

# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Niagara River has been the consistent theme that flows through the history and heritage of the Buffalo-Niagara region. From the aboriginal peoples who looked to the river for its natural resources and sacred places, the Niagara River and Niagara Falls have played an integral role in its development. A wealth of stories that relate the history and heritage of this region center upon the Niagara River.



**Old Fort Niagara  
Mouth of Niagara River**

The earliest explorers recognized the strategic value of the River, which served as the gateway to the vast interior lands of the continental United States. The Portage Road marks the route historically used to bypass the Falls en route to the upper River and on to the Great Lakes. The numerous forts that have lined its shores— including Fort Niagara, Fort George, Fort Schlosser, Fort Porter, and Fort Erie, among others— are a testament to the River’s strategic importance. The Niagara Frontier had a role in all of the early wars of this nation, particularly the War of 1812, as the opposing sides fought for control of both shores.

The Erie Canal, completed in 1825, opened a new era for the Niagara River and its region. The vast interior of the United States was opened for settlement through the gateway of the Buffalo-Niagara region, resulting in extraordinary growth. Erie-Niagara’s population grew from less than

23,000 persons in 1820 to nearly 93,500 in 1840, more than a four-fold increase. The gateway to the west shifted from the mouth of the River and Lake Ontario to the City of Buffalo, where the Niagara River, Lake Erie and the Erie Canal converged.

With the growth of the region, the Niagara River became a key location for industrial development. First, as a source for direct water power, then as the means to generate hydroelectricity, the Niagara River helped propel this region’s industrial growth. The Niagara River Greenway area still bears visible reminders of this manufacturing legacy. The grain elevators and shipping docks in the City of Buffalo, the impressive network of power lines and industrial infrastructure that extend across the region from the Niagara Power Project, the brownfields ready for redevelopment to new uses and the many still active manufacturing uses help illustrate the importance of the industrial heritage of this area.



**Niagara Falls**

At the same time, the spectacular natural beauty of the cataracts at Niagara Falls secured Niagara’s place as one of the nation’s first and greatest tourist attractions. From its discovery by early settlers, it has attracted large numbers of visitors. The vision of the prominent landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted helped preserve the centerpiece of the Niagara River corridor from overdevelopment, with the establishment of this nation’s first State

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Park, the Niagara Reservation (now Niagara Falls State Park). Tourism is and will remain a key component of this region's economic vitality.

The Niagara River and the Falls have consistently played a key role in the heritage and strength of the region. The future prosperity of this region depends on reinventing the Niagara River and the region's waterfronts to meet changing needs. The waterfront is an ecological resource that is unique to this region, and an important element in dozens of stories in the region's history, from the Underground Railroad to the birth of the modern environmental movement. The River itself presents a variety of experiences, from the mix of industrial heritage and recreational assets on the Upper River, to the less developed, more natural environment around Grand Island and the Lower River. The rapids, the Falls, the islands and the gorge, all represent unique environments and create a unique sense of place. The cities and towns that line the shores of the River also each have distinct characters that should be preserved and celebrated. These ecological, cultural, economic, and historical assets help establish an authentic "place" that is appealing to residents, visitors and investors alike. Collectively, they represent an opportunity to embrace a 21<sup>st</sup> century economy built on quality of life, ecological stewardship, recreation and enhanced community character.



**Lower Niagara River/ Whirlpool**

## A. Purpose of the Niagara River Greenway Plan

The Niagara River Greenway concept grew out of both local grassroots efforts and State-level initiatives. The importance of the Niagara River corridor has been recognized for over a century, as evidenced by Frederick Law Olmsted's vision in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Popular support for improvements at the Falls, increased river access, open space preservation, a "Lake-to-Lake" trail system, community revitalization and other elements of a greenway plan have been consistently put forward by the communities along the River. While these efforts have resulted in accomplishments to varying degrees, there has not been a region-wide vision to join these individual efforts together into a coherent whole.

*"And building on our successful efforts to revitalize Niagara Falls and its park land, and by working with the western New York delegation, let us create a Niagara River Greenway that stretches from Buffalo to Fort Niagara on Lake Ontario."*

*Governor George Pataki  
State of the State Address, 2004*

In January 2004, New York Governor George Pataki added impetus to the concept of Niagara River Greenway with a brief statement in his State of the State address. By September 2004, the Governor had signed the legislation creating the Niagara River Greenway Commission. This legislation defined the Commission's purpose as undertaking "all necessary actions to facilitate the creation of a Niagara River greenway." As part of the legislation, the commission was directed to develop a plan in order to "enhance waterfront access, complement economic revitalization of the communities along the river, and ensure the long-term maintenance of the greenway."

