



Ralph Wilson Park Conservancy, City of Buffalo, and Partners Break Ground on Future Ralph Wilson Park on Buffalo's Waterfront

\$110 million of collaborative investment to fulfill community's vision to transform the former LaSalle Park into a one-of-a-kind, world-class park serving all

Phase I Construction includes a signature pedestrian bridge for improved access, ball field improvements and shoreline rehabilitation of inlet area

BUFFALO, N.Y. (JULY 19, 2022) – The City of Buffalo and Ralph Wilson Park Conservancy broke ground today on Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Centennial Park (“Ralph Wilson Park”), a 99-acre, world-class park located on Buffalo’s waterfront. Rooted in the guidance of “Imagine LaSalle,” the community-driven visioning process for the former LaSalle Park, Ralph Wilson Park will undergo a \$110 million transformation into one of the most beautiful and inclusive public spaces in the country, serving nearby residents and visitors from across the region and beyond. The park’s name honors the legacy of the late entrepreneur, veteran, and philanthropist Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. It is estimated to be complete in late 2025. Renderings can be accessed [here](#).

Keith Belanger, Ralph Wilson Park Conservancy Board President, was joined by Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation President & CEO David Egner and numerous partners, dignitaries, special guests, and community members.

“This is Buffalo’s largest waterfront park and has been an integral part of the Western New York community since 1932, when it hosted the City of Buffalo’s centennial celebration,” **said Conservancy Board President Belanger**. “Development of this scale happens once in a lifetime. Ralph Wilson Park will rank among the country’s best parks and profoundly impact our neighborhoods. Generations of Buffalonians will gather here and make memories that last a lifetime.”

“Generations of Buffalo Bills fans knew of founder Ralph Wilson’s commitment to Buffalo and generosity during his life,” **said Governor Kathy Hochul**. “The groundbreaking of Ralph Wilson Park will bring a collaborative transformation of this waterfront park into a vibrant community space where future generations will enjoy gathering for many years to come, and that will ensure Ralph Wilson’s love for our community continues to make an impact.”

“In October 2018, Mary Wilson came to Buffalo and warmed our City’s collective heart by announcing the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation would invest \$50 million to help my Administration’s efforts to transform the former LaSalle Park into a world-class, waterfront destination that would make the most of the natural beauty of this one-of-its-kind setting,” **said Mayor Byron W. Brown.** “Today’s groundbreaking is a major milestone in the inclusive and transparent planning process to create a ‘people’s park’ that will be enjoyed by the neighboring community, and all Buffalo residents, for generations to come.”

Community-Led Development

In 2018, the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation made a lead commitment of \$50 million to support the City of Buffalo and surrounding community to transform LaSalle Park into a world-class destination. The Foundation provided added funding to launch the Imagine LaSalle initiative, a multi-year, community-driven effort to explore and [develop a community vision for the park](#) that would transform it into a world-class destination, serving neighbors and residents of Western New York as a “people’s park” while also attracting tourists to the region. The University at Buffalo Regional Institute (UBRI) led the engagement effort in partnership with the Wilson Foundation, Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo, and City of Buffalo, represented by its Division of Parks and Recreation, Buffalo Urban Development Corporation (BUDC), Department of Community Services and Recreational Programming, and Mayor’s Office of Strategic Planning.

Since then, funders and stakeholders have worked to fulfill the community’s full vision for Ralph Wilson Park. Designed to celebrate the park’s culture of inclusivity and diversity, and embrace nature with inspiring landscaping, it will undergo a dramatic transformation. The topography will change with sweeping hills and valleys, active and diverse recreation activities, and destination play space for children of all ages. The new design will increase neighborhood connectivity through a new pedestrian bridge, maximize safe water access, and establish a resilient shoreline to mitigate the effects of climate change and rising lake levels.

“Today’s groundbreaking would not be possible without the collaboration of the City of Buffalo, New York State and so many partners that have come together to leverage and build upon the commitment made by the Foundation in 2018 honoring our founder, Ralph Wilson,” **said David O. Egner, president & CEO, Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation.** “The Imagine LaSalle engagement process provided an ambitious community vision for the future Ralph Wilson Park that paved the way for this incredible group of partners, stakeholders and funders to join us in supporting this once-in-a-lifetime investment in a public space that will be open and welcoming to all.”

Construction Timeline

The park will be built in phases over several years. Construction is expected to begin in late summer, starting with a signature pedestrian bridge to give park-goers easier access to the park. Plans also call for updating several baseball and softball fields and rehabilitating the inlet area to create a resilient shoreline and protect the park from higher lake levels and severe

weather. Some other work has already been completed. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers have significantly renovated the existing seawall in front of the Colonel Ward Pumping Station; the Buffalo Water Authority has completed critical repairs of a 48-inch water main; and improvements to the skatepark and Empire State Trail behind the Waterfront Village housing have been made.

Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates (MVVA), a New York-based landscape architecture firm known worldwide for its creative and unique urban design, has designed the park in collaboration with the City of Buffalo, BUDC, UBRI, and Imagine LaSalle project partners. MVVA is also designing a “sister” Ralph Wilson Park on the Detroit Riverfront, the other geographic focus for the Wilson Foundation. Architecture and engineering firm schlaich bergemann partner (sbp) is leading the design and construction of the new pedestrian bridge spanning the I-190, connecting Ralph Wilson Park with surrounding neighborhoods. BUDC and Gardiner & Theobald are managing the entire project. A team of diverse construction firms, led by Gilbane Building Company, will provide construction management services.

Funding Partners

The park is undergoing a \$110 million transformation thanks to private and public support.

In October 2019, the New York State Governor announced a \$10 million grant to support the construction of a pedestrian bridge connecting the neighborhoods across the 190, as well as funding toward the inlet. NYS Environmental Facilities Corporation has provided \$2.5 million for the inlet, while \$1.5 million came from Buffalo Niagara Waterkeeper’s Buffalo Blueway initiative to implement a public access Blueway site within the park, which is funded in part by Empire State Development. In addition, the U.S. Department of the Interior has awarded \$2 million for the playground through the Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership (ORLP) Program.

The City of Buffalo provided \$3 million to support the new pedestrian bridge to connect the Lower West Side neighborhood to the park and waterfront. The Wilson Foundation provided an additional \$10 million in match funding for the pedestrian bridge and shoreline resiliency to ensure the full community vision is realized. The Greenway Commission has provided over \$2.5 million to support increased connectivity to the Shoreline and Empire State Trails, as well as increased circulation through the park. MLB-MLBPA Youth Development Foundation, a joint initiative between Major League Baseball and the Major League Baseball Players Association provided \$1 million for the youth baseball and softball field renovations.

In addition, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), in coordination with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), has provided \$2 million of Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) funding to support engineering and design work and pre-construction activities for coastal habitat restoration through a regional partnership with the Great Lakes Commission.

NOAA is now recommending an additional \$10 million of GLRI funding through a renewed partnership with the Great Lakes Commission for construction of the restoration project to increase the coastal habitat and build a more resilient shoreline. These efforts will deliver meaningful results toward the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative Action Plan, as Ralph Wilson Park is a priority habitat site to be protected and restored, located within the Niagara Area of Concern (AOC), due in part to loss of fish and wildlife habitat and the degradation of fish populations. In addition to the Buffalo Niagara Waterkeeper and NYS Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC)'s collaboration on the shoreline and habitat restoration aspects of the project, related initiatives include the Western New York Land Conservancy's effort to locally collect and grow native plants for the inlet area of the park, and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's support planting over 2,600 trees.

Phase one of the park is fully funded and the overall park is more than 90 percent funded to support the construction.

"Ralph Wilson was a dear friend of mine, and this park will be a fitting tribute to his legacy and unwavering commitment to Buffalo," said **U.S. Senator Charles Schumer**. "Soon, a modern and vibrant park will ensure that public access to the waterfront is truly for everyone. I want to applaud the Wilson Foundation for their steadfast dedication to Ralph's vision; the City of Buffalo for their commitment to this project; and the workers who are about to bring state-of-the-art public facilities to this beautiful parcel of waterfront land."

"This commitment by the Ralph Wilson Conservancy is a gift that will benefit the people of Buffalo and Western New York for generations to come," said **Congressman Brian Higgins**. "Parks breathe both tranquility and energy into the communities around them. We are thrilled to see work begin thanks to this legacy investment and over \$24 million in federal funding. This project better connects people with their waterfront, with healthy recreational options, and with one another."

New York State DEC Commissioner Basil Seggos said, "The future Ralph Wilson Park is an exciting project with big environmental benefits to the communities surrounding it, providing new public access to the Lake Erie and Niagara River waterfronts, and outdoor education aimed at preserving our natural resources. It also supports DEC's commitment to wildlife conservation, representing a significant opportunity to restore lost and degraded fish and wildlife habitat that used to call this area home."

"This is an exciting day for everyone who loves Buffalo and Lake Erie. This project was developed with input from a community historically overburdened by pollution and unable to enjoy the benefits of this wonderful waterfront," said **EPA Region 2 Regional Administrator Lisa F. Garcia**. "Through the investments from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, we will make unprecedented progress in restoring and protecting the waters of Buffalo, ensuring waterfront access and green space for everyone to enjoy."

New York State Parks Commissioner Erik Kulleseid said, “Congratulations on reaching a major milestone in the creation of this new park on the amazing Buffalo waterfront. Public parks are an integral and vital part of communities. It is so gratifying to see the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation and the people of Buffalo come together to build this wonderful and inclusive public park.”

“On behalf of Mayor Byron Brown, Chairman of the BUDC Board of Directors, and Brendan Mehaffy, Chair of BUDC's Downtown Committee, we are so thrilled to celebrate the groundbreaking of Ralph Wilson Park,” said **Brandye Merriweather, President, and Rebecca Gandour, Executive Vice President, Buffalo Urban Development Corporation (BUDC)**. “Many thanks to our fantastic project partners who have been working so hard over the past several years to get us to this point. Establishing Ralph Wilson Centennial Park as a world-class waterfront destination aligns with BUDC's vision for enhancing the sense of place in one of the most diverse neighborhoods in the City of Buffalo.”

