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Western New York Land Conservancy Awarded \$690,000 to Grow Native Plants for Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Centennial Park

The Western New York Land Conservancy is pleased to announce that it was awarded \$690,000 by the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation to collect local native plant seeds, grow the plants, and then provide the plants to the Ralph C. Wilson Jr. Centennial Park in Buffalo. The Land Conservancy will focus its efforts on the “inlet” zones of the park. It will grow 50,000 plants from locally collected seeds, and add many trees, shrubs, and aquatic plants that will enrich the wildlife habitat at the park.

This three-year project is part of the broader effort to create Ralph Wilson Park on Buffalo’s waterfront. The plantings will provide park visitors with an opportunity to experience and learn about native plants and the wildlife they attract. Through the Land Conservancy’s outreach efforts, people throughout the region and beyond will learn about the importance of using local provenance native plants in restoration projects and landscaping—a core element of the Land Conservancy’s work.

JJ Tighe, Director of the Parks & Trails Initiative at the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation said, “This grant is a further example of the collaboration and partnerships involved in achieving the communities’ vision for Ralph Wilson Park. The community input and collaboration from partners, like the Western New York Land Conservancy and Buffalo Niagara Waterkeeper, whose aligned missions truly elevate the importance of local native plants and natural habitat as part of the Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates design.”

Nancy Smith, the Land Conservancy’s Executive Director, a champion of native provenance seeds that foster biodiversity, said of the grant: “The community identified access to nature as a goal for Ralph Wilson Park. Using native plants responds to that goal by providing us with opportunities for storytelling, programming, and community engagement. This is a truly unique opportunity for the Land Conservancy to demonstrate the vital importance of native plants in our ecosystems, and we couldn’t be more thrilled to begin.”

Native seeds will be collected on Land Conservancy preserves, public parks, and private properties. The Land Conservancy will work with multiple growers to complete this project, including many from Western New York that are woman and minority-owned businesses. The Land Conservancy intends this project to help expand and build capacity for local businesses that can contribute to this project and hopefully many more in the future.

One such grower is **Allison DeHonney of Buffalo Go Green Inc. in partnership with Urban Fruits & Veggies**, located on Dupont St. and Glenwood Ave. in Buffalo. Like Nancy Smith, DeHonney is a strong proponent of native plants. "Local provenance plants, grown from seeds collected from plants growing near to and in similar environmental conditions as the planting site," she said, "are better suited to our local soil, temperature, and rainfall conditions. This gives new plants the best chance of thriving, potentially reducing long-term maintenance costs. Using local provenance native plants also helps preserve the genetic differences essential to preserving long-term biodiversity. This in turn helps make our local plant communities more resilient from the threat posed by climate change."

Additional quotes:

Congressman Brian Higgins, who has been steadfast in his determination to revitalize Buffalo's waterfront with projects like this, said: "Nationally and internationally, there is much interest in finding creative ways to enhance biodiversity. Increasing the use of native plants at Ralph Wilson Park positions Buffalo and this park as a leader in this realm. At the same time, it will keep more of the project funding here in the Western New York economy. This is a project that's easy to be excited about."

"I thank the Ralph C. Wilson Jr. Foundation for awarding nearly \$700,000 to the Western New York Land Conservancy to oversee bringing tens of thousands of native plants to Ralph Wilson Park. These funds will not only create greater biodiversity of plants, shrubs, aquatic species, and trees to what will be a world-class waterfront park, the funds will also pay local organizations to collect native seeds and grow the plants for the park," **Mayor Byron W. Brown said.**

Landscape architect and lead park designer Michael Van Valkenburgh expressed his enthusiasm about what this grant means for the park: "I love the idea that collecting seeds will be one of the first steps in bringing the shoreline of Ralph C. Wilson, Jr Centennial Park into reality. The plants that are grown through this grant will help us establish a robust site ecology that can thrive in this dynamic environment. The community has been very influential in making sure that this design really represents Buffalo. I hope there will be a lot of pride in knowing that these plants are locally sourced and sustainably grown."

Josh Smith, Director of Ecology for Rigidized Metals Corporation and Silo City, a 27-acre post-industrial site on the Buffalo River: "With up to half of all species on the planet expected to go extinct by the end of this century due to habitat destruction, we need to foster biodiversity everywhere, including urban parks. Native plants are vital to beneficial insect populations which in turn feed birds, fish, and amphibians. We are excited that Ralph Wilson Park has made ecological value a priority and look forward to contributing to this project."

Incorporating locally produced native plantings and offering educational outreach programs highlighting their importance is an essential step towards environmental resilience."

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 current and 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 1000+ land trusts nationwide, including 87 in New York State. Land trusts have protected over 56 million acres of land. To learn more about the Land Conservancy, visit wnylc.org.

About the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation:

The Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation is a grantmaking organization dedicated primarily to sustained investment in the quality of life of the people of Southeast Michigan and Western New York. The two areas reflect the devotion of Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. to his hometown of Detroit and greater Buffalo, home of his beloved Buffalo Bills NFL team. Prior to his passing in 2014, Mr. Wilson provided that a significant share of his estate be used to continue a life-long generosity of spirit by funding the Foundation that bears his name. Based in Detroit, the Foundation began with a grantmaking capacity of \$1.2 billion over a 20-year period, which expires January 8, 2035. This structure is consistent with Mr. Wilson's desire for the Foundation's impact to be immediate, substantial, measurable, and overseen by those who knew him best. For more information visit www.rcwjrf.org.