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CONTACT:

Nancy Smith, Executive Director
(716) 687-1225 office
(716) 432-1777 mobile
nancys@wnylc.org

Bringing Nature Downtown: A New Life for an Old Rail Corridor

Along the old DL&W rail corridor, a ribbon of green runs from the Buffalo River across from Solar City to the DL&W Terminal in downtown Buffalo near Canalside. This land, which extends for a mile and a half through The Valley, The First Ward, and the Perry neighborhood, is owned by the Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority (NFTA). These days the only thing that runs along the unused rail lines are deer, trees, and wildflowers.

Several cities around the country are renovating unused railroad infrastructure like this to create innovative and iconic trails and parks, including Manhattan's High Line, Detroit's Dequindre Cut, and Chicago's 606. These projects have become beloved—and in some cases world-famous—features of those cities. The DL&W Corridor poses a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to do the same in Buffalo.

Nancy Smith, Executive Director of the Western New York Land Conservancy, said "We would like to see this formerly industrial landscape become a place where people can reconnect with nature and each other. This fall we began meeting with neighbors and community leaders to start a conversation about what this rail corridor could become. One possibility is an inspiring and environmentally-friendly trail and linear park."

The DL&W corridor runs through backyards, businesses, and parks. Its surrounding neighborhoods are historic, and very close-knit. Although the area is experiencing revitalization, there is still a need for greenspaces and outdoor recreation.

"Places like these can create a vibrancy to our neighborhood just as Buffalo River Fest Park and Mutual Riverfront have done," said **Peg Overdorf, Executive Director of The Valley Community Association**. "These parks have rid the neighborhood of blight and have been a stimulus for economic development while creating beautiful places for all to enjoy."

Sara Heidinger, President of The Old First Ward Community Center, envisions how the corridor could add so much to the community. "Not only will it be a place to relax and enjoy the beautiful green paths, it will be a way to create a more walkable, bikeable community and connect neighborhoods together. Neighbors and visitors alike would be able to enjoy the paths throughout the changes of each season as well as the birds, butterflies and other wildlife that has taken to this space as a home. There are also so many ways to incorporate public art into this project as well, which, to me, is an important piece."

In addition to being a place where people can walk or ride a bike, a new trail and linear park could spur revitalization in the surrounding neighborhood and the entire region, building on investments at Canalside, the Outer Harbor, and Riverbend. As a healthy urban greenspace, it could also provide important ecosystem services like wildlife habitat and stormwater retention, ensuring that the rail-trail is beautiful, engaging, and ecologically

resilient. Portions of the corridor adjacent to the DL&W Terminal, the current terminus of the NFTA Metro Rail, could accommodate potential future light rail expansion.

"This project will provide a new opportunity for residents and visitors to explore Buffalo with vistas that bring together our City's unique industrial heritage with our magnificent natural landscape," said **Congressman Brian Higgins**. "Time and again the Western New York Land Conservancy has served as a steward with great vision and this latest project along the DL&W line will continue progress that embraces the community characteristics that are naturally ours."

NYS Senator Tim Kennedy said "As our city and our waterfront continue to see a sustained revitalization, so too should this urban greenspace that serves as a beacon of connectivity throughout downtown. I'm grateful to the Land Conservancy for thoughtfully engaging with the public about the potential of this project, and I look forward to hearing about the community's visions and hopes for this land."

"Converting an abandoned rail corridor into public space is a great example of smart growth, which is embraced in the Erie County 'Initiatives for a Smart Economy'," said **Erie County Executive Mark C. Poloncarz**. "Projects like this enhance our community's walkability and provide open spaces for our children and grandchildren to enjoy. They also give us an opportunity to reinvest in established neighborhoods."

Erie County Legislator Barbara Miller-Williams said "The Land Conservancy has done a great job of engaging people that live around this rail corridor. I am excited to learn more about what the community would like to see here."

David A. Franczyk, Fillmore District Council Member, said "I enthusiastically support the Western New York Land Conservancy's visionary and timely project to create a green pathway through the remnants of Buffalo's industrial past, providing a profound educational and recreational experience for all those interested in exploring the city's rich history in a unique environment."

The Land Conservancy began this community vision planning process thanks to a generous grant from the **Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Legacy Funds at the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo**, and donations from Land Conservancy members.

Tom George, Director of Public Transit at the NFTA, says, "The NFTA looks forward to the opportunity to work with the community and stakeholders to create a vision for our rail corridor. The chance to collaborate with the Land Conservancy to develop consensus on enhancement of the corridor through creation of public spaces in concert with future light rail service can provide great benefits to our community."

"We will work closely with neighborhood residents, business owners, elected officials, and other community organizations to find out what matters most to them," said **Nancy Smith, Land Conservancy Executive Director**. "This could be a transformational project, not just for surrounding neighborhoods, but for the entire region."

If you have ideas about this possible new trail and linear park, the Land Conservancy wants your input via a survey on their website at www.wnylc.org/DLW. You can also send comments or suggestions to info@wnylc.org or call (716) 687-1225. The Land Conservancy plans to host a community workshop in early 2018.

After we complete the community vision plan, the next step will be a high profile design competition. **M&T Bank** is sponsoring the competition and has contributed \$50,000 as a challenge gift toward the project. The Land Conservancy must raise at least an additional \$100,000 by the end of May 2018 to match the challenge gift and

make the design competition a reality. Please join this effort and make this project a success by donating to support the DL&W project. Contributions of all amounts are helpful and can be made on the Land Conservancy's website (www.wnylc.org), or by sending a check made payable to the "Western New York Land Conservancy" to P.O. Box 471, East Aurora, NY 14052. For questions, please contact the Land Conservancy. All donations for the DL&W project are tax-deductible.

The Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo, a 501 (C) (3) organization, was established in 1919 to enhance and encourage long-term philanthropy in the Western New York community. The Foundation's mission is: Connecting people, ideas, and resources to improve lives in Western New York. For nearly 100 years, the Community Foundation has made the most of the generosity of individuals, families, foundations, and organizations who entrust charitable assets to its care. The Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Legacy Funds were established at the Community Foundation to provide support to four areas that were important to Mr. Wilson: caregiving, community assets, design and access, and youth sports. Endowment funds, like these created to honor Mr. Wilson, are designed to grow over time and provide funding for charitable causes according to a client's wishes. www.cfgb.org

The Western New York Land Conservancy is a regional, not-for-profit land trust that permanently protects land with significant conservation value in Western New York for future generations. The Land Conservancy envisions a future in which open spaces, working lands, wildlife habitat, and scenic beauty are cherished and protected as part of the landscape and character of Western New York. The Land Conservancy is accredited by the Land Trust Accreditation Commission and is one of 1,700 land trusts nationwide, including 90 in New York State. Land trusts have protected 40 million acres over the last 20 years. For more information on upcoming events, volunteer opportunities, or the mission of the Western New York Land Conservancy, please call (716) 687-1225 or visit www.wnylc.org.

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