

# High Falls target of city study

Labella is looking at projects along gorge

By NATE DOUGHERTY

Pedestrians may one day be able to cross the Genesee River Gorge on a new pedestrian bridge, taking in views of High Falls on a greenscaped Pont de Rennes Bridge and walking down into the gorge.

The city of Rochester is undertaking a study to look at public access improvements through the High Falls District and Genesee River gorge, creating more connections among trails in the area and making access easier for pedestrians.

The study, which is being conducted by Labella Associates DPC and expected to be completed in the coming weeks, could lay the groundwork for a project officials say would create a major attraction downtown and boost local economic development.

"This is something that could grow into a huge tourist attraction," said Doug Benson, Rochester's supervising city planner. "This city has a great river that runs through the middle and a beautiful natural gorge, which a lot of people don't even know exists."

"This would create ... something you don't have anywhere else in New York. There's Niagara Falls and ways to view it, but not a trail system that would take you over the falls like what this here would be."

The study looks at improving pedestrian access in an area from the Smith Street Bridge to the north, the Inner Loop to the south, State Street to the west and St. Paul Boulevard to the east. The project also investigates the idea of a new pedestrian bridge spanning the river at the falls.

The firm studied a range of possibilities for the bridge, said Richard VenVertloh, vice president of the transportation division at Labella and the project's manager.

"We looked at four bridge types ranging from a more conventional steel pedestrian truss structure all the way to varying cable-stayed structures," he said. "We also looked at the Pont de Rennes Bridge to determine its suitability for adding land-



Rendering courtesy of LaBella Associates DPC

scaping and greenscaping."

There are many variables within the project itself. While the final report still is being compiled, VenVertloh said costs for bridge options range from \$7 million to \$26 million.

The project could include walkway improvements in Upper Falls Terrace Park, on the east side of the river along St. Paul Boulevard. VenVertloh said they are looking at ways to improve access to the High Falls area from downtown, though he admitted there would be challenges.

"We want to better connect downtown with High Falls, but that's a bit tricky because we have the Inner Loop there and the CSX main line tracks," he said.

The project includes a planning, design and feasibility analysis of the proposed "GardenAerial" concept. This project aims to create and prepare new trails and gardens on both the east and west sides of the gorge. It was developed by the non-profit Friends of the GardenAerial Inc., which does business as Greentopia.

The GardenAerial project also includes the construction of the new pedestrian bridge, creating what developers call a downtown connection system. This includes the possible re-adaptation and reconstruction of HydroPower Station No. 4, the oldest existing hydroelectric station in the city.

The final phase of the GardenAerial project would include the creation of an arbo-retum on the Pont de Rennes Bridge.

The city's study analyzes potential design options for a river-edge trail from High Falls to downtown Rochester. It also looks at costs to create new permanent pedestrian access from the Garden-Aerial and High Falls District into the river gorge itself.

The study has a total budget of \$107,000 and was funded in part by a grant from the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation. The city's planning and engineering staff also provided 25 percent in-kind staff support throughout the project.

Optimism for the project is high, said

Maranne McDade Clay, Greentopia's director of grants development and administration. A recent public meeting on the project drew 100 people, she noted.

The prospect of allowing visitors to access the lower portion of the gorge is particularly exciting, Clay said.

"It's really about giving access to the public who haven't been able to access that level in over 100 years," she said.

The project has a number of stakeholders. A project advisory committee was formed to provide input and review consultant work products as well as coordinate public outreach and help in the preparation of the final concept plan. This group includes representatives from the city of Rochester, Monroe County, the High Falls Business Improvement District, OPRHP, the GardenAerial and other community groups and property owners.

Benson noted that when completed, the study will serve as a framework for where the project might go next, though he cautioned the completed project is not a guarantee and could be a long way out.

"There really is a lot of work to figure out how to actually build the bridge and how you're going to fund it, as well as what other projects that would need to be started to improve access to the High Falls area from downtown or into the gorge," Benson said.

Though the study is just the first step of the process, Clay said it is an important one.

"This preliminary research and getting some definite engineering is a very exciting piece," she said. "It will really start to move that forward and enable us to start talking to developers and funders for the bridge."

She said Greentopia would be seeking a mix of private and public funding for the project.

But even with an admittedly long timeline, Benson said optimism is high for what the project may one day accomplish.

"This is something that would put Rochester on the map," he said.

[natdougherty@rbj.net](mailto:natdougherty@rbj.net) / 585-546-8303



## HIGH FALLS CONCEPTUAL ACCESS PLAN

LABELLA



09/01/2015