Building Together

Lessons from Transformative Public Space Investments

A Retrospective Evaluation of the Parks and Trails Portfolio at the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation

August 2025

RALPH C. WILSON, JR FOUNDATION

Gehl

Pictured on cover: **Engagement for Ralph Wilson Park in Buffalo —** Imagine Lasalle Playground Workshop with about 40 kids from the after-school program at The Belle Center. Source: University at Buffalo Regional Institute

Pictured here: **Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Centennial Park Detroit engagement,** revised design concepts workshop. Source: Nadir Ali.

Dear Colleagues & Community Partners,

With gratitude to our partners and community leaders, I am proud to present this midpoint evaluation of the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation's Parks & Trails Portfolio. Since 2017, our work has affirmed a powerful truth: when purpose and process are aligned, communities spaces can be transformed.

The signature parks and regional trails now taking shape across Southeast Michigan and Western New York demonstrate what happens when partners unite behind a shared vision. These spaces embody the commitment of our trustees, public officials, agencies, community members, nonprofits, and philanthropic partners who agreed to come together to create lasting public assets.

Our $200 million commitment in 2018, which has now grown to over $413 million, launched a journey through unexpected terrain: the COVID-19 pandemic, economic and supply disruptions, and leadership changes. Yet, our partnerships held firm. Our progress stems not just from funding but from the relationships built through persistent engagement and mutual trust.

This evaluation details the foundational strategies of our process: engage, commit, align, amplify, and collaborate. Each project was dynamic and involved multiple timelines. At every point, progress depended on community vision, strong partnerships, and effective risk mitigation. Importantly, investing early in organizational capacity as well as design and engineering can catalyze momentum for a project and investing in long-term maintenance endowments instills confidence and ensures it will be maintained for future generations. I want to specifically acknowledge the trust and leadership of our Board of Trustees to build these community assets and to ensure they can be maintained well into the future.

They saw the vision clearly and supported its development. They were unwavering and when challenges presented, they doubled down to fill gaps to ensure these projects could be completed. Our partners also believed in what was possible and found ways to work together to solve challenges and create these spaces. We watched community members reimagine spaces in their neighborhoods, government agencies bridge jurisdictional divides, and funders combine resources for greater impact.

As we reach the halfway point in our Foundation's spend-down process, this evaluation maps both our progress and the path ahead. The partnerships we forged must carry momentum beyond the Foundation's 2035 sunset. Our endowments offer financial stability for the maintenance of these parks and trails, but human connections — relationships, knowledge, and accountability — will determine their lasting impact.

This report is not an endpoint, but a milestone in our commitment to public space. Our ultimate success depends on communities continuing to nurture these vital connections long after our Foundation concludes its work.

With gratitude for your partnership,

James (J.J.) Tighe
Senior Director, Parks & Trails Portfolio
Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation
August 2025

RALPH C. WILSON, JR. FOUNDATION

The Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation is dedicated to sustained investment in the quality of life of the people of Southeast Michigan and Western New York.

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Executive Summary

Building a shared responsibility for world-class public space.

Transformative public space investments do not happen overnight. For the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation (the Foundation), the work of supporting two world-class waterfront parks and a network of trail investments was no different. The Foundation believed that to create meaningful impact, efforts should create momentum and be designed to endure long into the future. In 2018, the leadership of the Foundation made a $200 million commitment to investing in parks and trails across Southeast Michigan (SEMI) and Western New York (WNY). To deliver on this commitment, it developed a strategic approach to parks and trails development — one that generated shared responsibility among the many people and organizations within the two regions' public space ecosystems.

At the time of the Parks & Trails Portfolio's launch, the two regions' metropolitan centers were in distinct moments. Detroit, emerging from its 2013 bankruptcy, was focused on economic recovery, responding to calls for more equitable investment in neighborhoods and driving new development downtown and along the riverfront. Buffalo, meanwhile, was facing slow regional growth and job loss. This spurred projects like the Harborcenter mixed-use development and efforts to restore major open spaces, including plans to reconnect Delaware Park by reconfiguring the Scajaquada Expressway. In both regions, limited funding and local skepticism of outside influence threatened progress. The Foundation's challenge was to expand the vision, resources, and coordination needed to make transformative public space improvements possible.

These factors compelled the Foundation to do more than make a landmark financial commitment; it worked to build collective momentum. Thus, fostering shared responsibility across all stakeholders became central to the Portfolio's approach. For capacity building, the Foundation provided full funding for early-stage planning, design, and engineering, helping projects become well-positioned to seek funding. For capital support, the Foundation created a model in which it would contribute up to 1/3 of total project capital costs, helping to amplify additional resources from state, federal, and other partners. For the vision and design of the spaces, the Foundation embedded community leaders into the design process, funded inspirational trips for them to public spaces around the country, and gave them a direct line to world-renowned

Top: Parks & Trails New York.
Middle: Detroit Riverfront Conservancy.
Bottom: Ralph Wilson Park Conservancy.

design teams. For ensuring the spaces' completion and sustainability, the Foundation strategically coordinated across a web of government departments, philanthropic organizations, community organizations, conservancies, and contractors that would prepare sites for opening day and long-term operations. Beyond this, the Foundation reserved 20% of their financial commitment to fund endowments for the long-term operations of their park and trail investments.

Building this shared commitment to the parks was not without its challenges. The varying size and reach of each region's philanthropic and public funding pools required creative approaches to layering funding sources. The sheer size of the Foundation's commitment and the intensity of staff's involvement in these projects at times detracted from the collaborative, shared responsibility the Portfolio sought to foster. Further, a range of external headwinds — the COVID-19 pandemic, supply chain challenges, and an embezzlement crisis within a major grantee's organization — threatened the on-time, on-budget completion of these projects.

Amid these challenges, however, the Foundation and its partners adapted in service of project completion and long-term sustainability. The Foundation expanded its own program staff to engage with grantees on a more regular basis. It funded dedicated positions within grantee organizations for crucial needs, including fundraising, engineering support, and public space governance. And when needed — whether due to unexpected cost increases or mismanaged funds — the Foundation contributed more money to get the projects to the finish line.

The Foundation's model and work in supporting parks and trails across Southeast Michigan and Western New York provide many lessons for other funders and for the field of public space practitioners and advocates. These lessons vary widely: from the importance of building trust with local leaders to the value of establishing public space governance structures well before the ribbon cutting. In the spirit of continued learning, the Foundation is committed to uncovering additional insights as the parks and trails open, communities begin to use them, and the organizations responsible for their care take root as long-term operators and stewards.

In the meantime, one lesson is clear: a great public space is never finished. For the people who have shaped these spaces, the work of caring for them continues. As they do so, they can turn to this retrospective evaluation to understand the process that got these spaces to opening day. While not a roadmap, this evaluation highlights the keys to fostering the shared responsibility needed to bring world-class public spaces to life.

Portfolio at a Glance

$1.2 Billion $200 Million for long-term sustainability

Estimated Total Project Value + Endowments for Parks & Trails projects in Western New York and Southeast Michigan to date*

$413 Million

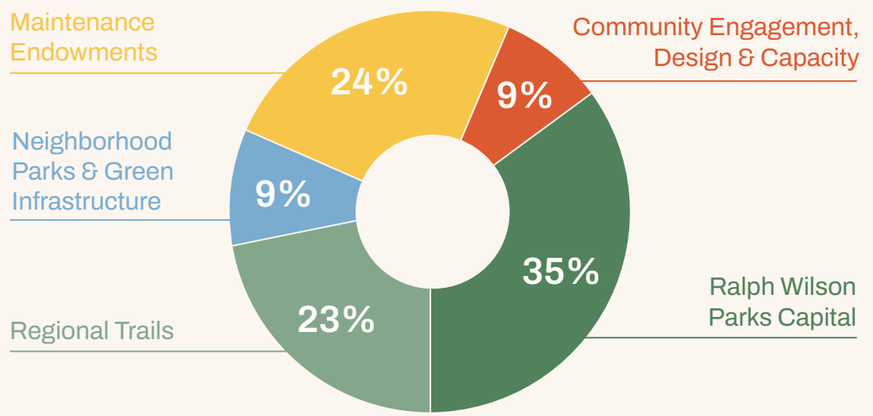
Total Foundation grant funding approved to date

85+ Grants awarded

50+ Grantee organizations

58% Western New York

42% Southeast Michigan



*As of July 1st, 2025.

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Parks & Trails Portfolio Overview

Prictured: **Joe Louis Greenway** connecting the award-winning Detroit riverfront with 23 communities throughout Detroit, Highland Park, Hamtramck and Dearborn. Source: Joe Louis Greenway Partnership.

Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation — Gehl

Focused on sustainable investment, capacity-building, and community-driven design, the Portfolio evolved to address regional needs, incorporating green infrastructure and long-term governance strategies.

A Bold Vision

In 2015, the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation (the Foundation) embarked on a journey as a spend-down foundation,* dedicated to making a transformative impact in Southeast Michigan and Western New York. Two years later, the Foundation introduced its Parks and Trails focus area: a strategic initiative aimed at enhancing public spaces through investments in the two regions. In October 2018, in honor of what would have been Mr. Wilson's 100th birthday, the Foundation announced its $200 million Parks & Trails Centennial Commitment, allocating $100 million each to Western New York and Southeast Michigan. The commitment aimed to do more than fund capital projects. The Foundation sought to elevate community missions, foster long-term sustainability through endowments and green infrastructure, and ensure that parks and trails would serve as pillars of connectivity and well-being for generations to come.

By 2020, the Foundation had refined the Portfolio focus areas into three key strategies: first, to advance the parks and trails initiative through the implementation of two signature parks and grant investments in regional trails and greenways; second, to promote public activation and programming of parks and trails; and third, to support targeted and collaborative green infrastructure and design projects. These strategies not only strengthened the physical landscapes but also built a framework for long-term community engagement and environmental resilience.

The Foundation viewed the Portfolio as part of a comprehensive grantmaking approach that intersected with other focus areas, particularly Youth Sports and Recreation and Entrepreneurship & Economic Development. To enhance quality of life in Western New York and Southeast Michigan, it extended its support beyond the centennial commitment, funding efforts like the Joe Louis Greenway in Detroit and the City Within a Park Endowment in Buffalo.

A Tailored Grantmaking Strategy

Beyond grants, the Foundation prioritized building stakeholder trust and setting a precedent for collaboration. Staff and leadership recognized the need to strengthen the relationships that sustain each region's park and trail ecosystem, ensuring longevity beyond the Foundation's end.

*Spend-down refers to a foundation with a planned end date, at which point it will spend down its assets and cease operations, commonly referred to as its "sunset".

Regions in Context — 2017

Southeast Michigan

includes Livingston, Macomb, Monroe, Oakland, St. Clair, Washtenaw, and Wayne counties

The landscape in Detroit at this time was marked by cautious recovery from the city's bankruptcy. Potential for public space investments in the region was buoyed by a robust philanthropic sector, a 2016 mayor's office commitment to fund improvements to 40 neighborhood parks, and the presence of high-capacity public space operators like the Detroit Riverfront Conservancy.

Recreation/Parks Budget	Detroit: $126 million
Park Score Ranking	Detroit, 2017: 75th Detroit, 2025: 58th
Notable events	The 2013 Detroit Bankruptcy led to the "Grand Bargain" — a group of philanthropic actors working together to address the fiscal crisis. The 2017 Detroit Parks & Recreation Improvement Plan allocated $12 million in unspent bond funds to fund capital improvements to 40 neighborhood parks.
Low-Income Community	42%
5 Yr Population Change	+ 0.3%
Job Growth	+ 6.8%
Median Household Income	Minimum: $43,702 Maximum: $78,430

Western New York

includes Allegany, Cattaraugus, Chautauqua, Erie, Genesee, Monroe, Niagara, Orleans, and Wyoming counties

Western New York had a growing commitment to parks and trails development at this time. Despite slow population growth and less robust philanthropic and public funding streams, the region saw the 2017 launch of the Empire State Trail initiative and the push for expanded commitments to sustaining Buffalo's parks system.

Recreation/Parks Budget	Buffalo: $13 million
Park Score Ranking	Buffalo, 2017: 58th Buffalo, 2025: 22nd
Notable events	Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy led a 2018 push to secure funding for the historic park system on its 150th anniversary. Sustained advocacy efforts were underway to restore parkland divided by the Scajaquada Expressway in the 1950s.
Low-Income Community	46%
5 Yr Population Change	- 0.3%
Job Growth	+ 1.9%
Median Household Income	Minimum: $44,304 Maximum: $55,459

Sources: City Recreation Budget: Detroit Budget in Brief 2017-2018, Parks Master Plan for the City of Buffalo, Page 68; Park Score: Trust for Public Land, 2017 and 2025. Low-Income Community: Defined by the share of census tracts that qualify as New Markets Tax Credit (NMTC) Low-Income Communities (LIC), based on poverty or income criteria. Population Change (5-Year): Calculated using American Community Survey (ACS) 5-Year Estimates; compares percent change in population between 2008–2012 and 2013–2017. Job Growth: Based on ACS 5-Year Estimates; measures percent change in population. Median Household Income: Based on the median household income of residents in neighborhoods surrounding the selected parks.