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The legislation also set forth a list of 15 elements to be addressed in the plan. The full text of the Niagara River Greenway Commission legislation is contained in Appendix A. The Niagara River Greenway

Plan has been prepared in response to the legislation, but it is also the result of strong grassroots support for a unified vision and coherent plan for the future of this important resource.

The enabling legislation for the Niagara River Greenway states that this plan must (*emphasis added*):

1. Recommend the specific **boundaries** of the greenway within Erie and Niagara counties;
2. Develop a specific **vision** for the greenway that focuses on linking parks and conservation areas, creating a multi-use venue for the people of the region, and enhancing the tourism potential of the region;
3. Include an **inventory of existing parks and other lands** under the jurisdiction of state agencies, public corporations and municipalities which may contribute to the purposes of a greenway;
4. Identify such other lands that through acquisition, dedication or redevelopment may **contribute to the purposes of a greenway**;
5. Identify **existing plans and plans under development** that can contribute to the purposes of the greenway;
6. Conduct **economic analyses of the costs to construct, maintain and market the greenway** as part of a strategy for implementation;
7. Consider how the region's **industrial heritage** can be celebrated and reflected along the greenway;
8. Recommend how the greenway could be **linked to upland and interior communities** in order to promote linkages to the river;
9. Consider how existing and proposed **economic development activities** in proximity to the greenway can support and complement the greenway;
10. Recommend cooperative efforts with the province of Ontario and the nation of **Canada** in furtherance of the objectives of this article;
11. Identify local, state, federal and private **sources of funding** that could support the purposes of the greenway;
12. Evaluate local, state and federal **laws and regulations** relating to the purposes of the greenway;
13. Identify ways for the commission to **work cooperatively** with municipal, state and federal agencies, public and private corporations, not-for-profit organizations, and private property owners and [other] interests to advance and complement the purposes of the greenway;
14. Recommend how portions of the greenway would be managed including a **plan for on-going operation and maintenance** that would make the greenway self-supporting; and
15. Include any other information, data and recommendations which the commission determines is necessary to support the purposes of the plan.

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This document establishes a vision and a set of principles that can be used to guide proposed actions and plans of the various entities who are working toward building a world-class Niagara River Greenway. It sets priorities that suggest the types of activities to target in the near-term. It identifies potential funding sources, partnerships and linkages, and addresses key transportation issues that affect the Greenway. The Plan also discusses several “Implementation Concepts,” which describe system-wide approaches and strategies for the Greenway. The Action Plan portion of the document concludes with a section on “Conveying the Vision of the Greenway,” which integrates a system-wide approach with the unique character of the component parts of the Niagara River Greenway.

Development of the plan has been an extremely useful process, helping to spark spirited dialogue among various interest groups and the general public. This dialogue and the presentation of various viewpoints has built greater consensus on the future for the Niagara River Greenway, a process that is essential for future progress. The Niagara River Greenway is grounded in the geography of this region, and the Plan describes the assets and resources that are part of that geography. But it is also a conceptual and organizational framework; a way of interpreting the region’s history and imagining its future that serves to connect the people of this region together.

## B. What is a Greenway?

Throughout the planning process for this project, there has been a great deal of discussion and debate about what defines a “greenway.” The fact is that there is no one standard definition of a “Greenway.” Greenway concepts range from the very specific, such as targeting a particular trail, to the very broad, encompassing large-scale ecological networks like the Florida Statewide Greenway. While the use of the

term “greenways” is relatively new, the origin of the concept can be traced back to Frederick Law Olmsted’s planning theories. Olmsted was an advocate of linked, linear systems of parks, as exemplified by Boston’s “Emerald Necklace” and Buffalo’s Olmsted Park system. The movement toward establishing greenways received greater impetus in 1987, when the President’s Commission on Americans Outdoors promoted the concept of greenways as tools to “. . . provide people with access to open spaces close to where they live, and to link together the rural and urban spaces in the American landscape threading through cities and countrysides like a giant circulation system.”



City of Buffalo waterfront

While the 1987 President’s Commission on Americans Outdoors increased interest in the concept of greenways, there has been significant variation on *how* greenways provide this access and linkage. As the various definitions indicate, the exact nature of a greenway depends upon its context and purpose. Some greenways have a recreational focus, while others function more as a scenic byway. Often, a pedestrian or bicycle pathway is an element of a greenway and frequently there is a heritage component. Some greenways function primarily for environmental protection, and may even exclude recreational use.

