

Executive Summary

The Site

Black Rock Canal Park (BRCP), currently known as the Ontario Street Boat Launch and Cornelius Creek Park, is an Erie County-owned site along the Niagara River in Buffalo's Black Rock/Riverside area occupying approximately 8.3 acres, of which approximately 4.7 acres is dry land (the property lines extend into the water). The project area, however, extends beyond the property line to include approximately .4 acres of New York State Thruway Authority land under the I-190 overpass and the .2-acre park entrance road owned by the City of Buffalo to create a total project area of 5.3 acres of dry land.

Challenges

Currently the Ontario Street Boat Launch property is uninviting due to the state of disrepair, the expanses of featureless paving and the relative isolation of Cornelius Creek Park. The 2,300 -foot shoreline is monotonous, generally consisting of a simple railing and narrow walkway. The boat launch gets moderate use in spite of difficulties with floating debris that sometimes obstructs the access to the water. Another problem is that the project area is bisected by Cornelius Creek, the City's largest combined sewer overflow (CSO). By design, untreated sewage overflows into Cornelius Creek when precipitation causes a spike in sewer flows leaving an unpleasant sewer odor at the park. The Buffalo Sewer Authority is being mandated to fix the CSO problem city-wide though the date when Cornelius will be addressed is currently unknown.

Opportunities

In spite of the current difficulties, the site is well used and has a tremendous potential for improvement and warrants a significant investment resulting in increased use and a more positive image of the region. The views over the Niagara River are appreciated by numerous anglers and the many visitors that come to eat lunch or watch the sunset. Further, the views over the park toward the river are seen by the 69,000 vehicles per day that travel on I-190 directly adjacent to the site. The site contains a segment of the Erie County Riverwalk which is a continuous pathway along the Niagara River running from downtown Buffalo to the City of Tonawanda at the County's north border. This provides a link to numerous other shoreline parks and allows park visitors to not have to take their car to the site.

The site has historic value as public access along the New York State Canal System, given its location between Canal Gateway in Tonawanda and the City of Buffalo Inner Harbor. This park has an opportunity to represent the link between the historic past, the present Erie Canal and future developments one of New York State's most significant assets.

A Grassroots Plan for Improvements

Members of the Black Rock/Riverside community who frequent the park are keenly aware of the challenges and opportunities at the site and decided to create a plan for improvements. The organization known as the Black Rock-Riverside Good Neighbors Planning Alliance (BRRGNPA) formed a subcommittee to address the project. The group, later reformed as the Black Rock Canal Park Steering Committee, completed an award-winning plan in 2006 for the park. The BRRGNPA planning process involved extensive public input and meetings resulting in a plan that was extremely well received by the community. Major features included a mixed-use building; reconfigured parking; a dog park, playground; covered creek; improved bike path, a deck over the river; and an improved entrance road.

Erie County Feasibility Analysis

In 2009, Erie County retained the landscape architecture and planning firm, peter j. smith & company, inc. (PJS) to conduct a feasibility analysis of the BRRGNPA plan for Black Rock Canal Park. This report is the result of that effort. To guide the process, two committees were formed, the Erie County BRCP Advisory Committee and the Erie County BRCP Steering Committee. The Steering Committee, whose members represent agencies that have a role in the project's funding, schedule or maintenance, was convened three times. The Advisory Committee had a broad membership with 30 members consisting of the original GNPA members, the Erie County Steering Committee members plus representatives of several elected officials and local organizations. In addition to the committees there was consultation with representatives of the US Army Corps of Engineers, the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation, US Department of Homeland Security, Erie County Sheriff's Office, US Fish & Wildlife Service, and the Buffalo Niagara Riverkeeper.

The Options

The Feasibility Analysis scope included reviewing the BRRGNPA plan and providing alternatives to items deemed not feasible.

BRRGNPA Plan

There were several items of this proposal that were adjusted in the subsequent conceptual plans due to either input from the Advisory Committee or to address comments by government regulatory agencies. These include: elimination of parking on the creek cover which would be designed to be removable in the event water quality was restored (the creek cover was also scaled back to allow room for clean-ups at the mouth of the river); modification of the concrete deck over the river based on concerns by regulatory agencies; the boardwalk concept was retained but pulled back adjacent to the shoreline; the road to the north was terminated part way along its length and the personal watercraft dock was changed to a paddlesports launch as a result of input from the Advisory Committee. The remaining items from this concept have been reconfigured in later plans once the adjustments suggested above were made.

Modified and Alternative Plans

The Modified Plan features a covered creek, a two-story mixed-use building; a road to the north that is terminated at two thirds of its existing length, a waterfront walkway north of the building that extends out over the water with an adjacent bike path, a dog park, a playground, an 300-foot pier extension creating a marina with slips for 35 boats. The Alternative Plan features an uncovered creek; a single-story restroom/concession building; a road to the north that is terminated at half of its existing length; a waterfront pathway build inland of the waters edge; a dog park; a shipwreck interpretive feature; a 70-foot pier extension creating a marina for 18 boats and a paddlesports launch.

No Master Plan?

Both the Modified Plan, the Alternative Plan, or a combination thereof, can move forward. There is no master plan since some issues still require study beyond the scope of this report or could not be fully defined without first determining the magnitude of funding that will be available. Unresolved items include:

- Covering Cornelius Creek – This option will require a more intensive environmental review process.
- Shoreline Trail – options for the treatment of shoreline trail system north of the existing restroom/concession building include either an overhanging walkway combined with a separate bike path or an inland multi-purpose walkway. The costs for the two options vary widely and the available funding has not been determined.
- Building Scale – whether to include a modest restroom/concession building or a larger mixed use building with facilities for a security – a related agency has not been determined. There is yet to be a commitment from a tenant and funding has not been determined.

Initial Improvements

There is funding immediately available for engineering and construction of improvements at Black Rock Canal Park. There are also a number of plan components that are widely agreed upon that will not preclude the advancement of many packages of components from either the Modified Plan or the Alternative Plan.

Phases

Though there is no definitive Master Plan, the project can move ahead in phases. The suggested phases include:

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| 1. The Entry | 5. The Mixed Use Building |
| 2. The Central Area | 6. The Boat Launch & Pier |
| 3. The Road & Turnaround | 7. The South End |
| 4. The Boardwalk | 8. The Creek |

Each phase is intended to be a stand-alone project that does not require another phase for completion. The sequence that the phases will be constructed in depends on available funding and priorities set by Erie County and the stakeholders as well as the duration of environmental reviews.