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The Editorial Board: Because of Nancy Smith, Western New York is a greener and healthier place

News Editorial Board

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Nancy Smith stands near the Niagara Gorge in 2016. Among the projects led by the soon-to-retire executive director is a nearly \$1 million effort to eliminate invasive species from a section of the gorge.

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Her legacy will be felt for decades to come.

Under 10 years of leadership by Executive Director Nancy Smith, 27 new properties and 2,500 acres have entered the protection of the Western New York Land Conservancy.

These acres represent forests, meadows, streams, wetlands and farms throughout the region. Thanks to the conservancy, trees that have stood for decades, even centuries, won't be cut down.

Wetlands that provide essential habitat for reptiles, amphibians and invertebrates – as well as flood control for human neighborhoods – won't be drained and paved over.

Small family farms that employ thousands and supply the region with healthy, fresh food can continue doing so, in confidence that they won't be developed or subdivided.

All this is impressive enough, but the land conservancy has also led the charge to preserve Niagara Gorge old-growth forests and create a Riverline park in Buffalo.

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Smith will step down from her post at the conservancy at the end of this year, though she promises to continue to advise the organization. The transition presents an opportunity to pause and reflect on the unexpected – even surprising – ways that land conservation benefits a region like Western New York.

Many people probably still stigmatize conservationists as fanatical tree-huggers who dedicate their lives to preserving the habitats of obscure creatures, but contemporary conservation practice goes well beyond this and other clichés.

Preserving wild places is done for the benefit of humans as much as it is for wildlife. Protected watersheds, such as Black Creek–Angelica Creek in Allegany County, where the conservancy is currently acquiring forest lands, ensure the safety of drinking water. In addition, forest preservation decreases the risks of disease-spreading ticks, invasive species and – without trees to absorb the water – catastrophic flooding.

Conservation can also protect the food supply. The conservancy’s current partnership with the Providence Farm Collective enables Western New York immigrant, refugee and low-income farmers who cannot otherwise access farmland get back to their farming roots and grow fresh food.

The 37-acre collective acreage in Orchard Park comprises more than 16 separate farms that grow niche crops like African maize, amaranth, roselle and African eggplants, many of which cannot be found in local markets.

The importance of fresh food access has been underscored in the wake of the May shooting at Tops supermarket and adds extra pathos to the simple dignity of this statement from Oro, a Somali Bantu farmer and member of the collective:

“When you have seeds, you can be self-sufficient. When you farm, you can grow your own food. When you have your own food, you don’t have to ask other people, the government or social services for food.”

And then there are the immeasurable quality-of-life benefits that accompany access to beautiful unspoiled places. Nature preserves provide quiet refuge, healthy exercise and rare views of wildflowers and bird life. Thanks to organizations like the conservancy, these places were there when we needed them most, during the isolation and fear of a raging pandemic.

The trails and preserves that have always delighted and comforted Western New Yorkers are now engaging tourists and other visitors. That benefit will be felt even more when the conservancy completes the Riverline, a proposed nature trail and greenway that stretches along an unused railroad corridor from Canalside at the DL&W Terminal to the Buffalo River at Riverbend.

When completed, the Riverline will be much more than a nature trail. The plans for Buffalo's first urban linear park promise a mosaic of walkways, meadows, gardens, public art and outdoor gathering spaces for downtown Buffalo, greatly adding to the enticements already presented by Canalside.

As a premier downtown attraction, Riverline will bring with it clear economic benefits to the businesses and other amenities that surround it.

There's more, much more, to the accomplishments of the Western New York Land Conservancy during Nancy Smith's tenure, including the fact that the staff of the organization grew fourfold. But we'll stop and simply conclude: Thanks, Nancy, and thanks to all who support this nonprofit jewel. Long may its work continue.

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