Despite the lack of a single definition for a greenway, there are several consistent themes in greenway planning. Greenways

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should be “green,” with a focus on the protection of important natural resources. Greenways are inherently linear spaces, stretching along a natural or man-made corridor, such as a river, a ridge line, a railway, a road or canal. As such, greenways generally require partnerships and cooperation across different jurisdictions. Finally, greenways support connectivity, linking together parks, open spaces, neighborhoods, and regions while promoting a healthy environment.



**Riverwalk in Tonawanda**

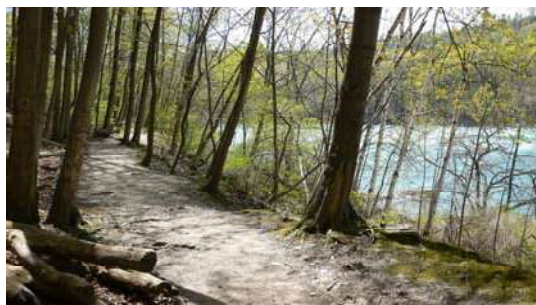
Each community must determine the appropriate balance between ecological considerations, access, public health and recreation. In planning the Niagara River Greenway, there have been proponents of a model that is focused on the Niagara River as an ecological resource, and those who support a model patterned after the Hudson River Valley Greenway, which is as much a regional planning pact as a geographically-based greenway. The legislation establishing the Niagara River Greenway envisioned the Niagara River Greenway as a linear system of state and local parks and conservation areas linked by a network of multi-use trails. The intent of the Niagara River Greenway, as stated in the legislation, is to redefine the Niagara riverfront by increasing landside access to the river; creating complementary access to the greenway from the river; augmenting economic revitalization efforts; and celebrating the region’s industrial heritage.



**Buffalo River**

While there has been intense discussion about the details of the Greenway, there has been consistent agreement that the establishment of a Niagara River Greenway will benefit the region. The Niagara River Greenway will serve as a catalyst to a higher quality of life, an improved environment, and a rejuvenated region. The specific vision that has been adopted for the Niagara River Greenway is discussed in Chapter 3 of the Plan.

First and foremost, the Niagara River Greenway is a product of the people of this region. Although the legislation creating the Niagara River Greenway Commission was developed at the State level, its impetus was the accumulated result of many local efforts. Similarly, the vision for the Niagara River Greenway transcends a specific list of places, projects or funds. The Niagara River Greenway is the physical, historic and symbolic heart of this region. By sharing this overall vision for the Greenway, we can move together toward a healthy, revitalized region.



**Trail, Lower River**

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### GREENWAY DEFINITIONS

*Corridors of land recognized for their ability to connect people and places together.*

– Greenways Incorporated – [www.greenways.com](http://www.greenways.com)

*Linear open space, such as a path or trail, which links parks and communities around the City, providing public access to green spaces and the waterfront.*

– New York City Department of Parks & Recreation- [www.nycgovparks.org](http://www.nycgovparks.org)

*A linear space established along a natural corridor, such as a riverfront, stream valley, or ridge line, or over land along a railroad right-of-way converted to recreational use, a canal, a scenic road, or other route; any natural or landscaped course for pedestrian or bicycle passage; an open space connector linking parks, nature reserves, cultural features, or historic sites with each other and populated areas; or a local strip or linear park designated as a parkway or greenbelt."*

- State of Florida ([Florida Statute Chapter 260, Section 13](#))

*A greenway is a corridor of open space. Greenways vary greatly in scale, from narrow ribbons of green that run through urban, suburban, and rural areas to wider corridors that incorporate diverse natural, cultural and scenic features. They can incorporate both public and private property, and can be land- or water-based. They may follow old railways, canals, or ridge tops, or they may follow stream corridors, shorelines, or wetlands, and include water trails for non-motorized craft. Some greenways are recreational corridors or scenic byways that may accommodate motorized and non-motorized vehicles. Others function almost exclusively for environmental protection and are not designed for human passage. Greenways differ in their location and function, but overall, a greenway will protect natural, cultural, and scenic resources, provide recreational benefits, enhance natural beauty and quality of life in neighborhoods and communities, and stimulate economic development opportunities*

--State of Pennsylvania, "Pennsylvania's Greenways: An Action Plan for Creating Connections, June 2001—[www.dcnr.state.pa.us/brc/greenways/](http://www.dcnr.state.pa.us/brc/greenways/)