Program staff delivered on this commitment to relationship-building by adapting to grantees' needs. Through extensive research, program staff developed strategies to mitigate potential risk and tailored funding to meet the specific needs and readiness levels of each community partner – ensuring that there was an existing coalition dedicated to the project, that there were opportunities to align other funding sources, and that there was potential to create a significant community impact.

A Commitment to Seeing Projects Through

The development of these parks and trails did not occur in a vacuum. Since the Portfolio's inception, a series of external challenges forced the parks and trails development process to adapt. Shifts in political administrations brought changes to public funding availability, while the COVID-19 pandemic introduced other unprecedented hurdles and emphasized the value of parks. Rising costs due to inflation and supply chain disruptions complicated project execution, necessitating creative solutions and flexible planning. Additionally, the landscape of organizational partnerships evolved over time, including the need to rebuild trust and recoup funds after the embezzlement of over $40 million from the Detroit Riverfront Conservancy, which also affected funds allocated for the Foundation-backed riverfront park.

Despite these challenges, the Foundation's commitment to parks and trails remained. Throughout these unforeseen challenges, trustees doubled down on the investment, approving additional funding to account for increased costs.

Through strategic investments, collaborative partnerships, and an adaptive approach, the Foundation continued to advance its vision of accessible, sustainable, and community-driven public spaces. By aligning financial resources with long-term community needs, the Parks and Trails Portfolio worked to ensure that parks and trails would be developed, actively used, and maintained for years to come.

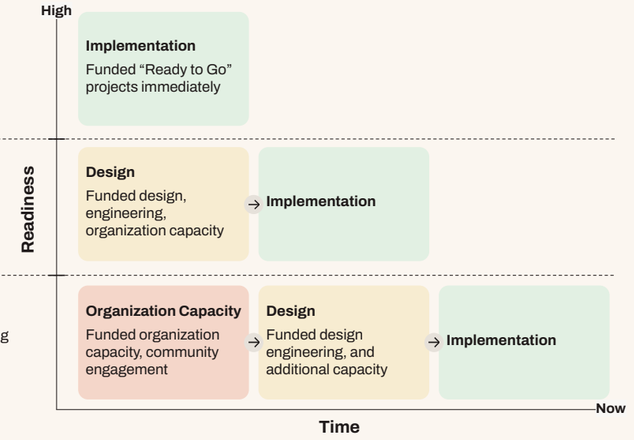
Project Readiness Assessment

For all projects, the Foundation reviewed socio-economic information, existing master plans and site history, depth of community engagement, and the state of project and financial readiness. As part of the project intake process, the Foundation assessed the readiness of projects and projects into three categories. This structured assessment helped determine the project's preparedness, and informed next steps in the project development process. Further, the Foundation identified critical gaps and worked to fill them.

Ready to Launch: Projects that: had completed community engagement, design and engineering; had the organization capacity to construct; only required match funding; and were up to 12 months from implementation.

Gaining Momentum: Projects that: required additional development in the form of community engagement, design and engineering, or organization capacity to construct; and were 1-3 years from implementation. The Foundation also provided additional support in the form of a support letter for future implementation funding to build confidence.

Emerging Opportunity: Projects that: were early in the visioning or development stage; required significant investment in organization capacity; needed to begin engaging the community; and required full design and engineering. These projects were typically in excess of $10 million and 3+ years from implementation.



Ralph Wilson Park, Buffalo

A world-class waterfront.
At the confluence of the Buffalo River, Niagara River, and Lake Erie, the park will be a local and regional destination.

Key Milestones

- 2017 — LaSalle Park engagement
- 2018 — Foundation announced funding commitment & signed MOU with City of Buffalo
- 2020 — Announcement of endowment funding
- 2021 — Ralph Wilson Park Conservancy established
- 2022 — Construction began
- 2025 — City within a Park Endowment established
- 2027 — Anticipated completion and opening

Key Partners

- Great Lakes Commission
- New York State
- Buffalo Niagara Waterkeeper
- Buffalo Urban Development Corporation (BUDC)
- City of Buffalo
- Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo
- Gardiner & Theobald
- Gilbane Building Company
- Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates Inc.
- Ralph Wilson Park Conservancy
- University at Buffalo Regional Institute (UBRI)
- University at Buffalo School of Architecture and Planning

Key Features

- Resilient shoreline with habitat for fish, birds, and other wildlife that reduces flooding
- Kayak launch allowing people to interact with the water
- New pedestrian bridge to connect city to the site
- Flexible spaces for informal activities (e.g., picnicking, playing, biking)
- Play garden inspired by Buffalo's industrial history and Great Lakes ecology
- Upgrades to sports fields
- ~2,000 newly planted trees

Lake Inlet →
The inlet combines shoreline resiliency with ecological uplift.

The Bridge →
Once separated from the Lower West Side by an expressway, the Park will now be accessible via a new pedestrian bridge — providing a safe, car-free connection for nearby residents.

Existing surrounding public space investments (parks and trails)

Map reflects conditions as of May 2025.
Photo shown on page are completed and constructed projects.

Transforming Buffalo's Waterfront

Buffalo's history with bold public space investment traces back to the 1932 Centennial celebration, organized to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the city's incorporation. To prepare, the city transformed lake-bottom land into usable ground by dredging the waterfront to create Centennial Park, featuring landmarks such as entry pillars, a grand stadium, and a beach. While some elements were temporary, many were permanent. When the event ended, Buffalo was left with a significant new green space. Described as "the place to go" for residents at the time, Centennial Park became a symbol of civic pride. However, for decades after, Buffalo's waterfront stood as a symbol of untapped potential. LaSalle Park, a sprawling 91-acre space along the edge of Lake Erie, offered visitors scenic water views but lacked amenities, suffered from limited upkeep, and was generally underused. While it served as a vital community space, hosting family cookouts, outdoor concerts, and cultural festivals like the Puerto Rican and Hispanic Day Parade, formal investment was sporadic. A 1998 master plan spurred modest improvements such as sports field reconfigurations, and over time, amenities like a splash pad and dog park were added, but the park remained largely disconnected from a broader vision. Repeated exposure to Lake Erie's winter ice and waves significantly eroded the seawall that protects both the public park and the Colonel Ward Pumping Station, posing a threat to the city's water supply and public access to the shoreline. While other sections of the city's waterfront saw revitalization over the years, LaSalle Park remained largely unchanged — until a new vision and a major investment.

In 2018, the Foundation committed $50 million to fund a signature park in Western New York. The selection of LaSalle Park came after careful consideration of different factors that made it an ideal site: its location, potential for impact, proximity to public housing, flood mitigation, and potential for inclusive waterfront access. As part of the commitment, $10 million (20%) was set aside for an endowment to ensure long-term maintenance, an oft-overlooked aspect of public park investment. As one project partner put it, "The project doesn't end when you cut the ribbon."

Plan for Ralph Wilson Park, Buffalo
Source: Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates for Ralph Wilson Park Conservancy.

Imagine Lasalle Engagement
Source: Ralph Wilson Park Conservancy

Community input was central to transforming LaSalle Park into Ralph Wilson Park. Through the Imagine LaSalle initiative, thousands of residents, advocacy groups, and city officials shaped the park's design over 100+ community and technical meetings. Local organizations, including youth sports leagues and cultural event leaders, were actively involved.

As the community vision took shape, strategic funding from the Foundation helped build the city's capacity to manage such a large scale transformation: Buffalo Urban Development Corporation was resourced to manage the project and hired Gardiner & Theobald, while the University of Buffalo conducted research on effective governance models, work that ultimately led to the formation of the Ralph Wilson Park Conservancy to steward the park in partnership with the City of Buffalo after construction.

Following its work on the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Centennial Park in Detroit, landscape architecture firm Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates was introduced to the Buffalo community at a public meeting and was subsequently chosen to translate the community's vision into life in 2018. The design includes a resilient shoreline, natural habitat restoration, kayak launch, and a pedestrian bridge connecting the park to the Lower West Side.

What began as a $50 million lead gift has now added into a more than $200 million collaborative effort, unlocking new opportunities for Buffalo's waterfront and catalyzing community revitalization. As one local resident noted, "Every year, the landscape in our communities is physically and visually improving. Waterfront activity has exploded. Tourists and former residents are coming back, and they're amazed at the changes they see."

Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Centennial Park, Detroit

A complete riverfront. The park will transform an underutilized stretch of Detroit's riverfront into a vibrant public space and regional trail hub.

Key Milestones

- 2014 — Site acquired for park development
- 2017 — Funded community engagement through DRC
- 2018 — Foundation announces funding commitment
- 2022 — Groundbreaking of park
- 2023 — Southwest Greenway and Riverfront Towers Boardwalk completed
- 2024 — Fund at Southeast Michigan Foundation for Public Spaces established
- 2025 — Completion and park opening

Key Partners

- City of Detroit
- Community Foundation of Southeast Michigan (CFSEM)
- Detroit Riverfront Conservancy
- Huron-Clinton Metroparks
- Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates Inc.
- Michigan Department of Natural Resources (MDNR)
- Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT)

Key Features

- Water Garden — an experiential, ecological learning area in the heart of the park
- Expanded and diverse shoreline with increased habitat for vegetation, birds, and aquatic wildlife
- New kayak launch allowing people to interact closer with the water
- A network of spaces for informal activities, including shaded groves and social plazas
- Sports house featuring a raised canopy and skylight that provides two public open-air basketball courts and flexible space for a range of programs and events
- Play garden featuring an iconic, 22-foot slide in the shape of a brown bear
- The Hill — an expansive lawn for musical performances and movies in the summer and sledding in the winter

The Play Garden →

At the heart of the new play garden is a 20-foot bear slide, the centerpiece of a collection of play structures inspired by Michigan's wildlife. Other oversized creatures, including a beaver, fox, and fish, invite children into a larger-than-life adventure.

The Hill →

The new park design features an expansive lawn for year-round events like concerts, movies, outdoor fitness classes, and sledding in the winter.

Existing surrounding public space investments (parks and trails)

Proposed investments (trails)

Map reflects conditions as of May 2025.
Photo shown on page are completed and constructed projects.

Filling a Gap in the Detroit Riverfront

Once home to a bustling rail yard and later a commercial printing facility, the 22-acre site now known as Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Centennial Park stood as one of the most underutilized stretches of Detroit's riverfront for decades. Despite the surrounding area's ongoing revitalization, including a pedestrian path and more than $1 billion in economic development, the site remained largely untouched, defined by a sea wall and vacant lots.

In 2017, two powerful forces converged on Detroit's West Riverfront Park. The Detroit Riverfront Conservancy (DRC) had identified the site as a transformative opportunity, a chance to enhance quality of life, spark economic growth, and bridge critical gaps in the city's connectivity. At the same time, the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation recognized the park's potential as a cornerstone investment for their Parks and Trails Portfolio. This alignment of vision sparked a collaboration that would reshape Detroit's waterfront.

The Foundation demonstrated its commitment early, providing a $3.3 million capacity-building grant to the DRC in 2017. Rather than imposing external ideas, the Conservancy took a community-first approach, establishing a Community Advisory Team (CAT) that brought together diverse Detroit residents and neighbors. This group embarked on a nationwide research tour, studying successful park models across the country. Their findings, combined with insights from over 20 public meetings and focused community engagement sessions, became the foundation for what would come next.

The following year brought the project's most ambitious phase: an international design competition launched by DRC in 2018. When Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates (MVVA) emerged as the winning firm, they didn't work in isolation. Instead, community voices continued to shape their vision through six major public meetings that drew more than 800 attendees, plus extensive outreach that engaged over 5,000 residents through schools, neighborhood events, and public displays throughout the city.

Also in 2018, the Foundation signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the State of Michigan to formalize its commitment to Michigan parks and trails. This agreement established regular meetings between local and state leaders to identify aligned projects and address regional trail gaps,

Eugene Driker, a life trustee of the Foundation at Community Engagement Meeting

Plan for Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Centennial Park, Detroit
Source: Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates for Detroit Riverfront Conservancy.

including connecting projects like the Southwest Greenway and the Riverfront Towers Boardwalk to the riverfront park site.

The park was renamed the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Centennial Park in 2018, and the Foundation announced its financial commitment: $40 million for construction and $10 million to support long-term sustainability efforts along the riverfront.

