

## Stella Niagara Preserve plan calls for network of nature paths, improved habitats

By Thomas J. Prohaska :

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LEWISTON – The Stella Niagara Preserve, a 29-acre natural site on the lower Niagara River, will feature efforts to improve the habitats and lure birds and butterflies while protecting native plant species.

A network of paths – mowed grass, not pavement – will provide access to the river and the other sites on the property.

Those were among the highlights of a vision plan unveiled Thursday night to a crowd of nearly 200 in the Lewiston Senior Center. It was created by nationally known landscape architect Darrel Morrison and his colleague Nancy Aten.

Morrison and Aten were hired by the Western New York Land Conservancy, which bought the property last May from the Sisters of Stella Niagara, a convent of Franciscan nuns whose motherhouse and Catholic grammar school are located across the road from the preserve.

The conservancy pledged to keep the site natural and to preserve and improve the habitat for birds, animals and native plants, as the goals of the conservancy and the sisters, who had owned the land since 1907, converged.

“They didn’t want it to be paved over. They didn’t want the view to be blocked,” said Jajeane Rose-Burney, the conservancy’s development director.

The conservancy raised \$3.6 million, including \$2.25 million to buy the land from the nuns, with the rest set aside to maintain the property.

A chapel, a grotto modeled on the one in Lourdes, France, and a peace monument that includes a memorial to President John F. Kennedy will be preserved.

Rose-Burney said the first goal is to protect the wildlife habitat and add more native plants, focusing first on the meadow. Access for “low-impact uses,” such as walking and launching of canoes and kayaks, will be maintained. The land is low enough that watercraft can be launched without having to construct a dock or a ramp.

Morrison said his goal is to create “ecological art” in the plan; work on it will begin this spring.

A system of universally accessible 10-foot-wide paths will be mowed in the grass to enable visitors to reach the river, chapel, memorial and grotto, as well as a “witness tree” near the riverbank that is believed to be well over 200 years old.

“If we have a diversity of life, we’ll have more butterflies, more birds,” Morrison said. The wide paths are needed, he said, “so there’s plenty of room for people to meet and plenty of room not to brush against the taller vegetation, which on some occasions might have ticks.”

He said the site will feature seven “plant communities” totaling 80 distinct species, and he promised “visual richness” from the plantings that are meant to protect and maintain native grasslands, oak savanna, cedar glade and sedge meadow.

The site also played a role in the War of 1812, as the British forces that burned Lewiston and attacked Fort Niagara landed there in December 1813. The historical markers will be maintained, Rose-Burney said.

The entire vision plan is posted on the conservancy’s website at [wnylc.org](http://wnylc.org).

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