

# Olmsted Legacy in Danger

**The Niagara Heritage Partnership** is a group of concerned citizens who advocate the preservation and restoration of the region's natural environment and who encourage socially responsible development.

## WHAT'S HAPPENING HERE AND WHAT WE BELIEVE

- ❖ We believe that the waterfalls at Niagara and the gorge are the premier feature of our region's natural environment and that the direction of stewardship should be guided by them.
- ❖ The natural areas near the falls (Goat Island, Prospect Park) were reclaimed from commercial interests and restored over a century ago according to the vision of Frederick Law Olmsted. These areas, collectively called the State Reservation of Niagara, were reserved as an area to be forever wild, to feature the natural world over man-made amusements. This unique designation distinguishes these landscapes from the Olmsted parks in Buffalo.
- ❖ The New York Office of State Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation has changed the name from the State Reservation at Niagara to Niagara Falls State Park stating that visitors confused the park with an American Indian reservation. People may have been confused about many things, but mistaking Goat Island for an Indian Reservation, if such a thought ever occurred, would certainly have been a minor and short-lived confusion. Meanwhile, changing the name eliminated the reminder to citizens and to a changing State Parks' leadership that the Niagara Reservation was reserved as a natural area and intended to be preserved that way. This opened the door wider to further commercial exploitation. We continue, therefore, to have our reservations about the name change.
- ❖ We believe the Office of State Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation has a special responsibility to the Niagara Reservation, that it's stewardship here should be tailored to preserve and restore our unique natural environments as Olmsted intended them to be. Treating the Niagara Reservation (Niagara Falls State Park) as a revenue generator for the state should be secondary to the preservation and restoration of its environmental integrity.
- ❖ These naturally restored landscapes should be extended along the gorge rim between Niagara Falls and Lewiston, NY. This requires moving all four lanes of the Robert Moses Parkway. Hiking and bicycle paths should replace vehicular traffic.

- ❖ This would create beneficial conditions: increased traffic in the streets of Niagara Falls, NY, landscapes attractive to the eco-tourism market, and a native tree canopy of foliage accompanied by long-grass wildflower meadows, about 300 acres of additional wildlife habitat that would protect the gorge ecosystem and make a small contribution to the clean air of our region and planet.
- ❖ Vehicle access to the gorge would be maintained in the locations presently existing: the Gorge Discovery Center (Geological Museum), Whirlpool State Park, Devil's Hole State Park, The Power Vista, The Power Authority access road, and Artpark—six locations in six miles.
- ❖ Multiple alternate routes exist for commuters (other than Lewiston Road) which critics of parkway removal refuse to acknowledge.
- ❖ We advocate the restoration of forested areas and grasslands along the gorge rim, of native trees and other plants. Botanist Patricia Eckel has written authoritatively about our region's "distinctive genetic heritage" with respect to our trees and other plants, using oaks as a specific example. She spoke forcefully during relicensing negotiations, and wrote proposals as well, about the need for horticultural specialists and international cooperation for our restoration efforts, but her remarks were obviously ignored.
- ❖ NHP did not ignore them, and we oppose, therefore, the planting of ornamental nursery stock as recently established in large dug beds on the median near Whirlpool State Park and advocate the removal of these and earlier non-native plantings.
- ❖ Additionally, the daffodils, for example, planted around the mowed perimeter of the old growth forest at DeVeaux Woods State Park are offensive both aesthetically and botanically. Do they "prettify" the old growth? The saplings that spread from the edges, permitted to grow instead of being mowed down would themselves be old growth in the year 2157. What of the present woods will remain then? The removal of four lanes of parkway would allow this growth to be nurtured and guided.
- ❖ We also oppose the running of trolleys, light rail, or other commercially exploitative "people movers" along the gorge rim. Such conveyances should be limited to the location previously mentioned. Food shacks along the gorge rim and in the parks there should also be prohibited; It's a shame they've been established on Goat Island and elsewhere.
- ❖ Incidentally, the gorge edge near the Gorge Discovery Center provides a wonderful view of massive stone gorge walls sweeping to the lower river in configurations that have been shaped over thousands of years. It is here

- the State Parks has installed a fiberglass climbing wall, an amusement more appropriate to a gym or a shopping mall. This is significant because it demonstrates a mind-set willing to trivialize, to carnivalize the Olmsted philosophy on which parks should be based. We believe this fiberglass climbing wall should be removed as an indication that new stewardship directions more respectful of our historical heritage are being taken.
- ❖ We believe the Greenway Commission was compromised from its inception by ethical transgressions, and by a membership non-responsive to citizen concerns. We asked for a determination from the New York State Ethics Commission regarding ethical violations (Nov. 2006) but received no response, though promised one shortly before year's end.
  - ❖ Because the plan for a Niagara River Greenway formulated by Wendel Duchscher addressed almost none of our concerns, even "conceptually," which was repeatedly emphasized as the plan's essential character, we declined to endorse it, though we praised its river focused boundaries.
  - ❖ After the deadline for formal comments had passed, however, the Greenway Commission changed the boundaries, bowing to Power Coalition (PC) demands that proposals across Niagara County be as eligible for funding as those near the river. Now the PC, the Greenway Commission and Wendel Duchscher would have us believe that even the boundaries of the Niagara River Greenway were "conceptual." The PC, unsatisfied with their 5 million for 50 years to be spent wherever they lie, will now get an easier grab at the 3 million annual funding (originally designated for the Niagara River Greenway Corridor) as well.
  - ❖ We await, for example, the proposals that will be put forth by the school districts of Lewiston-Porter, Niagara Falls, and Wheatfield, and the language that will be used to justify their receiving Niagara River Greenway funding.
  - ❖ We believe that locating the Niagara Falls School District Administrative offices in retrofitted historic buildings at DeVeaux Woods State Park, a plan favored by Assemblywoman DeMonte and Senator Maziarz, to be extremely inappropriate. Any development in this near-gorge location should be Niagara River Greenway related, an ecology/interpretive center, greenhouse, etc. The Commissioner of State Parks has told us that future uses for these buildings will be carefully evaluated for their greenway compatibility, but that was the past administration. It's our hope that the new Commissioner will be very strict about this compatibility.
  - ❖ During the Niagara Power Authority relicensing process, and then during the Niagara River Greenway discussions via the Citizens' Advisory Committee we repeatedly asked that four projects be considered for study

or evaluation as part of NYPA environmental reparation: (1) the removal of the State Parks' maintenance garage from the gorge rim and the restoration and the restoration of natural landscapes on that site; (2) the bridging of the NYPA access road that cuts the gorge wall at Devil's Hole State Park to restore the park; (3) removal of the four lanes of parkway between Niagara Falls and Lewiston, NY and (4) action on Homeland Security concerns about vehicle traffic being permitted to drive across the face of the power plant via the parkway.

- ❖ The responses to these issues were either non-existent (#1, #2), or inadequate (#3, #4).
- ❖ We further believe that the proposals we put forth are consistent with greenway criteria and we remain perplexed about the policy of silence to which the Office of State Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation has adhered, especially regarding #1 and #2. A maintenance garage on the gorge rim is clearly unacceptable. The access road exists as a result of an easement State Parks has granted NYPA and two agencies should cooperate in repairing the damage, using money dedicated to State Parks by NYPA, separate from Niagara Greenway Funding.



For further detailed information about these and other issues, please visit the Niagara Heritage Partnership website at [www.niagaraheritage.org](http://www.niagaraheritage.org).

More background information can be found in the award winning PBS documentary, Fading in the Mist and in the article "Niagara Falling" in Traffic East magazine, issue 1, 2003.

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