Beyond its direct financial impact, the Foundation's involvement helped build capacity and also to raise the park's profile, allowing DRC to attract additional funding from other philanthropic, state, and federal partners. The Foundation remained a key supporter of the project through major challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2024 embezzlement crisis involving the Detroit Riverfront Conservancy's former CFO. In the face of heightened uncertainty, the Foundation stepped forward with a $16 million emergency grant funds to the Conservancy to cover construction costs. As part of the broader effort with the CFSEM, the Foundation structured a $25 million loan guarantee to keep construction moving forward and to provide time for the Conservancy to raise additional funds. The Foundation's leading commitment stabilized momentum during a critical period and signaled confidence in the project's long-term vision and in the Detroit Riverfront Conservancy. This support helped keep construction on track, cover contractor payments, and enabled short-term borrowing for the DRC to stay in business. One interviewee described it as "a crisis moment that sparked a critical level of collaboration" between partners to sustain momentum and restore public trust.

The Southwest Greenway opened in 2023. The Riverfront Towers Boardwalk and Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Centennial Park broke ground in May 2022 and will open in October 2025. The project represents a major step in the DRC's broader vision to create a continuous riverfront that represents a physical and symbolic connection between the east and west riverfront. Once a neglected and inaccessible site, the park is now set to become a civic anchor, reconnecting neighborhoods and offering new public space along Detroit's waterfront.

Project in Focus

Trails Partnership with New York State

A catalyst for community connection. Linking communities and driving rural revitalization through trail partnerships with New York State.

Key Milestones

- 2018 — Foundation awarded the first $6.5 million grant to start the partnership with NY State
- 2020 — Completion of the Empire State Trail
- 2022 — Genesee Valley Greenway rehabilitation project continues with second grant
- 2023 — Grand opening of Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Welcome Center at Niagara Falls State Park

Key Partners

- Community Foundation of Greater Buffalo
- New York Power Authority
- Natural Heritage Trust
- New York State
- Parks & Trails New York
- New York Department of Environmental Conservation
- New York Department of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation

Key Features

- Trail Development — Empire State Trail, Genesee Valley Greenway, Niagara Shoreline Trails, Quaker Area Multi-Use Trail
- Trail Gateways and Visitor Centers — Erie Canalway Gateways, Niagara Falls Welcome Center
- Youth & Community Programs — Ladders to the Outdoors, Learn-to-Swim, Our Whole History

↓ Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Gateway
A tribute to Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. added to the Empire State Trail at the Outer Harbor State Park at the entrance to Gallagher Beach.

Brockport Loop →
The new pedestrian bridge connects SUNY Brockport to the Empire State Trail and the Brockport Village Center on the historic Erie Canal.

Existing trails

Planned, proposed, or potential trails

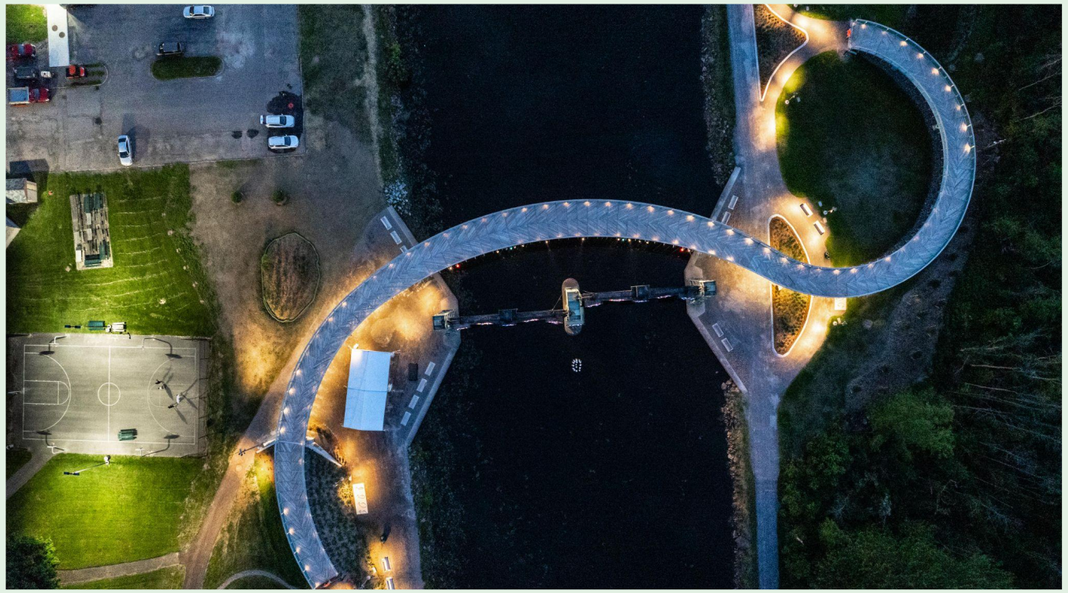
Map reflects conditions as of May 2025 sourced from NYS Greenway Trails System Map and the Foundation's knowledge of trail development in the region.

Connecting Communities Across Western New York Through Partnerships

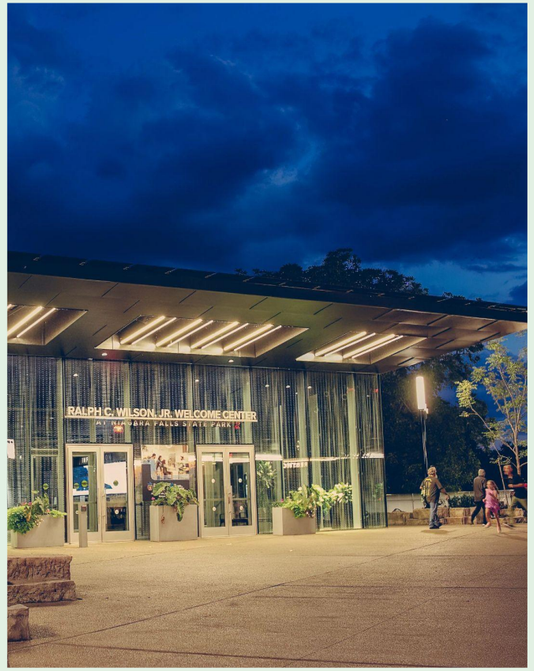
The Foundation's partnership including New York State Department of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation, the Natural Heritage Trust, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservancy, the New York Power Authority and others, formed a collaboration that helped transform parks, trails, and connections across Western New York. This partnership is an example of how public-private partnerships can advance bold community visions and increase access to recreation, nature, and vibrant public spaces.

Since the partnership began, there have been more than $37 million in private grants combined with $63 million in public funding, resulting in $100 million invested in outdoor projects. This infusion of private philanthropy catalyzed broader public investment and community support, making transformative outdoor projects a reality.

One of the hallmarks of this partnership has been the completion and enhancement of regionally significant trails. The Foundation's funding helped bridge critical gaps in the Genesee Valley Greenway, Shoreline Trail, and Empire State Trail — projects that had long stalled or were never started due to jurisdictional and funding challenges. Many major trail and community connection projects benefited. In Allegheny State Park, a $1.22 million grant supported a 3.6-mile extension of the Quaker Area Multi-Use Trail. A $6.5 million grant supported the creation of five trail gateways to improve accessibility and trail surfaces along the Empire State Trail. A $6.4 million grant completed over 12 miles of trail and multiple bridges in Allegheny County to re-invigorate the Genesee Valley Greenway south of Letchworth State Park. And a $8 million grant supported the new Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Welcome Center at Niagara Falls State Park, which will serve over 9 million visitors yearly.



The Brockport Loop offers a uniquely curving ADA-accessible bridge across the Erie Canal
Source: NYS Canal Corp



Ralph C. Wilson, Jr Welcome Center at Niagara Falls State Park, a 28,000-square-foot structure featuring glass walls and a low roof to maximize views and connections to the Falls.
Source: Diana Nowak Riffel for New York State Office of Parks.

Ladders to the Outdoors program provides free recreational programs for youth in Niagara and Erie county communities.
Source: New York State Office of Parks.

The partnership with New York State exemplifies how targeted philanthropy with a spend-down model can drive ambitious projects that might otherwise seem out of reach. By filling gaps in planning, design, capacity-building, construction, and programming, the alliance between the Foundation and New York State empowered communities to achieve long-term goals and realize innovative visions for their public lands.

2

Study Overview

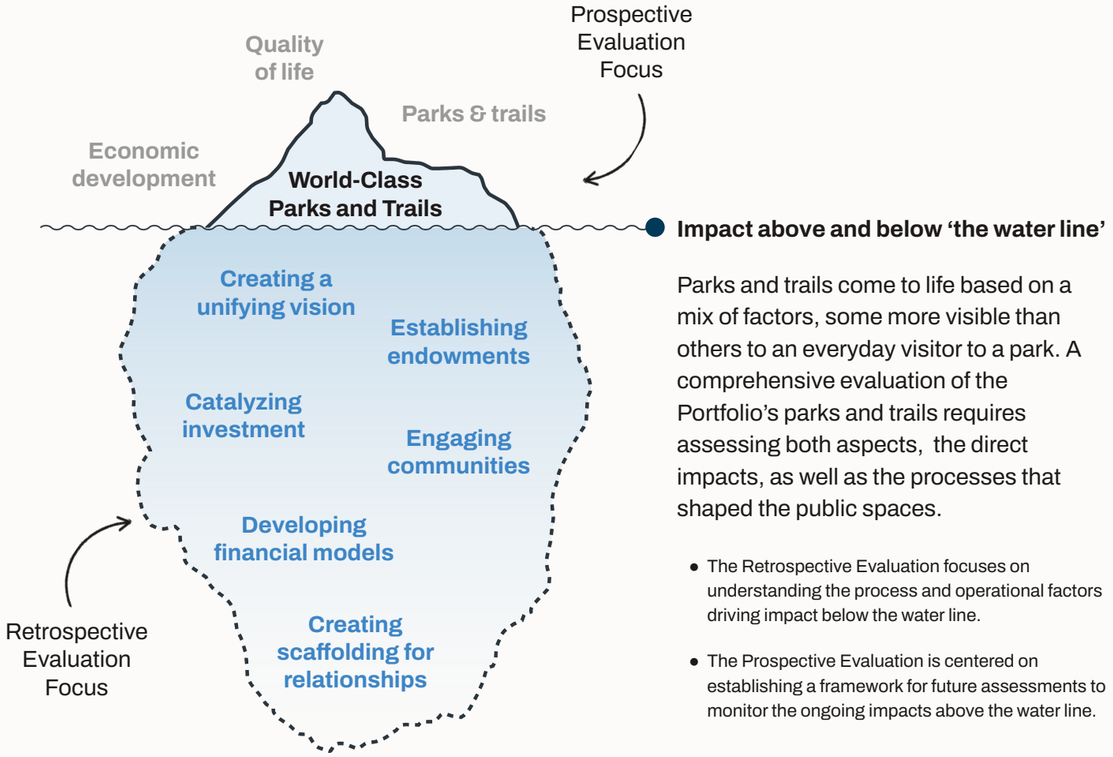
Prictured: **Retrospective Evaluation** project team workshopping key findings and recommendations.

Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation — Gehl

Lessons from the Process Behind These Emerging Public Space Projects

Once the parks and trails investments are open to the public, evaluating their many impacts on public space access, quality of life, and economic development will be essential. At this moment in the life cycle, however, the focus is on understanding impacts that lie beneath the surface.

This retrospective study examined how visioning, financing, engagement, and construction efforts contributed to shaping the parks and trail network across Southeast Michigan and Western New York.



The iceberg model was originally developed by anthropologist Edward Hall (1976) to understand cultural dynamics in organizations. Systems theorist Donella Meadows later adapted this framework for systems thinking applications, using it to illustrate how visible events represent only a small portion of systemic reality, while deeper patterns, structures, and mental models remain hidden beneath the surface (Meadows, 1999).

Parks and trails come to life based on a mix of factors, some more visible than others to an everyday visitor to a park. A comprehensive evaluation of the Portfolio's parks and trails requires assessing both aspects, the direct impacts, as well as the processes that shaped the public spaces.

- The Retrospective Evaluation focuses on understanding the process and operational factors driving impact below the water line.
- The Prospective Evaluation is centered on establishing a framework for future assessments to monitor the ongoing impacts above the water line.

Methodology

Gehl grounded the study's evaluation plan in the Portfolio strategy and developed core research questions to guide assessment. For each sub-question, the evaluation team identified key indicators to measure outcomes and outlined the proposed methodologies for collecting and analyzing data.

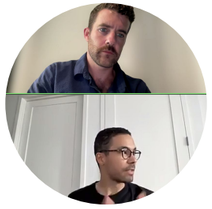
Interviews with a cross-section of project leaders and partners lent a comprehensive understanding of the Portfolio investments. Given the importance of interviews to the process, Gehl and Fourth Economy developed a detailed interview guide to ensure consistency in gathering qualitative insights.

Gehl and Fourth Economy met with a diverse group of individuals affiliated with the Portfolio. These stakeholders represented a range of roles and perspectives related to parks and trails development and management, and provided insights into the Portfolio's impact and challenges.

Desktop Research

August–December 2024

Collected and analyzed publicly accessible datasets, including census data and media coverage, as well as Foundation materials such as grant lists, MOUs, and past progress reports to establish the understanding of the Portfolio.



