

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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Buffalo Revitalization Chugs Along With Planned Nature Trail

Stretch of former rail line envisioned as park connecting three neighborhoods



The Western New York Land Conservancy held a design competition to revive a former railway in Buffalo, N.Y., as a park. One of the five winners, Matt Renkas, submitted this design of a path incorporating steel-mill ladles. PHOTO: MATT RENKAS

By Alexa St. John

June 15, 2019 9:00 a.m. ET

A 1.5-mile stretch of the former Delaware, Lackawanna and Western Railroad is the latest stop in the city of Buffalo, N.Y.'s ongoing revitalization effort.

The Western New York Land Conservancy on Friday announced five winners of a design competition to turn the tract of land along the Buffalo River into a cohesive park and year-round nature trail. The winning designs will guide the conservancy's plans to link Canalside, a waterfront park that helped spark the rejuvenation of Buffalo's downtown, and the solar-panel factory of Tesla subsidiary SolarCity, the endpoints of this particular project. The stretch of land also connects three Buffalo neighborhoods.

"We want to show that people will invest in this neighborhood," said Nancy Smith, executive director of the conservancy, a nonprofit working to sustain natural areas in Western New York.

Ms. Smith said the competition was inspired by several projects of the High Line Network, an organization pushing cities to reuse underutilized infrastructure as public spaces. The High Line, a former elevated freight line on Manhattan's west side that was turned into a popular greenway, is one of the most successful examples of the movement.

The conservancy's design competition is just one of several ongoing community efforts to boost economic growth and revitalization in Buffalo, which has worked in the past two decades to draw new businesses, develop affordable housing and provide more employment opportunities to the city's working-class people. The city saw over \$5.5 billion in new economic development activity in 2016, largely due to investment in natural areas that inspired new businesses and employment opportunities, according to the Buffalo Urban Development Corp., the city's development agency.

Thomas Kucharski, president and CEO of Invest Buffalo Niagara, an economic development group representing the eight counties of Western New York, said the conservancy's rail-line project and similar ones have played a role in his work drawing new companies and employment opportunities to Buffalo, all while remaining respectful of the communities that already exist.

"It really speaks to the way our community came together about 20 years ago and started working on changing the direction of where we're going," Mr. Kucharski said.



Another of Mr. Renkas' designs in the Western New York Land Conservancy competition. PHOTO: MATT RENKAS

The conservancy's DL&W Corridor International Design Ideas Competition drew more than 100 submissions. The next phase of the project will begin later this summer, with bidders proposing schematic designs for the park that incorporate the ideas of the competition submissions.

Kishore Varanasi, an adviser for the competition and a director at CBT Architects, an international urban-planning firm based in Boston, said it is important for incoming developments to consider the needs of surrounding areas.

“The trail itself is quite unique in its character, its context, its demographics, its neighborhoods,” Mr. Varanasi said. “This is a Rust Belt city that has seen economic challenges.”

Matt Renkas, a City of Buffalo firefighter who won the design competition’s community-choice award, said his design aimed to incorporate both the city’s Native American roots and industrial history.

“I saw that as a metaphor for the people who stuck around in the community,” said Mr. Renkas, whose design included aspects such as streetlights, water fountains and symbolic animal sculptures. “They planted the seeds for this revitalization and renaissance we’re seeing in Buffalo right now.”

Winning the second place jury-selected award was a New York City-based team comprised of architecture firms that have worked on several statewide revitalization efforts.

“We didn’t want to create a traditional linear park that’s packed with intense activity,” said Yadiel Rivera, a landscape architect at Marvel Architects, which was part of the New York City team. “We wanted to have something that is more responsive to the neighborhood and basically respects the fact that there’s an existing fabric there.”