

Niagara Falls State Park set to receive \$46 million visitor center

BY MICHAEL DEPIETRO
Tribune Editor

An artist's rendering of a reimagined Niagara Falls State Park welcome center. (Image courtesy of the Office of Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo; find more at www.wnypapers.com)

State and local officials gathered outside of the aging Orin Lehman Visitor Center in Niagara Falls State Park last Friday to unveil renderings of a future replacement – an all-new, 28,000-square-foot welcome center. The project is estimated to cost \$46 million. The Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation pledged \$8 million toward the project.

State Parks Commissioner Erik Kulleseid said the Orin Lehman site, first built in 1985, was “inadequate” and that, despite efforts to keep up with maintenance, the building was, “simply no longer functional. It does not serve as kind of the grand entrance here” for the 9 million tourists the park brings in annually.

“You look at it now and it’s a little hard to believe that, at its start, it was state-of-the-art,” Kulleseid said. “It has limited entries,

cramped corridors and stairways, claustrophobic gathering places. There’s more colorful language I’ve used to describe it, but I’ll just leave it today that it’s inadequate.”

State Parks Regional Manager Mark Mistretta was less kind: “It’s not just underwhelming, but frankly, it’s an embarrassment right now.”

Kulleseid said that, while the new facility will certainly have basic necessities such as information, food and beverages services, it will also feature historical exhibits, providing a better opportunity to learn about the history of the park, as well as the surrounding Western New York region.

“Travelers have expectations when they visit a destination, es-



pecially a destination as iconic as Niagara Falls State Park,” Kulleseid said. “We want people to

experience a sense of arrival; a sense of majesty when they arrive at this park. People expect conveniences, but they also expect an orientation to their surroundings. They want to know more about the place they’re about to experience.”

He also explained the state’s new “Our Whole History” initiative, aimed at broadening interpretations of historic sites, has helped guide plans to use the welcome center to tell diverse stories surrounding the region’s history. He said the state has been working with the Seneca and Tuscarora communities to showcase their culture and history and is also working to feature stories that explain the area’s connection to the Underground Railroad.

Historical offerings will be a key feature of the entire redesign. Kulleseid said that, in addition to the new welcome center, a nearby administrative building is slated to be converted to a public facility that will feature scores of archived materials including handwritten journals from Thomas Welch, a “founding father” of the park.

The building’s current offices will be moved to a building located in DeVeaux Woods State Park.

Another key feature of the new design is that the building will no longer impede viewing of the falls. The design will allow visitors standing in the plaza outside to see through the structure and have a view of the falls.

“We’re taking a plaza that, right now, is fairly closed and we’re

opening up,” Kulleseid said. “It’s gonna really change the whole relationship of this park with the Falls.”

GWWO Architects will be the lead designer for the building. Hailey Sharp will handle the design of exhibits both in the building and outside. TY Lin International was named the engineer of record, while Trowbridge Wolf Michaels the site landscape architect.

John Percy, CEO of Destination Niagara USA, said the new facility is just what the park needs to re-right itself after COVID-19-marred tourist seasons.

“I think debuting this new welcome center will perfectly be timed as we approach a post-COVID era and what I believe will be a post-COVID renaissance era,” he said. “This project is perfectly timed, and is ideal and perfectly positioned to showcase this stunning park and the wonderful rehabilitation and tender, loving care that’s been put back into it.”

Kulleseid noted more than \$150 million in investments and improvements to the park in the past decade. Among the most significant recent improvements, a wall of trees near the park’s entrance that once obscured the city’s view of the falls has been removed.

“I am grateful for Gov. Cuomo for his support of state parks as well as our state legislators. This really has been a partnership,” Kulleseid said. “The state parks generally have benefited from *SEE WELCOME*, continued on Page 17

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