*"A linear open space established along either a natural corridor, such as a riverfront, stream valley, or ridgeline, or overland along a railroad right-of-way converted to recreational use, a canal, a scenic road, or other route; any natural or landscaped course for pedestrian or bicycle passage; an open-space connector linking parks, nature reserves, cultural features, or historic sites with each other and with populated area; locally, certain strip or linear parks designated as a parkway or greenbelt."*

- Charles E. Little, [Greenways for America](#) (1990)

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## C. Niagara River Greenway Boundary

Under the legislation establishing the Niagara River Greenway, this plan must recommend a specific boundary for the greenway within Erie and Niagara Counties. During the public participation process, there has been a great deal of discussion and debate over the issue of the boundary for the Niagara River Greenway, with vocal and dedicated proponents for various alternatives. The scenarios have ranged from a narrow boundary that focused strongly on the River and its shoreline, to a wider, regional approach.

There are benefits to each approach. The narrower boundary focuses efforts and resources on the River itself. In this model, the boundary of the Greenway encompasses the lands that are targeted for open space protection and environmental restoration. A more targeted Greenway boundary is strongly grounded in a specific geography that is clearly identifiable as a linear, literal “green”-way linking resources, conservation areas and parks.

At the other end of the spectrum is a more regional approach that focuses more on the concept of the Greenway as an organizational structure. In this approach, the Greenway becomes a governance structure that encourages greater interaction and cooperation across the region, and takes a more economic development and tourism-related approach to the Greenway.

The Niagara River Greenway Commission has chosen a boundary that follows municipal lines: the jurisdictional boundary of the Niagara River Greenway is the political boundaries of those municipalities that physically border on the Niagara River, with the addition of the Town of Niagara and the Village of Kenmore. The Niagara River Greenway consists of the Towns of Porter, Lewiston, Niagara, Wheatfield,

Grand Island and Tonawanda; the Cities of Niagara Falls, Buffalo, North Tonawanda and Tonawanda; and the Villages of Youngstown, Lewiston, and Kenmore. This boundary is depicted on Figure 1.

There are a number of reasons for using a jurisdictional approach for the official Greenway boundary. The Niagara River Greenway legislation requires that the Plan be approved by the local legislative body of each city, town and village within the designated boundary before it can be submitted to the State for approval. In other words, the City Council, Town Board or Village Board of every municipality that falls within the designated boundary must affirmatively vote in favor of the plan. Therefore, it is important that the boundary be simple to understand and justify, particularly at a local municipal level. Establishing a boundary that includes the entire municipality is a standard practice for this type of regional plan. For example, the boundary established for the Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor includes the cities, towns and villages—in their entirety—that lie immediately adjacent to the Erie Canal and its historic alignments. The Hudson River Valley Greenway and many of the State Heritage areas also use municipal boundaries to designate their official boundaries. The municipalities that comprise the Greenway area will be the stewards of the Greenway as an entity, and their full support is important for the long-term success of this effort.

The Commission recognizes that efforts and resources should be focused on the Niagara River and its shoreline, which is the heart of the Niagara River Greenway. Mapping of resources and an initial list of existing and proposed projects shows a concentration in the River, along its shores and on adjacent inland areas. Input from the general public