Interviews

August–September 2024

Conducted 60+ interviews with stakeholders involved in the Portfolio to assess successes, challenges, and overall impact. See table on the right for the perspectives covered in these interviews.*

Site Visits

August–September 2024

Visited parks and trails with the program staff to observe the existing landscape, assess progress, and gain firsthand insights into project implementation.

Spatial Analysis

January–March 2025

Used geospatial analysis to evaluate community demographics and access to parks and trails across both regions.

Gehl analyzed interview transcripts using multiple qualitative methods to extract key insights. The team began by summarizing the main points from each stakeholder conversation to capture essential takeaways. The team then conducted a qualitative thematic analysis to identify emerging patterns and themes, drawing on subjective interpretation and domain expertise. Additionally, transcript tagging and coding were applied to systematically categorize data, facilitating a structured analysis and interpretation of stakeholder perspectives. To enhance the rigor of the analysis, an AI-assisted review was conducted using a licensed AI tool to verify and support qualitative findings.** By employing this multi-method approach, the study ensured a comprehensive and rigorous examination of stakeholder perspectives. This methodology enabled a deep and well-informed understanding of the Portfolio's impact, opportunities, and challenges.

Interviews at a Glance	Western New York	Southeast Michigan	Total
Total Number Of Interviews Conducted			
Total Interviews	31	30	**61**
Total Interviewees	33	34	**67**
Number Of Interviews By Delivery Methods			
In-Person	20	9	**29**
Virtual	11	21	**32**
Number Of Interviews By Perspectives			
City Government	2	4	**6**
County Government	0	3	**3**
State Government	9	4	**13**
Non-profit Including conservancies	8	10	**18**
Foundations Including community foundations	2	5	**7**
Consultant	7	3	**10**
Others Including corporate, regional park system, federal government, community advocates	3	1	**4**

*While some interviewees might come from multiple perspectives given career experience, they were categorized here by their current affiliation.
**Involves a custom ChatGPT model under a protected, secure Team license — this method was only used to ensure that there were no gaps or bias in the analysis process.

3

Looking Back

The Emerging Impact of the Portfolio

Prictured: **Ralph Wilson Park Buffalo** community update meeting in 2024. Source: Ralph Wilson Park Conservancy.

Building for the Long Term: Partnership and Progress Despite Uncertainty

Any effort to understand the short- and long-term impacts of the Parks & Trails Portfolio comes with limitations, because the public spaces themselves were not all complete at the time of research. For example, the sufficiency of funding, durability of materials, and endurance of relationships can only be measured in the years to come. That said, the retrospective evaluation, grounded in over 60 interviews, offered early signals of the effectiveness of the Foundation's efforts to shape world-class public spaces.

First, many partners reported how the Foundation's grantmaking approach reflected the holistic needs of public space projects. Indeed, grant funding was allocated to various facets of the projects: design and engineering, capital construction, community engagement, capacity-building, research on governance structures, and more. "Big things don't get done without coordination and partnerships, and [the Foundation] provides resources that allows for those discussions to move forward," said Andy Rabb, Deputy Commissioner for Parks and Recreation, City of Buffalo.

Second, the Foundation's approach as a funder was distinct. Staff were nimble, hyper-engaged with grantees and partners, and committed to long-term relationship building. Partners valued the Foundation's follow-through on its vision to produce impact.

> "The amount that we've been able to accomplish since 2018 is close to double what we've been able to do 20 years prior, from 1998. In that time we put 10 miles of trails on the ground, now we put 25 miles of continuous trail."
>
> Retrospective Study Interviewee

Lastly, even with the Foundation's pledge to earmark 20%* of its initial $200 million commitment for parks and trails endowment funding, many grantees remain concerned about the long-term sustainability of the public spaces they are a part of creating or maintaining. This challenge is not unique to these spaces. As the Foundation prepares to spend down and step back in its involvement, grantees face a challenging regional and national funding landscape for parks and trails. As such, grantees remain uncertain whether they have sufficient human resources and diversified funding sources to sustain them for the long term.

These early signals of impact reflect the Foundation's approach to park and trail development. The following sections detail the strengths and challenges of this approach.

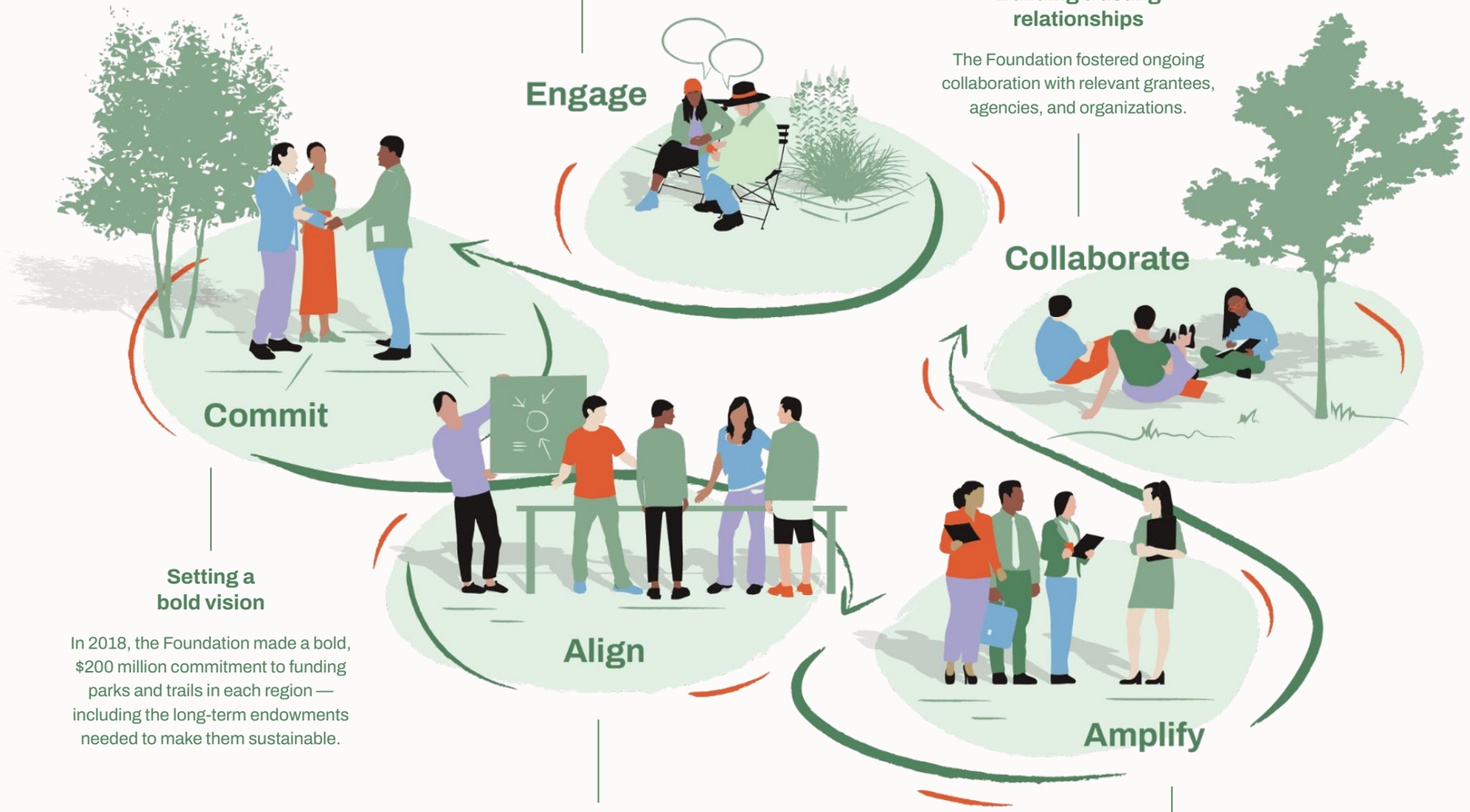
*At the time of this report, the Foundation has made nearly $100 million in grants to fund parks and trails endowments, exceeding the 20% pledge.

Fundamental Strategies of the Parks & Trails Portfolio

Public space development is not linear. The Foundation worked iteratively with its collaborators — communities, state and local government, funders, designers, contractors, and more. Five strategies predominated throughout the project development process. Each of these built shared responsibility for the short-term implementation and long-term sustainability of these public spaces.

Centering community needs

The Foundation invested in community engagement to ensure the project visions were informed by community needs and desires and to build local support and ownership.



Building trusting relationships

The Foundation fostered ongoing collaboration with relevant grantees, agencies, and organizations.

Setting a bold vision

In 2018, the Foundation made a bold, $200 million commitment to funding parks and trails in each region — including the long-term endowments needed to make them sustainable.

Aligning resources to complete the community vision

The Foundation tailored pacing and funding amount based on grantee and partner readiness related to project implementation and long-term sustainability.

Amplifying partner capacity and community voices

The Foundation catalyzed greater impact by diversifying funding sources and strengthening local capacity.

Engage

The Foundation invested in community engagement to ensure the project was informed by local priorities and to build local support and ownership.

The in-depth and continuing engagement process for its two signature park investments in Detroit and Buffalo went beyond workshops and feedback sessions. The Foundation helped form and fund community engagement processes, including resident and stakeholder groups that traveled to world-class public spaces across the United States for inspiration. This raised expectations and inspired a more ambitious vision among participating residents.

These residents played a crucial role in interviewing and selecting the parks design teams. This process gave locals real decision-making power and laid the groundwork for resident representation and ownership in the eventual operations of the public space.

Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation — Gehl

> This is one of the greatest community engagement efforts I’ve ever seen. I am confident that it’s going to sustain the interest in and use of this park.”
>
> Retrospective Study Interviewee

Strengths

The in-depth engagement process for the two signature park investments in Detroit and Buffalo ensured locals were represented in the design process, elevated community aspirations of what is possible, and fostered a sense of pride in the parks.

For example, many interviewees praised the Foundation's funding of the Ralph Wilson Park Community Working Group in Buffalo (Imagine La Salle) and Detroit Riverfront Conservancy Community Advisory Team (CAT): a diverse group of community members who led visioning for the park, traveling to world-class public spaces in New York City, Philadelphia, and Chicago for inspiration and serving on the design competition review jury. They now feel a sense of ownership over the space, often referring to it as "my park." Interviewees noted that this process allowed for a variety of voices to be included in the process, ranging from residents near the park to occasional visitors.

This level of inclusion not only ensured that projects reflected the needs and desires of diverse community members but also built trust through the Foundation staff's consistent presence at community meetings. One participant illustrated the value of such in-depth engagement: "Wins from community engagement include asking the children what they wanted, which was huge. The playground, which was far from the entrance, became a focal point because of their input."

> "It brought in people who normally wouldn't be part of the process — neighborhood locals, young people. It gave them confidence in their own voice and created an expectation that if something is happening in their neighborhood, they should be involved and have a voice in it."
>
> Retrospective Study Interviewee

As part of Imagine LaSalle, 22 residents and stakeholders visited other U.S. cities — such as the Chicago Riverwalk shown above — to gather inspiration from parks and provide valuable insights throughout the design process. Source: University at Buffalo Regional Institute

Community engagement and the Foundation's subject-matter expertise in parks and trails shaped visions that reflect each project's role in a broader network of public spaces and natural resources.

Flagship parks and improved trails often attract both citywide and regional audiences. This mix of everyday and occasional visitors enabled the projects to set a new bar for quality, inspiring change throughout their public space networks.

As one Western New York interviewee reflects, "Signature projects like this are really helpful to point to so [if] another community in another part of the state is looking to do something similar, we now have the right type of design where we can say, 'Look at what they did in Buffalo.'"

Community outreach for the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Centennial Park Detroit included information sessions, educational sessions with Detroit Public School students, block club meetings, and models of the proposed park being displayed in prominent locations throughout Detroit. Source: Nadir Ali.

Challenges

The Parks and Trails Portfolio investments elevated the common tension facing parks funders — between investing in large projects and investing more widely in neighborhood spaces.

For example, in Southeast Michigan, four interviewees expressed concern about the site selection and potential disparity that this high-profile park could create. A local Detroit interviewee voiced their curiosity behind the investment, asking, "If there's this spend-down [model], where should we spend it? The impact that Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. could have on our neighborhood parks would be significant for the lives of Detroiters."

To balance the focus on signature park investments, the Foundation has also prioritized smaller-scale, community-centered spaces in Southeast Michigan and Western New York. By partnering with two national nonprofits — KABOOM! and The Skatepark Project — the Foundation has helped local communities create more safe and imaginative places for kids to play. What began as a $10 million commitment from the Foundation ultimately grew to nearly $17 million, resulting in the creation of more than 90 play spaces and skateparks across the two regions. In 2025, the Foundation also launched the City Within a Park initiative in Buffalo — a long-term endowment of up to $50 million, seeded by a landmark $25 million gift from the Foundation — to support the ongoing care and maintenance of parks throughout the Buffalo park system.

