

The beginning of the end for Robert Moses Parkway will restore Olmsted's vision

Robert Moses was a complicated man who left a complicated legacy. He was the powerful state development official responsible for some spectacular public achievements, including New York City's Triborough Bridge and Long Island's Jones Beach, but also for some long-lasting disasters, prominent of which in these parts is the Niagara County parkway that carries his name. Its damage is about to be undone.

The Robert Moses Parkway begins at the North Grand Island Bridge, then sweeps west along the Niagara River, cutting city residents off from one of the world's most famous and spectacular waterways. The City of Niagara Falls interrupts its path, but it soon resumes its destructive course, cutting the city's North Side off from one of the world's most famous and spectacular waterways. Farther north, the parkway moves inland and is, for the most part, innocuous and useful.

But now, as part of Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo's Buffalo Billion, much of the parkway will be reconfigured to restore the riverfront to the righteous vision of Frederick Law Olmsted, the 19th century designer of Niagara Falls State Park, the country's first state park. Once again, it will become a place of beauty, where visitors can appreciate the splendor of the upper river, free from the scar that is the Robert Moses Parkway.

The work has been in the planning for two years, but last week work began. The project will remove a 1-mile stretch of the parkway and replace it with a "riverway" – a stretch that will improve pedestrian access to the river, as Olmsted wanted.

Specifically, a section of the parkway west of John B. Daly Boulevard will be converted from four lanes to two; the two eastbound lanes between the park and

Daly Boulevard have sat unused for nearly 25 years.

In addition, the overpass at the interchange between the parkway and Daly Boulevard will be removed and replaced with a roundabout. An embankment that propped up the parkway will be lowered, making the river more easily visible. Nature areas will be added, including a small pond and a more extensive system of trails along the river. There will also be a new path to the water from Buffalo Avenue near the First Street bridge over to Goat Island.

And that's just what is happening along the upper river. Plans are also in the works to remove the section of the parkway that blocks North Side residents from the Niagara River Gorge, which in its tumultuous, churning current is nearly as spectacular as the falls, themselves.

Moses elevated the automobile above all other concerns. It was the way of the future, he believed, and all resources had to be marshaled to its benefit. No price was too high to pay in disruption or even suffering. But here, more than 50 years after the parkway's construction, the mistake is being fixed.

The natural resource that Western New York has in abundance is water, and in some of its most breathtaking configurations. Access to that resource was stolen away, and not just in Niagara County. With this project, Western New Yorkers are beginning to get back what is theirs. That counts as a big day."

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