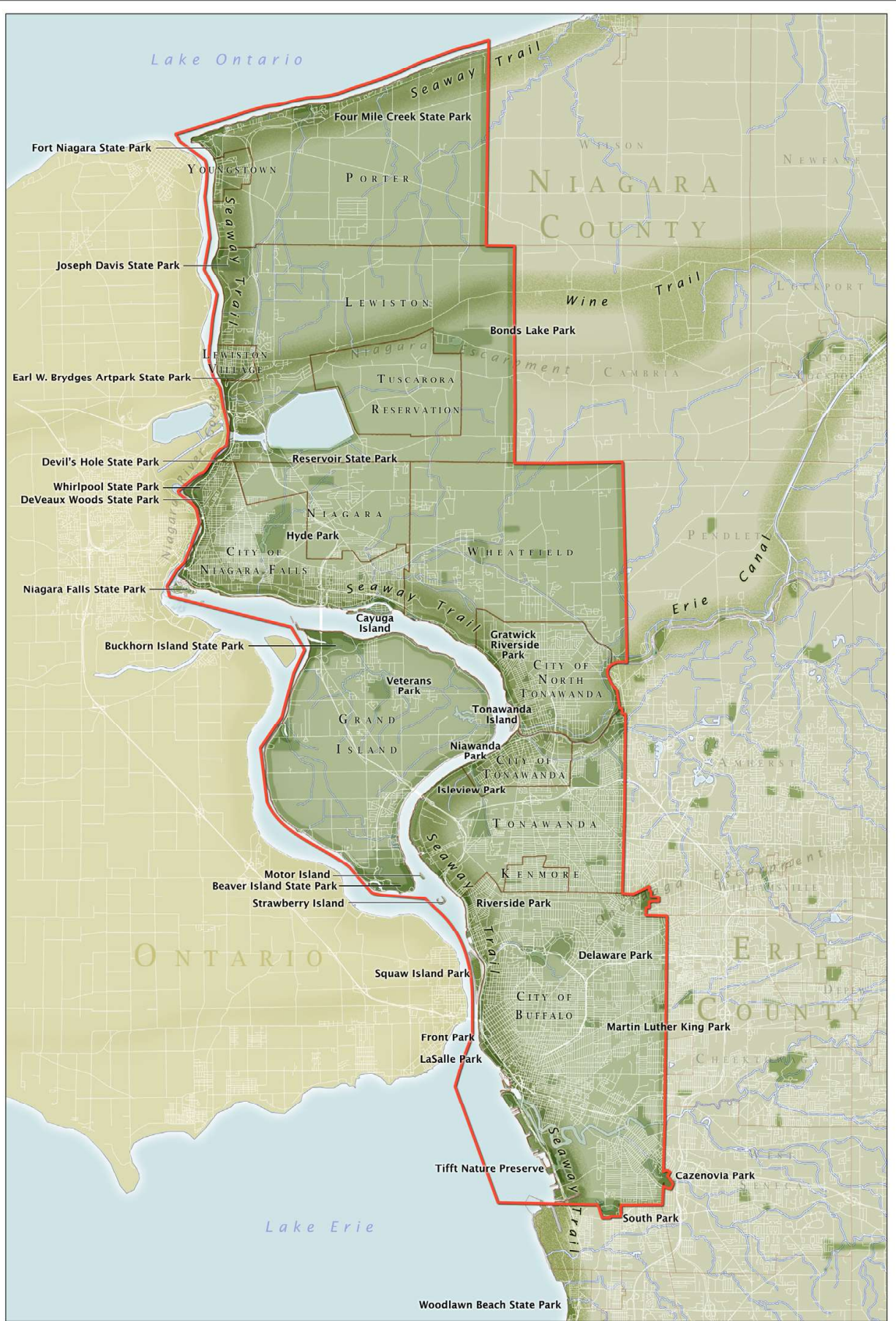
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has indicated strong support for a scheme that acknowledges the centrality of the River as the geographic basis for the Greenway. In establishing the priorities and criteria for evaluating programs and projects relating to the Greenway, the Commission has established a focus that will help direct activities and funding. Local Waterfront Revitalization Program boundaries and Coastal Zone Management boundaries formed the basis of the focus area, with modifications to include important adjacent resources, such as major tributaries, downtown “Main Street” areas and other major resources along the River. The focus area will help implement the vision of the Greenway as a linked corridor of parks, places and resources within the communities that make up the political boundary of the Greenway. However, the plan also recognizes that several municipalities do not have jurisdiction of lands immediately adjacent to the river or their waterfront lands are already developed. These municipalities must develop their own priorities in relation to the expenditure of greenway related resources. It is anticipated that these

priorities would include but not be limited to, inland parks, open space projects, trail projects and projects relating to destination resources.

Beyond the specific ratification boundary of the Niagara River Greenway, there are important connections and intersections of the Greenway with other designated systems. The Seaway Trail, the Niagara Wine Trail and the Erie Canalway all connect to the Niagara River Greenway. These connection points link the Greenway to upland and interior communities and help integrate the Greenway into wider systems. Projects that enhance these and similar connections are consistent with the Greenway. For a description of these connections, refer to page 11. In addition, the Greenway will enhance opportunities for creating compatible linkages with similar systems in Canada. Linkages improve access to not only the Greenway, but to the many resources and attractions of this region that fall outside the designated geographic boundary of the Niagara River Greenway.





**NIAGARA RIVER GREENWAY**  
 ■ Niagara River Greenway Area

**NIAGARA RIVER GREENWAY BOUNDARY**  
 MARCH 20, 2007

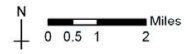


Figure 1