The initial $200 million commitment established credibility, raised the ambition level, and generated momentum.

The Foundation's $200 million commitment — split evenly between parks and trails in Southeast Michigan and Western New York, including reserves for endowment funding — was a landmark moment for public space funding in these regions. For reference, annual parks and recreation budgets for these regions' public entities at the time of these investments were $107 million by the Michigan Department of Natural Resources[1]; $500 million by the State of New York[2]; $140 million by the City of Detroit[3], and $13 million by the City of Buffalo[4]. Once the commitment was announced in October 2018, it signaled the Foundation was dedicated to supporting world-class park and trail development in the two regions. Coalitions of grantees, partners, and co-funders formed, including public space conservancies, park and trail advocacy groups, and city and state governments. Over time, the Foundation expanded its original $200 million centennial commitment to $413 million in total grantmaking, in response to additional grantee project-based needs that surfaced, new opportunistic investments in critical spaces, and additional endowments for sustainability.

Sources: Michigan Department of Natural Resources. (2019). Budget briefing FY 2019/2020. New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, Division of the Budget. (2020). Budget highlights FY 2020. 3. City of Detroit. (2019). 2019–2020 budget in brief. 4.City of Buffalo. (2019). 2019–2020 adopted budget.

> I don't need to speak, the commitment speaks for itself."
>
> Mary Wilson (who lost her voice the day of the announcement), Life Trustee, Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation

Strengths

The public announcement of the Foundation's commitment to the flagship parks signaled to public and private funders that a base of support was in place.

Interviewees with different roles in project development noted that the public commitment in particular provided a sense of credibility to both parks and trails projects. According to Kristen Wiltfang, Principal Planner for Oakland County, Michigan, "Having a letter of support and commitment from Wilson provided stability for the trail council to remain committed to the Michigan Air Line Trail project."

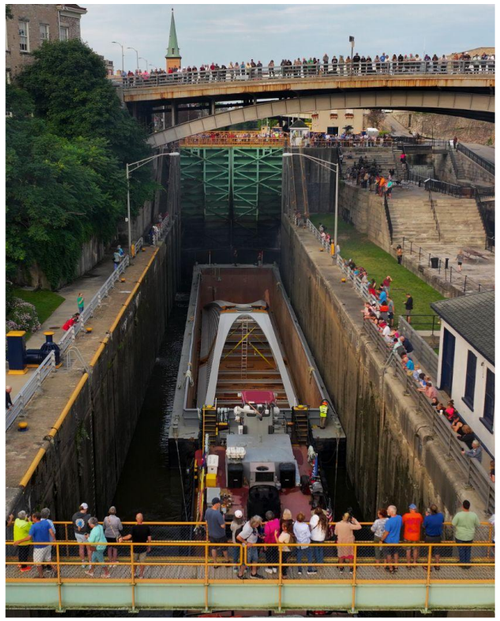
> "[The funding commitment] said, 'There's no question that we're serious about what we're doing.' This is not 'build it and they will come'. It's 'we will build it, and we will do everything along the way that needs to be done.' This gives them confidence that they're not getting involved in something that is a lost cause."
>
> Retrospective Study Interviewee

Beyond capital funding, the Foundation demonstrated its commitment to long-term sustainability through an endowment structure that supports the lasting success of its projects.

Interviewees with different roles in project development shared that the public-facing commitment to endowments lent credibility to parks and trails projects, while encouraging philanthropies to consider funding endowments, not just capital.

The Foundation's communications on their large upfront commitment to parks and trails investment drummed up regional excitement and interest beyond Buffalo and Detroit.

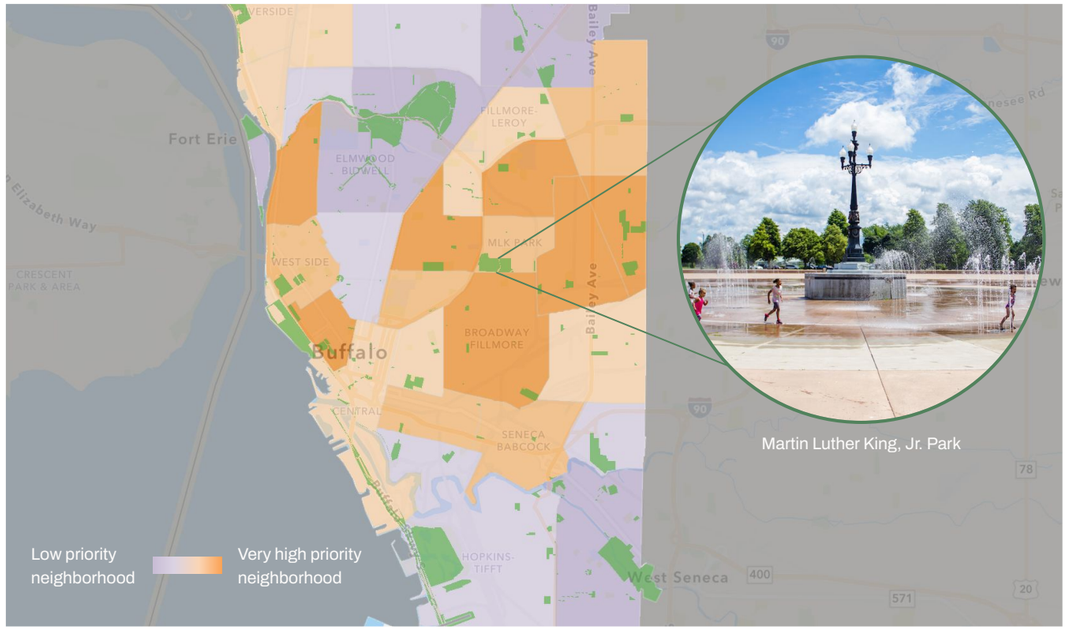
As one Western New York stakeholder observed upon the arrival of the signature pedestrian bridge for the Ralph Wilson Park through the Erie Canal, "It was really unique to see there were actually people who were just paying attention to what was coming through the locks. … That way you're creating that broader draw throughout the region. They did a really good job of creating a little bit of hype behind it."



Communities gathered to witness the Ralph Wilson Park Bridge travel 363 miles along the historic Erie Canal before its installation at Ralph Wilson Park. Now spanning Interstate 190, the bridge connects Buffalo's Lower West Side to the newly renovated, 100-acre park.

At a playground workshop for Ralph Wilson Park in Buffalo, children and adults from Waterfront Elementary School shared feedback on the draft design though interactive activities including a favorite image exercise. Source: Ralph Wilson Park Conservancy.

The Michigan Air Line Trail stretches over seven miles through three western Oakland County communities. Construction was completed in 2023. Source: Michigan Air Line Trailway Management Council, photographer: Fred Phillps.



This map from the Buffalo Parks Master Plan integrates data on community, health, and environmental priorities to present a holistic view of park needs across the city. Martin Luther King, Jr. Park (highlighted), located in a high-priority area, has undergone major improvements in recent years with the support from the city, the Foundation, community partners, and hundreds of volunteers. Upgrades include an inclusive playground, splash pad (pictured), picnic shelters, and renovations to the casino and shelterhouse. Source: City of Buffalo, Trust for Public Land, and New City Parks.

The Foundation tailored the pacing and amount of funding based on grantee and partner readiness.

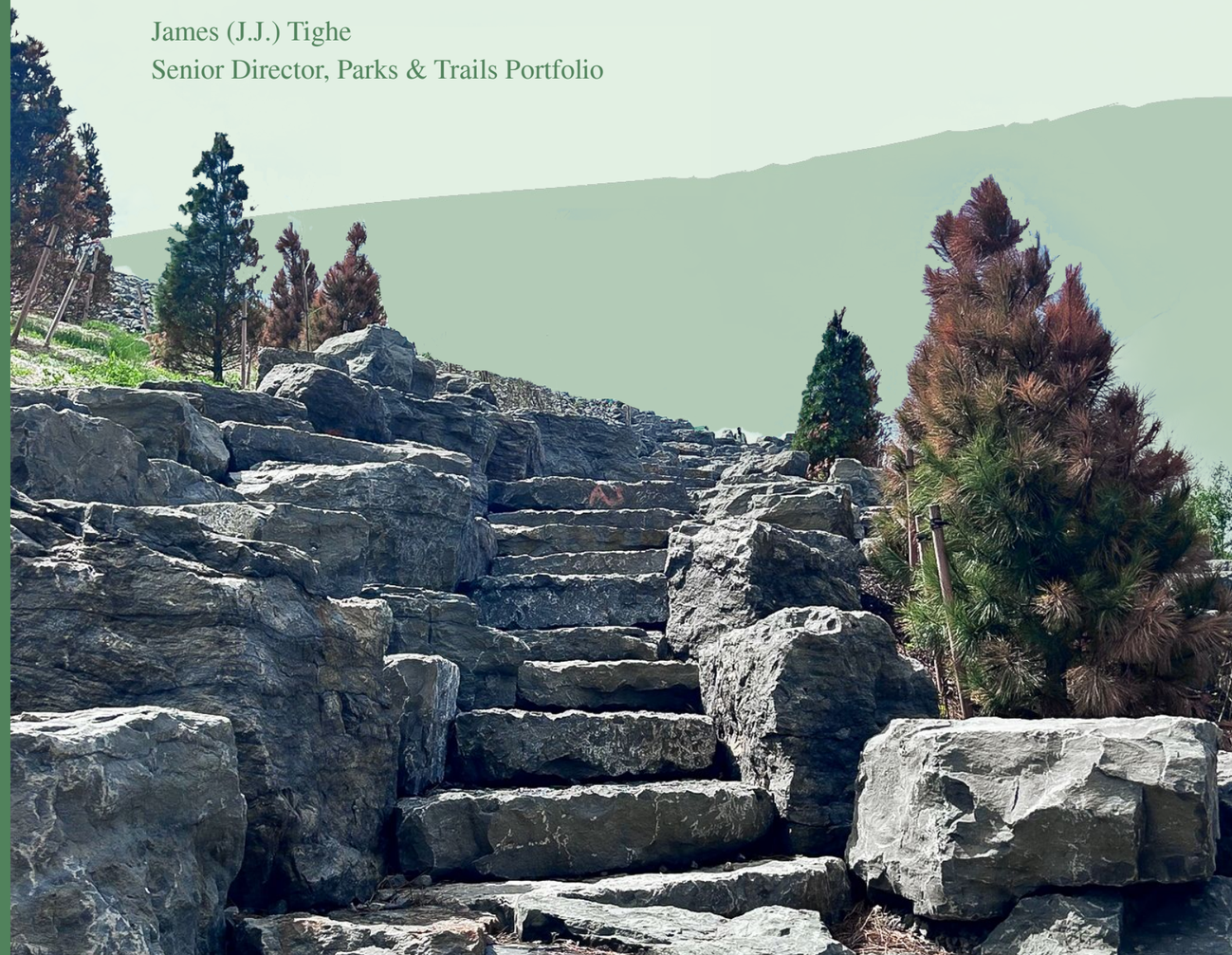
Disbursing funds incrementally was the Foundation's way of building trust and capacity with grantees, providing support when it was most needed and when recipients were best positioned to use it effectively. In particular, the Foundation calibrated its grantmaking in relation to grantees' needs in project implementation and their preparedness for long-term sustainability.

For project implementation, the Foundation's support extended beyond capital construction, offering financial and human resources for design, engineering, and project management. The Foundation actively engaged park and trail stakeholders throughout development, for instance, facilitating discussions with community groups while researching future governance structures. Despite some concerns with the fast pace of the timeline, project partners emphasized that this approach ensured alignment and efficiency.

On long-term sustainability, the Foundation established a model for funding long-term endowments, maintenance funds, and governance structures as integral parts of project development. This begin-with-the-end-in-mind approach had a ripple effect, enabling organizations to be more strategic in their visioning and long-term planning. However, concerns remain about sustaining the momentum of these projects once the Foundation is no longer convening key partners.

> We listened closely to community feedback and worked to build as much of the community's vision as possible given funding and technical limitations. At the same time, we collaborated with partners to align resources and move forward at a pace that matched their capacity and readiness to implement."

James (J.J.) Tighe
Senior Director, Parks & Trails Portfolio



Design, Engineering & Construction

Strengths

The Foundation supported the design and engineering phases required to make projects shovel-ready and eligible for essential state and federal funding.

This ensured projects could more efficiently move toward completion and lifted the funding burden for design and engineering from public space operators and public sector agencies.

For example, the Foundation invested $40 million over six years in the Joe Louis Greenway, a 27.5-mile pathway connecting four cities and 23 neighborhoods in Southeast Michigan. This investment was strategically phased. It began with $2 million 2017 for early planning and community engagement, followed by $3 million in 2021 to support design and initial construction of a critical 3 mile section, and culminating in a $35 million commitment in 2023 to ensure long-term sustainability. This catalytic funding helped unlock up to $350 million for the broader initiative. The initial planning grant laid the groundwork by funding the framework plan and construction documents, enabling successful applications for state and federal construction funds. It also supported the integration of neighborhood planning and economic development efforts along the corridor to maximize the project's broader impact.

