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Project Unveiling: Land Conservancy begins work to 'Restore the Gorge'

On Monday, November 13th at 7pm, the Western New York Land Conservancy invites the community to attend a project unveiling at the Niagara Falls Public Library for their ecological restoration project in one of the most important natural places in the world—the Niagara Gorge. Land Conservancy staff and project consultants will present information about the project's process and timeline. Everyone will have an opportunity to give feedback about the project. Attendees are asked to register in advance online at restorethegorge.eventbrite.com or (716) 687-1225.

Thanks to funding from Phase II of Governor Cuomo's Buffalo Billion Economic Development Initiative, the Greenway Ecological Standing Committee, and Empire State Development's Yahoo! Community Fund for Niagara County, the Land Conservancy has \$2.1 Million to undertake a three-year ecological restoration project in the Niagara Gorge from the Gorge Discovery Center to Devil's Hole State Park. This habitat restoration project is a separate and distinct effort from the removal of the Niagara Scenic Parkway (formerly the Robert Moses Parkway) from Main Street to Findlay Drive, but the two projects will take place concurrently and collaboratively.

Paul Dyster, Mayor of Niagara Falls, is excited for this project to begin. "The Land Conservancy will enrich one of our community's most cherished green spaces making the gorge a more resilient and healthy place for wildlife while also enhancing it as a destination for our residents and visitors. This is a welcome change not only to surrounding neighborhoods, but our entire region."

The Niagara Gorge includes unique ecological communities and it is one of the most biologically diverse places on the Great Lakes. The gorge is home to the majority of the plant species found in the Niagara Frontier, including many rare plants. It is also part of a globally significant Important Bird Area and the lower Niagara River rapids are important a spawning ground for freshwater fish, like the threatened Lake Sturgeon. Unfortunately, the health of this sensitive environment has been harmed by many factors, especially non-native invasive plants. The Land Conservancy is hiring a contractor to remove harmful invasive plants like Norway maple and Common buckthorn within the gorge. These invasive species will be replaced with beneficial natives like Oak trees and Ninebark shrubs.

The Land Conservancy has hired botanical experts and famed landscape designers Darrel Morrison and Nancy Aten to create a showcase native ecosystem along the rim of the gorge. As part of this project, the Land Conservancy will undertake the largest local grass and wildflower seed collection and propagation project in Western New York's history, which is made possible by Yahoo! funding. The Land Conservancy is also collaborating with Grassroots Gardens to create ribbons of green into the community by incorporating native plants in a community garden in Niagara Falls.

Land in the project area is owned by the New York Power Authority (NYPA) and by the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation (OPRHP). Both agencies are supportive of the Land Conservancy's plans.

"In addition to providing New York State with clean, renewable energy, NYPA is committed to being a good steward of its ecologically important land," said **John R. Koelmel, Chairman of the New York Power Authority Board of Trustees**. "We are proud to work collaboratively with OPRHP and the Land Conservancy to ensure that this gorge restoration provides a high quality experience for visitors and tourists, and continues to support our state's biodiversity. This work, in addition to the parkway removal and trail development, will enhance the natural experience for all."

"The Niagara Gorge is a dramatic and incredibly scenic place," said **Mark Thomas, Western District of the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation**. "This project complements our investments to improve nearby parks and will both protect our natural assets and deepen the visitor experience."

In addition to the Governor's investment, nearly \$1 million has been awarded to the Land Conservancy's broader Niagara Gorge restoration project through Niagara Power Project Relicensing benefits administered through the Greenway Ecological Standing Committee.

"The Western New York Land Conservancy has conserved some of our region's most cherished natural areas and we are fortunate to have their expertise in restoring this gem in Niagara Falls," said **Congressman Brian Higgins**.

"Please join us on Monday, November 13th at 7pm, at the Niagara Falls Public Library for the unveiling of this exciting restoration project. Our goal is to listen to community members' thoughts about this project so that we understand what is most important to them," said **Land Conservancy Executive Director, Nancy Smith**. "We hope that our shared work will have positive impacts that will ripple through the City of Niagara Falls and the rest of Western New York."

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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