours.
- Study the potential of soil contamination along the rail bed and develop implementation strategies to mitigate or remediate any potential negative impacts of disturbing the existing conditions.

3) Provide different kinds of recreational uses and programming year round

- Explore parallel or separated trails for bicyclists and pedestrians.
- Provide areas of respite for those who would like to relax, enjoy views, and watch nature.
- Ensure that unique features like the half bridge and double bridge are given special treatment, and that there are opportunities to view the river, the city skyline, remnants of our industrial heritage, and the active rail lines from the trail.
- Create innovative play spaces for children on or adjacent to the trail.
- Consider creating spaces for larger group activities or events, away from closely populated areas.
- Explore the potential of creating concession areas where trail users can find refreshments.
- Plan for 'nature breaks' by providing access to washroom facilities.
- Create lighting that doesn't detract from natural beauty and that respects neighbors.
- Develop programming that meets a wide range of interests and proactively seek out groups that may not have ready access to nature and the trail.
- Keep the trail open year round and test design ideas that accommodate sledding, snowshoeing, cross-county skiing, or iceskating.
- Ensure access and meaningful experiences for those with differing abilities, striving for universal access.

4) Create connections to existing assets and plan for future projects, needs and growth

- Plan for trail connections to other parks and public spaces throughout the neighborhoods, connections from the trail to nearby areas and attractions such as Canalside, the Outer Harbor, Silo City, the Heritage Discovery Center, and Larkinville, and other potential connections as the area continues to redevelop.
- Provide wayfinding signage that helps users navigate to nearby parks, trails, water access, business districts, and other amenities.
- Explore ways to improve walkability in the neighborhoods so residents can access the trail and other trail users can access neighborhood destinations.
- Where appropriate for future transit expansion plans, allow for the potential addition of active rail along the corridor between the downtown DL&W terminal and Louisiana Street. This western section should be designed as a potential "rail-with-trail."
- Consider the ways in which this corridor fits within and connects to a broader vision of a regional trail system, including the Niagara River Greenway, the Buffalo River Greenway, the Buffalo Blueway, the Queen City Rail Trail, and the Empire State Trail.
- Connect to Buffalo's emerging on-street bicycle network, including the South Park bike lanes which connect to the Tesla facility and to South Buffalo.
- Promote the corridor's potential as a commuter route for people walking and bicycling and work with employers along its length and at its ends to create awareness and trail use.



Inset Image Source: Sara Heidinger, Right Side Image Source: Jacob Jordan

5) Design with long-term use, maintenance and safety in mind

- Design the trail in ways that promote safety and discourage improper use (such as by implementing Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design principles).
- Carefully consider access points and how they contribute to activity levels in the neighborhood, as well as perceptions of security on the trail.
- Employ a mix of visual screening techniques and open vistas to retain privacy for residents but avoid a sense of isolation on the trail.
- Create the trail with materials that are inviting and durable, minimizing maintenance needs while remaining an approachable and well-used destination.
- Engage multiple constituencies throughout each neighborhood adjacent to the trail and beyond. Creating a sense of ownership and pride in the trail will help prevent misuse.
- Develop partnerships that will keep frequent “eyes” on the trail, whether in the form of regular community activities, or in the form of rangers or trail guides.
- Plan and budget for upkeep and maintenance needs at the outset, before the trail is even built, and have clear roles, responsibilities, and expectations for partners engaged in its stewardship.
- Consider pedestrian and cyclist safety at street-crossings along the trail and throughout the surrounding neighborhoods.

6) Serve as a catalyst for additional investment and opportunity

- Continue to engage local residents and community members in all stages and phases of the development and operation of the trail.
- Ensure local residents have a presence in infrastructure and investment decisions that will impact their neighborhoods.
- Target employment opportunities and recruiting for jobs created through the development and operation of the trail within the adjacent neighborhoods.
- Work directly with the City, County, and State to ensure policies that allow local residents to benefit from reinvestment in the surrounding neighborhoods and prevent residential displacement.
- Complete trail connections to provide access to job centers and local commercial districts while spurring investment in commercial areas within the neighborhoods.
- Build partnerships with schools, universities, non-profits, and businesses to create spin-off job and business opportunities within the local community.
- Coordinate with local tourism promotion industries to maximize the potential to draw visitors and the time and money they spend within the neighborhood.