Thet Warren Trailhead, built on a former rail corridor, serves as a major gateway featuring outdoor event space, accessible parking, and a signature playscape. This was something communities could see take shape while the full 27.5-mile loop was under construction. Source: Joe Louis Greenway Partnership.

Community members explore the playscape and recreational space model at the Ralph C. Wilson Jr. Centennial Park groundbreaking event. Source: Nadir Ali.

Once projects broke ground, the Foundation continued to be highly engaged in the project management process, which helped keep projects in both regions on track and maintained momentum.

State project partners and strategic partners for Ralph Wilson Park in Buffalo shared how the Foundation's structured approach to timelines encouraged stakeholders and partners to remain focused on deliverables, avoiding project stagnation.

> "It was a very, very sophisticated way of managing something. All of those things in parallel could then converge instead of it being a 25-year process."
>
> Retrospective Study Interviewee

Challenges

At times, the design vision and tight timeline did not fully account for rising costs and increasing complexity due to inflation, regulations, the COVID-19 pandemic, and supply chain challenges.

While interviewees from both regions expressed this concern, those from Western New York specifically focused their feedback on the Buffalo park. As one interviewee reflected, "[the Foundation] could be tough about the budget [...] Costs were going up before the pandemic, and now it is worse."

Throughout these unforeseen challenges, Foundation trustees approved additional funding to account for increased costs ($13.5 million for Phase 1) and supported match funding for over $94 million in external grants to support the project and ensure as much as the community vision as possible was built.

Long-Term Sustainability

Strengths

The dedicated allocation for park and trail endowments signaled to other funders, especially philanthropies, the importance of preparing for long-term maintenance and sustainability.

This is regarded as just as valuable as its capital investments, creating a sense of a “safety net" for partners. Five interviewees from Southeast Michigan emphasized the significance of Wilson’s commitment to park endowments and how making this investment visible to other regional philanthropies is a key part of their legacy as it sunsets.

> “[Wilson's support for endowments helps] show other philanthropies why endowments are important, because for public spaces, if you don't maintain them, it's not worth the initial investment. And the only way to truly do that is through an endowment, because the public levers can always change and be subject to the whims of different policies.”
>
> Southeast Michigan Interviewee

Targeted capacity building and research on best-practice governance structures ensured that new entities, such as the Ralph Wilson Conservancy in Buffalo, were well-equipped to manage and steward public spaces upon completion.

The Foundation’s capacity-building investments included expanding the size of Detroit Riverfront Conservancy staff to support a capital campaign and sustain operations; funding a facilitator for Department of Natural Resources (DNR)’s advisory council to streamline the SPARK program — a Council of Michigan Foundations (CMF) and DNR partnership aimed at expanding access to healthy indoor and outdoor recreation opportunities and advancing transformative change for many of the state’s historically under-resourced and underrepresented communities; and providing capacity support to smaller regional nonprofits to help grow their teams.

Several interviewees noted that many government grants require projects to be at the “shovel-ready” stage, leaving a funding gap for the early phases of development, such as capacity building and transforming a vision into a concrete plan. The Foundation has played a crucial role in bridging this gap for many organizations. As one interviewee explained, “Thinking about state or federal grants, they are very specific grants towards specific deliverables, [they don’t] pay for anything that you need to be strategic and build capacity and have time. Without [Wilson] it would be difficult for us to do this work.”

Challenges

Challenges and doubts related to roles, responsibilities, and maintenance capacity remain, especially around the maintenance of the flagship park in Buffalo once the Foundation sunsets.

Many interviewees — especially those involved with the Buffalo park — valued the role of the Foundation in facilitating collaboration and setting up endowments for long-term funding. As the Foundation prepares to close, some interviewees were concerned about momentum slowing and long-term maintenance being compromised without the Foundation’s advocacy.

Another interviewee noted that in part due to the limited philanthropic support available in Western New York compared to Southeast Michigan, “I’m nervous about the amount of funding it would take to manage this … We’re tapping into this real sense of grassroots ownership, but it doesn’t exist at [the] corporate or foundation level.”

The Black Rock Canal Bridge connecting the Erie Canal to Lake Erie.

While the parks endowment was praised, some grantees were unaware that the Foundation had also invested in a dedicated trails endowment.

Interviewees from both regions suggested the Foundation put in place an endowment for trails, even though it already exists within community foundations. As one Western New York interviewee said, “I know they're only going to be around so long, and it would be awesome if they figured out an endowment or something they could put somewhere to help fund maintenance.” This misunderstanding signals a need for continued communication and capacity-building around accessing the trails endowment and using these funds for their intended purpose.

The Foundation catalyzed greater impact by diversifying funding sources and boosting local capacity.

The Foundation takes a comprehensive approach to supporting complex and challenging projects by first assessing what organizations need, then providing ongoing help to ensure they can successfully complete and maintain their work over time. The Foundation fills important gaps in public funding by offering grants to build organizational skills, providing design and engineering assistance, and giving strategic funding that helps projects qualify for additional government support. A central part of this work is the Foundation's commitment to cover one-third of construction costs, which encourages multiple partners to work together, build strong relationships, and share responsibility for projects in the long run. These investments have demonstrated how to tackle difficult public space projects while also spurring new development and economic growth in the surrounding neighborhoods. Most importantly, the Foundation sets aside 20% of its investment for ongoing maintenance and operations, ensuring these spaces remain vibrant and useful for years to come.

Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation — Gehl

> I haven't worked on a project or seen a project with this amount of funding sources, period. I think it speaks to the Foundation's success in leveraging the funds that they're putting into this thing. It's almost like an art … because it's building relationships over a long time."

Retrospective Study Interviewee

The playground at Joe Louis Greenway Warren Gateway Trailhead Park features a play structure and a super-speedy slide that delights kids of all ages. Source: Joe Louis Greenway Partnership.

Strengths

The Foundation's funding commitment for capital projects built shared ownership over projects, unlocking additional sources of state, federal, and philanthropic funding.

The ⅓ model expanded funding commitments from all sources to $1.2 billion, inclusive of the Foundation's total $413 million in funds for parks and trails across both regions. Many state interviewees noted that being upfront and transparent about commitments was beneficial in attracting additional funding partners and in setting expectations for the need to leverage other funding sources that were readily available at the time (for example American Rescue Plan funding, infrastructure and environmental funding in New York State, and funds from other philanthropic partners in Southeast Michigan).

Projects are starting to organically generate community development impacts and attract additional funding to support local residents.

In particular, completed improvements to trails are starting to catalyze area development, such as small business openings, grassroots initiatives, and other community and economic development programs (e.g., local homeowner supports).

> "You're starting to see something that's called hope. People are cleaning up their yard, planting flowers, they're painting the porches, and doing all of those things as a result of this project."
>
> Retrospective Study Interviewee

Challenges

While the Foundation has made important strides in connecting local partners with funding opportunities, some grantees have still found them challenging to navigate and secure.

Interviews revealed a need to build awareness of the diverse (and occasionally hard-to-access) public, private, and philanthropic funding pools available to grantees.

There is also a need to guide nonprofits and government entities in securing such funds, whether through grantwriting assistance, funding development positions, or bringing together would-be funders and grantees for introductory sessions.

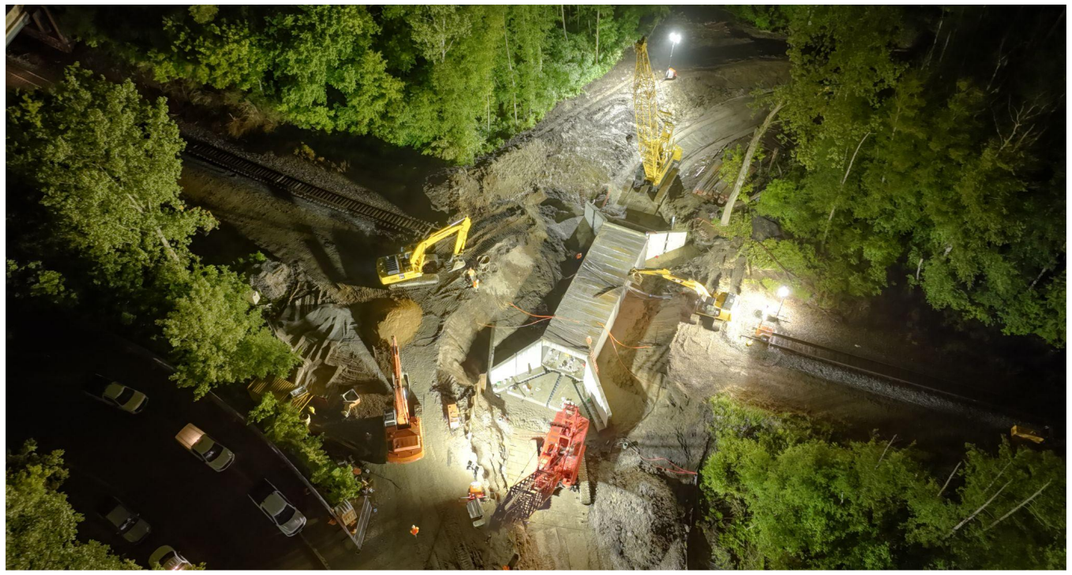
The naming of the projects after Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. can also hinder fundraising.

Eleven interviewees (16%) across the two regions shared concerns that the naming of sites after Mr. Wilson had led would-be funders to assume the site is financially secure and sufficiently funded by the Foundation.

Association with the Foundation name can create the impression that projects are financially secure, making it harder to attract other private entities to contribute to ongoing funding needs. As one interviewee said, "They've been generous but it makes it hard for us to build relationships with other funders when their name is on the banner."

Rendering shows the redesigned 100-acre site of Ralph Wilson Park, one of the largest waterfront parks in Buffalo and located where the Buffalo and Niagara Rivers meet Lake Erie, only ten minutes from downtown. Source: Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates for Ralph Wilson Park Conservancy.

Border to Border Trail (B2B Trail) is a 35-mile, 10 foot wide, ADA accessible, paved pathway. It consists of 8 trail corridors that connect residents to cities, parks, and destinations throughout Washtenaw County, Michigan. Source: Huron Waterloo Pathways Initiative.



An essential connection for the Border-to-Border (B2B) Trail in Washtenaw County is a pedestrian tunnel constructed beneath the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) railroad, operated by Amtrak. This tunnel will link the new segment of the B2B Trail in Barton Nature Area with the existing B2B Trail network in Bandemer Park and more than 20 miles to the east.

Challenges (continued)

Given the history of economic and cultural displacement that has followed major public space investments, such as The 606 in Chicago or the Atlanta Beltline, concerns persist about the potential for similar outcomes in Buffalo.

Despite this history, proactive efforts to ensure local community stability and inclusive economic benefits around recent signature projects have been limited, raising questions about how to safeguard against displacement moving forward.

Early analysis from the City of Buffalo's Office of Strategic Planning suggests that the presence of significant public housing in adjacent areas may help reduce displacement risk; however, the City of Buffalo and the Conservancy should continue to build and implement strategies that promote long-term housing stability, including opportunities for current residents to achieve homeownership where possible.

Partners have high hopes for regional impacts, but are searching for entities, models, or a leader that can coordinate efforts (e.g., financing, wayfinding, connectivity).

Interviews revealed that there may be a tendency across both regions to wait for someone else to lead, convene, or drive coordination, rather than for local leaders to step beyond their core responsibilities and into these roles.

For example, many interviewees mentioned that there is a need to better connect wayfinding or signage within the network, but there is currently no strong, centralized organization driving regional collaboration at this scale.

Collaborate

The Foundation shaped a collaborative network of grantees, agencies, and organizations.

A steady hum of relationship-building with various agencies and community-based organizations enabled these projects to get off the ground. Early moves, such as Memoranda of Understanding signed with the City of Buffalo and the State of Michigan, provided the base to explore project opportunities alongside local leadership so the Foundation could better target its eventual grantmaking. Once projects were underway, the Foundation regularly met with grantees and project partners to facilitate project development and get ahead of potential risks and challenges to completion. This level and depth of collaboration has been unique for some partners. As the Foundation approaches the end of its spend-down period, some expressed uncertainty about the longevity of multi-sector, multi-agency collaboration without the convening power of the Foundation.