“We are proud to join the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation and all the other great partners on this community-driven revitalization of Ralph Wilson Park,” said **MLB and MLBPA Youth Development Foundation Executive Director Jean Lee Batrus**. “Our support of this project aligns perfectly with the mission of our organization of increasing youth baseball and softball participation and bringing different cultures and communities together. We look forward to seeing the overall completion of the park.”

“The Great Lakes Commission is proud of its role in enhancing coastal resilience and improving fish and wildlife habitat in the Niagara River Area of Concern,” said **Erika Jensen, Great Lakes Commission executive director**. “This innovative project was developed by a dedicated team of local partners, businesses, state, and federal agencies, following a robust community planning process, and incorporates habitat restoration into the greater transformation of the park. We are excited that it will provide ecological benefits and recreational opportunities to the entire Buffalo community.”

“The Ralph Wilson Park project will provide a multitude of benefits for the Niagara River ecosystem and the City of Buffalo by creating coastal wetlands, removing hardened shoreline, and creating habitat for a variety of fish species,” said **Carrie Selberg Robinson, director of the NOAA Fisheries Office of Habitat Conservation**. “NOAA is proud to be partnering on such a transformative effort for the local community, and we’re excited to see the project underway.”

New York State Environmental Facilities Corporation (EFC) President & CEO Maureen A. Coleman said, “EFC is pleased to support this important environmental justice project with a \$2.5 million green innovation grant to help re-naturalize the Lake Erie shoreline. The project will add beautiful greenspace to the shore by removing concrete seawalls and transforming it with wetlands, which provide aquatic vegetation and fish habitats that will flourish over time and add natural resilience to the waterfront. Not only will this project provide recreational opportunities for the people of Buffalo and its visitors, but it will also improve the water quality

of Lake Erie by buffering flood events, reducing erosion, storing carbon, and providing increased habitat for aquatic vegetation, marine life, and wildlife.”

“The Ralph Wilson Park is a true testament to the things we can accomplish through community engagement and collaboration,” said **NYS Assembly Majority Leader Crystal Peoples-Stokes**.

“Thanks to the hard work of various partners in government and the private sector, Buffalo will have a world-class gathering space with increased access to our waterfront, and expanded and enhanced green space. This transformational project would not be possible without the amazing work of the Ralph C. Wilson Jr. Foundation, as they continue to carry on the legacy of Ralph Wilson Jr.”

“Today’s groundbreaking amplifies Ralph C. Wilson, Jr.’s vision for a better Buffalo by fostering an inclusive, collaborative, and world-class public space that will bring new opportunities to celebrate our city’s waterfront and truly create a people’s park,” said **Senator Tim Kennedy**.

“Investing in this project was a priority at many levels in government, not only because it will bring an unparalleled recreational experience to the Queen City, but because it honors Mr. Wilson’s legacy and commitment to the future of our greater region.”

Senator Sean Ryan said, “The new Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Centennial Park will be a beautiful tribute to the life and legacy of Ralph Wilson and his spirit of generosity to the Buffalo and Western New York community. The new park will be a waterfront destination, providing recreational opportunities for surrounding neighborhoods and people from across the region. I am proud that New York State has invested in this great project, and I thank Mary Wilson and the Wilson Foundation for their leadership and enduring commitment to our community.”

“For the past five years, Buffalo Niagara Waterkeeper has been thrilled to be a part of this incredible park team in this once-in-a-lifetime project on our city’s waterfront,” added **Jill Jedlicka, Buffalo Niagara Waterkeeper executive director**. “The commitment and vision of the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation, combined with the collaboration of the City of Buffalo and dozens of partners, will deliver a legacy of equitable public access and healthy ecosystems in memory of Mr. Wilson. Waterkeeper is honored to support this work through our Buffalo Blueway Initiative and helping secure significant habitat and ecosystem funding for this park. We remain a committed partner to seeing this project to the end and ensuring successful implementation of ecosystem and shoreline improvements.”

“We are proud to be working with partners throughout the community to help this park reach its full potential as a destination for Western New Yorkers and visitors from across the region and beyond,” added Belanger.

About the Ralph Wilson Park Conservancy

The Ralph Wilson Park Conservancy is the not-for-profit organization created to work in partnership with the City of Buffalo to operate, maintain, and promote the public use of Ralph Wilson Park, a 99-acre park located on the shoreline of Lake Erie within the City of Buffalo. Established in 2021, the Conservancy is committed to reflecting the priorities laid out through

the [Imagine LaSalle](#) public engagement process and establishing the framework by which the park will be operated and maintained, with a continued focus on input from the community it serves.

The Conservancy will work closely with the local community and the City of Buffalo Parks Department, taking on responsibilities such as enhanced park maintenance, non-structural improvements, turf maintenance, horticulture, furnishing, events and programming, concessions, marketing, and branding. To learn more, visit <https://RWParkBuffalo.org>.

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