Image Sources from top to bottom: Paula Sciuk, Abby Songin, Priscilla Titus, James Hoggard

CONCEPTUAL RENDERINGS OF A REIMAGINED DL&W RAIL CORRIDOR

By Hiro Hata, UB School of Architecture and Planning



View from the forest near Red Jacket River Front Park



View along Miami Street near Louisiana Street



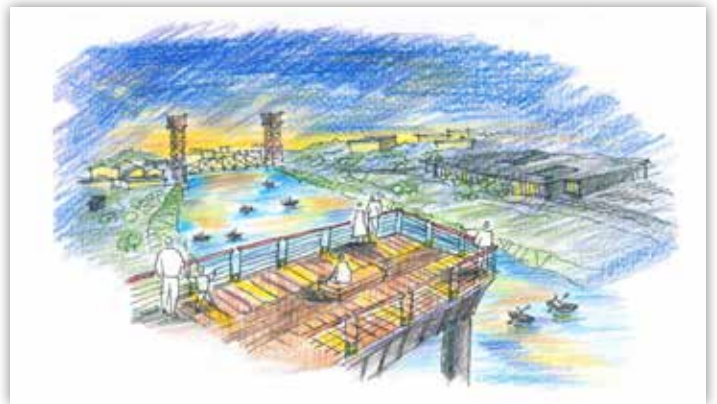
View of the trail and park along Miami street - summer



View of the trail and park along Miami street - winter



View of the half bridge over the Buffalo River



View of the half bridge over the Buffalo River



View down Louisiana Street near Miami Street



View of the double bridge over the active railroad line



NEXT STEPS

Image Source: Jacob Jordan

This vision plan represents the initial step in creating a trail and linear park. While the timeline for the construction and completion of the trail remains uncertain, many next steps have been outlined and are being implemented to build momentum and crystalize what a trail will look like, how it will function, and how it will be paid for and maintained.

NAMING

The final name of the trail is yet to be determined. Many members of the community have already provided ideas for naming the trail through the online survey and at other meetings and events. The Land Conservancy expects to work with project partners and the broader community to determine a name for the trail and linear park before the end of 2018.

DESIGN

The Land Conservancy will initiate a design competition that will translate the principles and strategies of this vision plan into multiple conceptual renderings for the community to consider and on which to provide feedback. This design competition will launch in the summer of 2018 with completion anticipated by the end of 2019. The full design competition is still in the planning phases, and more funding is needed in order to have a robust and successful process. Throughout the process, community participation will remain key, and the selected concepts will inform the final design phase.

CONSTRUCTION

The design of the trail will determine the cost of construction. Depending on project costs, available resources and sources of funds, regulatory approvals and required environmental studies, the trail and linear park may be completed in a single construction phase, or it may be divided into multiple smaller building projects. There are precedents for both approaches



Image Source: Jacob Jordan

throughout the High Line Network of project peers. For other projects, phasing has been handled geographically with, for instance, an initial quarter or third of a trail being brought to completion prior to the start of work on additional lengths. Another option for phasing may be to begin with a complete but basic trail throughout the corridor and continue to enhance amenities as funding and evolving usage become clearer. This approach can be compared to the “lighter, quicker, cheaper” method that has been employed on Buffalo’s Inner and Outer Harbors. This approach may create construction complications which would need to be factored into any potential schedules, but could also take the form of completing trail sections along the existing berm with street level access while restoring bridges over streets at a later date. The half bridge over the Buffalo River may remain a half bridge, or later phases of work could restore the connection to the other side of the river. Many other key features of the trail may have similar phasing considerations. No decisions about phasing have yet been made, and these considerations will be part of the design process.



Image Source: Abby Songin

MANAGEMENT

Infrastructure reuse projects across the country have adopted many different management arrangements to ensure that trails and public spaces continue to operate smoothly and that projects are maintained to provide a consistent and high quality experience for all users. Often this involves a “friends group”, and at times it also involves a larger pre-existing non-profit, public entity, or private business or business coalition. As the conceptual design is developed — including specific features, cost estimates, and maintenance and security needs — conversations regarding ongoing roles and responsibilities will continue to progress. Ultimately, this question will need to be answered prior to trail construction, and the impacts of that decision will need to be vetted and endorsed by the community, government agencies, and project partners alike. Nevertheless, multiple partners and agencies have already expressed excitement and a willingness to be a part of this project, and these initial partnerships will continue to be explored and nurtured so that the vision outlined in this plan can become a reality and can be sustained as a community asset for future generations.

LET’S DO THIS!

This vision plan lays out a framework for what a community of project supporters hopes the DL&W corridor will become. Many decisions are yet to be made, and the Land Conservancy is committed to continued collaboration throughout the process.

We are incredibly grateful for the support we have received from the many people who shared their expertise, time, ideas, and concerns with us. What happens at the DL&W corridor next will impact all of us. With the community guiding this effort, we know it will become a place that is cherished by everyone.

Let’s embrace this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. The Land Conservancy looks to the community to guide us on this journey and help us gather the funds needed to make this project a reality.

Together we can bring this vision to life. Thank you!



Image Source: Paula Sciuk



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