> “Since the Foundation's involvement in our organization, we have seen a change in the willingness of long-time partners to collaborate and partner, rather than fight or put up obstacles. The idea that there is an organization that is willing to help, but only if there is collaboration, has changed the environment positively.”
>
> Retrospective Study Interviewee

Strengths

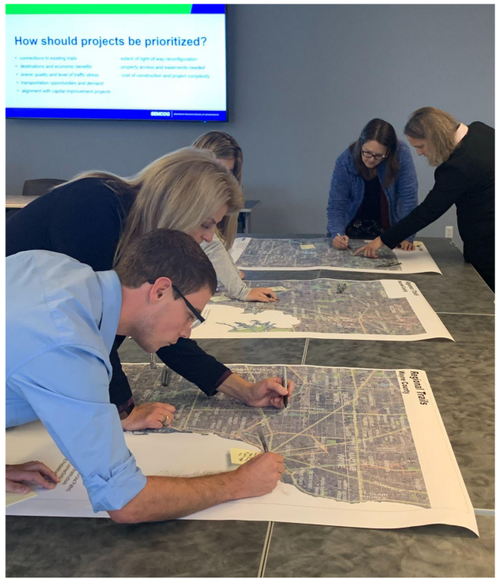
Establishing Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) with core partners enabled the Foundation to explore potential collaboration opportunities with these partners outside of formal grantmaking.

The MOUs with the City of Buffalo and the State of Michigan set the stage for incremental funding for projects in both regions before the $200 million centennial commitment was announced. In addition, the MOUs set the funding framework that established a regular rhythm of convenings to discuss possibilities and alignment for funding to support grantees.

The Foundation brought together different entities to the same table to build shared visions for parks and trails and to plan and fund for the project's whole life cycle.

The Foundation tapped into established relationships with state and philanthropic organizations to get projects off the ground. It also created and funded the facilitation of the Southeast Michigan Trails Action Team (SEMTAT), which brought different public agencies together to set a regional trail vision that would remedy siloed action by municipalities.

This process reinforced the need for capacity, design and engineering, match, and long-term maintenance funding; filling the gaps that exist in state and federal funding opportunities.



SEMTAT met over a four-month period to identify what actions are necessary to develop a world-class, connected trail system in Southeast Michigan. Source: Public Sector Consultants

When engaging grantees, the Foundation applied deep knowledge of local capacity, development processes, and fundings; were flexible with timelines; and reduced bureaucratic obstacles with grantees.

This pace and type of engagement was distinct from other funders and positioned the Foundation as an expert partner and collaborator in the process. As one interviewee reflected, “There was some authenticity to our relationship because we didn't have to come to [JJ Tighe] and explain that we needed capacity building dollars. It was already understood.”

Challenges

The trails action team’s (SEMTAT) report and pilot programs helped identify key gaps, develop funding models, and validate underlying assumptions.

Interviewees viewed the end of SEMTAT as a missed opportunity. Many regional interviewees pointed out the lack of sustainable funding for state parks and trails in Michigan. Although the Foundation offered financial support to encourage a regional organization to take on leadership in the long term, a leadership gap persisted.

“It is hard to find a leader that will play the role the Foundation played in bringing all the partners together,” said one interviewee.

Several nonprofit grantees noted the Foundation’s limited availability and staff capacity.

The Foundation initially had limited staff as part of their approach to their spend down structure. However given these capacity challenges, additional staff were hired as the portfolio progressed, including grant writing support and associates specific to the portfolio.

The Foundation faced the ongoing challenge of balancing due diligence and risk assessment with a trust-based approach to grantee relationships.

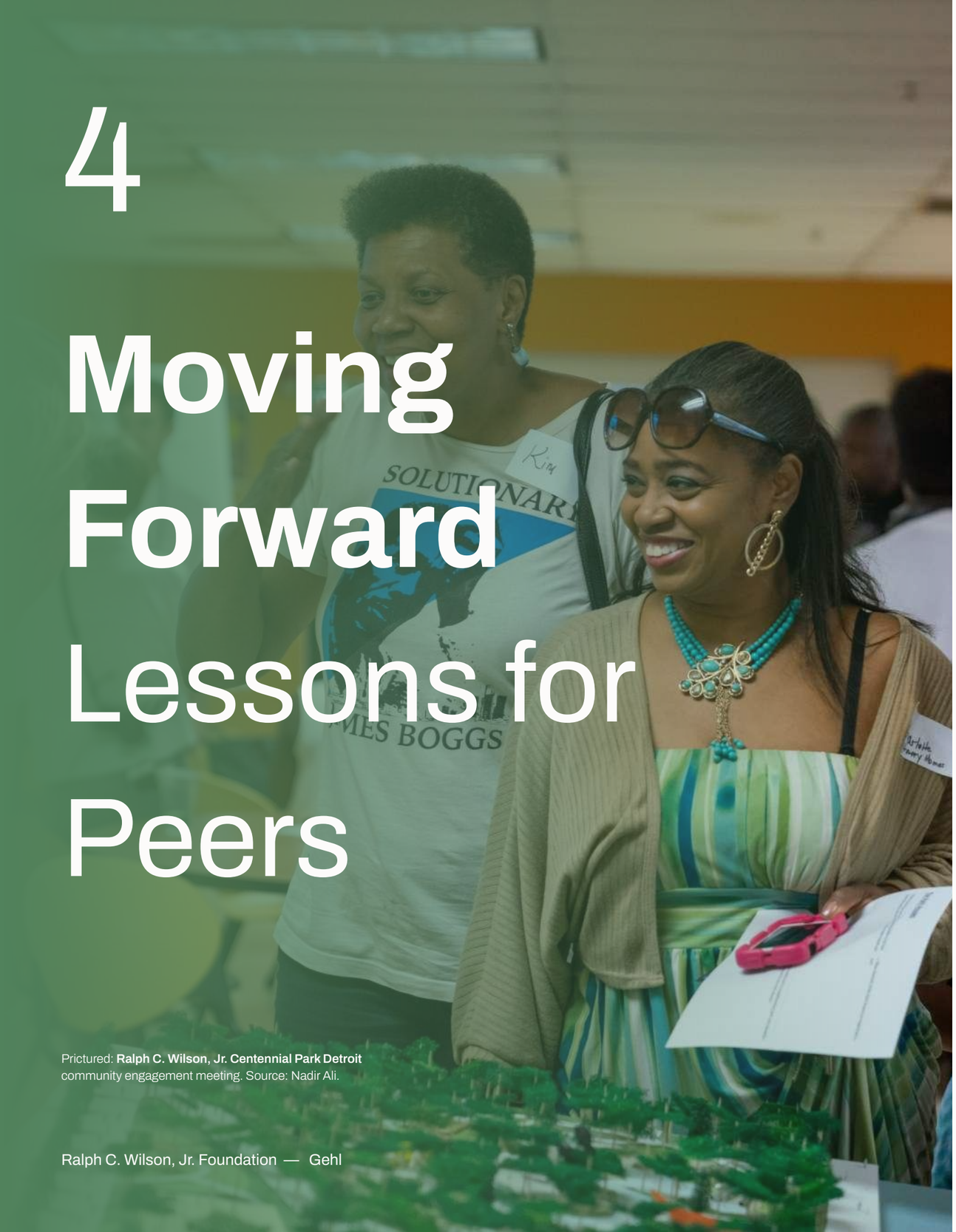
Most state-level interviewees reported feeling trusted by the Foundation to go about their work semi-autonomously. “The Foundation did trust us to get the job done, without a lot of micromanaging which is huge, we just don’t have the staff to keep up on those reporting details,” said one Western New York interviewee.

Some nonprofit and city grantees in Detroit, however, felt the Foundation’s due diligence came across as excessive and distrusting. The incident involving stolen funds from the Detroit Riverfront Conservancy underscores the complexities and difficulties in striking the right balance between accountability and trust.

4

Moving Forward

Lessons for Peers



Prictured: **Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Centennial Park Detroit** community engagement meeting. Source: Nadir Ali.

The Foundation's model and experience supporting parks and trails across Southeast Michigan and Western New York provide lessons for philanthropy, government, and public space practitioners.

The retrospective evaluation highlights how the Foundation's approach to grantmaking is bringing to life $1.2 billion worth of projects — including two signature parks, 250 miles of regional trails, and more than $100 million in endowments — across both regions. The establishment of long-term endowments sets these spaces up for long-term operations, community engagement, and maintenance beyond the Foundation's spend-down period.

The Parks & Trails portfolio model offers valuable lessons for leaders and partners who view parks, trails, and green infrastructure as essential to community vitality and resilience and want to bring them to life.

The lessons span the following themes, and build on effective approaches as well as opportunities for improvement that were identified in the evaluation.

1. Relationship and Partnership Building

The Foundation's work underscored the importance of investing time and resources into building strong, trust-based relationships and agreeing on roles at the onset.

2. Public Space Strategy

Signature projects were grounded in deep analysis and understanding of the local context, and an ongoing commitment to community engagement to inform the project visions.

3. Financing Structure

The Foundation played a catalytic role in unlocking state, federal, and philanthropic dollars through the funding of design and engineering, community engagement, and maintenance, which in turn revealed the need to support under-resourced grantees in assembling and implementing these funds.

4. Organizational Preparedness

The Foundation played an active role in assessing project leaders' capacity and readiness to implement and sustain public space investments.

5. Grantee Support and Engagement

As projects grew more complex, the Foundation team's skill sets and flexibility enabled regular communication and problem-solving to support grantees.

6. Public Communications

The Foundation recognized early on that communications were not ancillary, but central to project success. Supporting a strong communications infrastructure enabled grantees to keep stakeholders informed, respond to concerns, and align around shared goals.

Relationship and Partnership Building

Establish shared purpose, goals, and roles early on, and revisit them throughout.

01

Create a relationship matrix to identify and build key relationships.

These should include financial, technical, and governmental partners who can support planning, implementation, and long-term stewardship.

Examples↘

- Intentionally meeting with key stakeholders in Western New York prior to Centennial funding commitment announcement
- Regularly meeting with State leaders in Albany to share grantmaking strategy, community vision, and provide progress updates
- Imagine Lasalle Briefing Book

02

Establish MOUs to anchor shared goals across political cycles.

Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) with municipal and state partners help formalize commitments, align objectives with community vision, and provide continuity through changes in political leadership.

Examples↘

- Establishing an MOU with the State of Michigan and City of Buffalo early on in the process
- Funding the Governance and Financial Study led by HR&A, and the Parks Master Plan in Buffalo led by the City of Buffalo

03

Identify and engage nonprofits and agencies working on aligned efforts to build project capacity.

Identify organizations with overlapping missions or technical expertise and explore how their skill sets can support and strengthen the project team.

Examples↘

- Collaborating with Buffalo Niagara Waterkeeper and National Fish & Wildlife Foundation in Western New York
- Collaborating with the Great Lakes Commission (US EPA & NOAA), Huron-Clinton Metroparks, Michigan DNR, Michigan DOT, Michigan DNR Trust Fund, and many more in Southeast Michigan
- Detroit Parks Coalition

04

Announce funding commitments after vision and agreements are in place.

Making a clear, public funding commitment after a shared vision and MOU are established helps build confidence among stakeholders and creates momentum for implementation. It also helps set clear expectations for the project funding that is available from the Foundation.

Examples↘

- Announcing the Centennial Commitment after the Imagine LaSalle engagement process was completed and the MOU with the City of Buffalo was formalized
- Jointly announcing the funding of the pedestrian bridge in Ralph Wilson Park in Buffalo along with the City of Buffalo and the Governor of New York to address a major need identified in Imagine LaSalle

05

Collaborate with non-profit, municipal, and state agencies to strengthen capacity where needed.

Partner with nonprofit, municipal, and state entities to identify staffing or resource gaps and help secure funding to ensure they can effectively support the project without compromising their existing responsibilities and priorities.

Examples↘

- Funding City Engineer and Grants Manager positions at the City of Buffalo and supporting capacity at BUDC
- Funding officers at Detroit Riverfront Conservancy
- Supporting additional funding for fellows to be embedded within the Parks, Recreation, and Culture Department in Detroit to address community need in neighborhood parks

Public Space Strategy

Assess needs of the public space network to shape a bold, complete vision.

01

Ground efforts in history of the space, context, and culture.

Before launching any major initiative, take time to understand the municipality's history, demographics, and dynamics. Reviewing previous master plans — whether successful or not — can provide critical insight into what has or hasn't worked, and why. Cultural and historical awareness helps build trust and informs more relevant, resonant strategies.

Examples↘

- The Foundation provided funding to the City of Detroit to thoroughly research the context, develop the vision, and create the framework plan for the Joe Louis Greenway.
- The Foundation funded the Bridge to Bay Master Plan to support the regional initiative in developing a coordinated vision and plan for the entire route from north of Port Huron to New Baltimore.

02

Fund inclusive community engagement to shape a shared vision.

Ensure that community visioning is grounded in authentic, inclusive engagement, not just shaped by the most vocal participants. Partnering with a neutral, respected third-party facilitator can help maintain trust and legitimacy in the process.

Examples↘

- Funding the Imagine LaSalle engagement process and the Governance Model Study, both led by the University of Buffalo Regional Institute (UBRI)
- Funding the Community Advisory Team (CAT) in Detroit

03

Research the impacts of investing in neighborhood public spaces as well as world-class destinations and how outcomes may differ.

Understanding the distinct roles of neighborhood and regional parks is essential. Local spaces often foster equity and daily access, while regional destinations drive visibility and economic impact. Align funding accordingly and communicate investment choices clearly.

Examples↘

- The Foundation worked to understand local priorities for smaller-scale neighborhood parks and supported those through other focus areas (e.g., play spaces for early childhood), while investing in larger-scale public spaces through the Parks and Trails Portfolio

04

Invest in technical studies and master planning to align with broader municipal context.

Funding governance studies, financial assessments, technical studies, and park master plans helps ensure that public space investments are grounded in the larger needs and dynamics of the municipality.

Examples↘

- Investing in the LaSalle Park Seawall Condition Report, UBRI Managing High Quality Park Environments Study, City of Buffalo Parks Master Plan, and City of Buffalo Shoreline Resiliency Study

Organizational Preparedness

Set up projects for implementation and long-term sustainability.

01

Invest in leadership and organizational capacity.

Evaluate the capacity of key partners (nonprofits, governmental agencies, and consultants) to lead and deliver the project. Where gaps exist, invest in staffing, project management, leadership development, and governance structures development to strengthen execution and long-term stewardship.

Examples ↘

- Funding Gardiner & Theobald to be the project manager for the park in Buffalo
- Establishing the Ralph Wilson Park Conservancy after determining with the City and Imagine LaSalle that additional capacity was needed. Best practice findings from a survey of other parks conservancies helped inform the organizational structure of the Conservancy.

02

Assess project readiness.

Evaluate where a project sits in its development cycle: early-stage visioning, design, or shovel-ready. Consider existing project momentum, potential risks, partner capacity, and funding gaps. Tailor support accordingly, and monitor progress as the project advances.

Examples ↘

- Funding capacity for implementing organizations
- Funding the design and engineering of a project before supporting its construction
- Supporting the construction funding (match) in phases for large projects, establish contingencies tied to milestones

03

Challenge leaders to assess readiness with honesty and transparency.

Not all organizations will be fully prepared, even if they say they are. Assess capacity and risk honestly, and encourage transparency. Projects are not linear: use the community vision as a guidepost throughout the project, revisiting it when challenges arise and communicating clearly when technical or funding limitations affect what's possible.

04

Integrate best practices through learning trips and studies.

Use studies, site visits, and learning trips to bring innovative ideas and proven practices from around the country and the world into the project. Be present in the process, ask questions, and learn together with your project partners to strengthen outcomes.

Examples ↘

- Funding the Community Action Team's trips to Chicago, Atlanta, and New York
- Funding project partner's learning trip with the organization *8 80 cities* to Copenhagen

Financing Structure

Diversify funding and invest beyond the space to promote shared ownership.

01

Align funding with vision, partnerships, and technical studies.

Use insights from the relationship matrix, community visioning, and studies to identify and secure funding that supports the project's goals and infrastructure needs.

Examples↘

- LaSalle Park seawall engineering study
- Lake Erie shoreline resiliency study
- Imagine LaSalle's accessibility section to support infrastructure funding

02

Cast a wide net beyond parks and trails when pursuing funding.

A park is not just a park, and a trail is not just a trail when it comes to funding — they often align wider goals. Explore funding streams tied to bridges, flood protection, shoreline resilience, recreation, and green infrastructure.

Examples↘

- Federal infrastructure investments like Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP), Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality (CMAQ) for trails.
- Aligned regional funding like the Great Lakes Commission and National Fish and Wildlife Foundation for shoreline resiliency
- Dedicated state-specific funding for infrastructure like pedestrian bridges or shoreline resiliency (New York State Environmental Bond Act or Environmental Facilities Corporation)

03

Leverage a mix of funding sources and help grantees access them.

Explore private, philanthropic, corporate, municipal, state, and federal sources to support different stages of a project. Offer gap funding for design to get to a shovel-ready phase, and match funding to unlock larger grants. Provide hands-on support to meet grantees where they are, coaching them through applications and building their capacity to succeed.

Examples↘

- In 2020, the Foundation funded the design and engineering for Phase 2 of Rouge River Gateway Trail. In 2022, a new grant funded 33% the construction of Phase 2 and 100% of design and engineering for Phase 3

04

Ensure sustainability is built in from the beginning.

Celebrating a project opening is one milestone, but maintaining its quality and impact over time is the true measure of success. Include endowment or long-term maintenance funding from the outset, with a recommended minimum of 20% of the project's capital cost dedicated to operations and upkeep.

Examples↘

- Funding the Park and Trail Maintenance Funds at the Community Foundations
- Funding the Unified Greenway Endowment for the long-term sustainability of Joe Louis Greenway
- Funding City Within a Park, an endowment for maintenance and operations of all parks in Buffalo

05

Ensure third-party oversight of spending across funding sources to ensure they are responsive to unexpected crises and cost increases.

Project budgets included contingencies for cost increases, but the unpredictability of the Covid-19 pandemic and its impacts on supply chain exceeded expectations, leading to sharp surges in the prices of rock, transportation, and fuel. In economically volatile times, contingencies and tighter timelines can mitigate cost fluctuations.

Examples↘

- The Detroit Riverfront Conservancy embezzlement crisis also revealed the need for greater oversight of and accountability for Conservancy operations and finances during large scale capital projects

Grantee Support and Engagement

Adapt Foundation approach and team based on changing project and grantee needs.

01

Ensure sufficient staff for grantee engagement so they can be responsive to grantees' needs.

Having enough dedicated staff enables timely, responsive support and deeper engagement with grantees to strengthen outcomes and monitor organizational preparedness more closely.

Examples↘

- After making funding commitments to parks and trails, grantee needs grew increasingly numerous and complex. As a result, the Foundation hired more staff to address needs related to project implementation
- The Foundation began the ambitious work with one dedicated staff member in 2018 and added additional staff in 2022 to be responsive to grantee and projects growing needs. In 2025, additional staff support was added to address grant management, evaluation and story-telling

02

Hire staff well-versed in technical needs for developing and financing complex parks and trails projects.

Staff with experience in designing, permitting, and financing complex public space projects can better support grantees, navigate barriers, and add strategic value throughout the project lifecycle. Grantees appreciated senior staff's understanding of parks and trails development based on prior experience.

Examples↘

- For example, local government officials that were interviewed valued the technical and strategic expertise that the Foundation team brought to the work. As one reflected, "JJ and his team understood what it was like to do our job. … There was an authenticity to our relationship as a result."

03

Establish clear structures for the frequency and depth of communication with and oversight of grantees.

Define the expected cadence and depth of check-ins to ensure consistency, build mutual accountability, and provide the right level of support.

Examples↘

- Owner's, Architects, and Contractor (OAC) Meetings to support rigorous construction progress updates and space to solve complex, multi-dimensional challenges that arise during large capital construction projects
- Funder convenings with State and Federal regulatory agencies and funding partners to share progress and open future dialogue for implementation partners regarding funding, permitting or adjacent infrastructure projects

04

For place-based work, ensure a representative is based locally (or frequently available to travel) to build relationships and trust.

While based in Detroit, the Foundation's senior program officers regularly visited Buffalo and Western New York for key meetings and site visits. While many local partners valued these visits, some still voiced that an everyday presence on the ground and a dedicated Foundation outpost may have expedited trust- and relationship-building.

Public Communications

Bring the project vision to life through storytelling.

01

Communicate the vision early, broadly, and often.

Start telling the story of the project as early as possible — highlighting the vision, the people behind it, and the milestones along the way. Repeating and reinforcing that vision broadly helps builds public trust.

02

Invest in communications to advocate for the vision and amplify impact.

Securing funding isn't just about the ask, it's about consistently sharing the story of how community-driven investments take shape. Fund strong communications efforts to celebrate milestones and show how each piece of funding helps complete the broader vision. Take the time to produce high-quality videos of major components and share them widely.

Examples↘

- Supporting a strong communications budget to regularly share the community vision and milestones like groundbreakings, shoreline completion, and unique moments like Buffalo's new pedestrian bridge traveling through the Erie Canal
- Funding different types of events: awards, ground-breakings, ribbon-cutting ceremonies, etc.
- Producing high-quality videos with the Ralph Wilson Park Conservancy to build excitement for the park in Buffalo

03

Be transparent, stay responsive, and build trust over time.

Regularly share project updates with the community — especially during construction — and be honest about technical and financial constraints. Embrace feedback, communicate what is possible within current funding, and position yourself as an advocate for bringing in future resources. While individual projects have defined timelines, parks are never finished. Future phases and improvements can grow with continued community input and usage data.

Shaping an Impactful Legacy for the Foundation

Based on the Parks & Trails portfolio evaluation, these are three core areas for continued action by the Foundation in the remainder of its spend-down cycle.

01

Leadership

You've demonstrated how you can bring people and organizations together. Now is the time to help solidify your legacy as a convener by working with local partners and regional leaders to nurture lasting relationships and address priority issues related to long-term park and trail sustainability. Consider:

- ➜ Host a symposium with leaders from across sectors to develop models for regional collaboration on parks and trails.
- ➜ Convene partners who have been granted or are managing endowments to ensure clear expectations and collaboration.
- ➜ Make residents and community leaders more visible in the space through naming and signage (e.g., park benches, pavers, art, etc.).
- ➜ Work with funders to fill in final gaps in trail network and maintenance funding.
- ➜ Work with other funders to identify complementary, long-term areas of investment for parks & trails (e.g., activation / programming, workforce development, anti-displacement, restrooms, etc.).

02

Long-term sustainability

You've made high-profile announcements, yet they don't reveal the behind-the-scenes work it's taken to set these projects up for the long term. Now is the time to communicate beyond the ribbon cutting to the general public and partners — how the endowments are structured; how communities will benefit; and how the spaces are taking shape. Consider:

- ➜ Amplify partners stories and signs of progress (e.g., volunteering, informal programming) toward community stewardship and public life in the park and trail spaces.
- ➜ Communicate the commitment to endowments to the general public and local partners, even when a park or trail has opened.
- ➜ Build awareness of other RCWJRF investments in neighborhood parks through other program areas (e.g., Youth Sports and Recreation, Entrepreneurship and Economic Development).
- ➜ Consider additional research to illustrate community-wide impacts of parks and trails investments.

03

Storytelling

You've led an evaluation of the pre-work. As park and trail investments come to life, it's time to understand their legacy beyond opening day. Observe how they are being used and track the impacts they are having on communities through the forthcoming prospective evaluation. Consider:

- ➜ Measure economic development impacts (e.g., types of businesses opening in the area, related jobs, home values, talent attraction/ retention).
- ➜ Assess and demonstrate community impact of park and trail investments. (e.g., use data, resident surveys).
- ➜ Support fiscal health and capacity of organizations / conservancies charged with operating and stewarding spaces.
- ➜ Work with local public space leaders / conservancies to learn from and integrate findings from this retrospective evaluation into their work.
- ➜ Track additional amplified funding catalyzed by foundation's investment.

Appendix

Interview Questions

The interview process gathers insights from key stakeholders to understand the successes, challenges, and impact of the Parks & Trails portfolio. Additional or follow-up questions were asked based on the interviewee's role and knowledge. In addition, we asked some interviewees for their consent to be quoted in this report. Below is the standard script used by the Retrospective Evaluation.

Introduction

The Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation is working with Gehl Studio and Fourth Economy Consulting to conduct a third-party evaluation of the Foundation's Parks & Trails focus area. Our goals are to provide a retrospective assessment of the collaborative process of the portfolio, as well as a plan for future monitoring in order to inform and strengthen Parks & Trails work and ensure we are creating lasting, sustainable impact. As part of our evaluation and assessment process, we are conducting a series of interviews to gather valuable insights and feedback from key stakeholders like you. Your expertise and perspective are crucial to shaping the future direction of our projects.

Interview Questions

Origin Story

- Could you elaborate on how you first got involved and how your role has evolved?

Funding Process

- Describe the project process. What mechanisms were critical to project success?
- What were the challenges with the project's process / approach?

Community Engagement

- What role did community engagement play in this process?
- Specifically, we'd love to hear more about some of the key engagement activities and how they impacted the final project design.

Capacity Building

- What were the biggest impacts of this process on you and your team? For example, skill-building, managing funds, building relationships with local politicians and policymakers?

Collaboration in Action

- How did you collaborate with other organizations during this project?
- What worked well or was challenging when defining your role alongside other partners?

Understanding Impact

- How do you hope this project will benefit the community over time?
- Are there key people or groups in the community who you hope will benefit in particular?
- With the endowment or other measures in place, do you feel prepared for the long-term operations of this project?
- Are there any concerns you have about its impact or viability over the coming years?

Looking Back, Moving Forward

- What lessons learned would you share? Is there anything you would do differently if approaching a similar project in the future?

Close-Out

- Is there anything we didn't cover that you think is important for us to know?

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Sally Drake, New York State Natural Heritage Trust

Eric Ellis, Great Lakes Commission

Deborah Fenn, Erie Cattaraugus Rail Trail

Kerrie Gallo, Buffalo Niagara Waterkeeper

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