

Some citizens to sue Niagara Falls State Park for false advertising?

Deceptive trade practice alleged in claiming State Park is an 'Olmsted Park'?

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Some people are disturbed that Albany advertises the Niagara Falls State Park as an "Olmsted Park."

Disturbed enough, maybe, to bring a lawsuit and erect billboards exposing what may be "blatant deception."

You be the judge.

The land where the Niagara Falls State Park sits was "reserved" in 1886 by New York State in accordance with Frederick Law Olmsted's plan. America's most famous "landscape architect," Olmsted designed Central Park, Yosemite National Park and many others.

While the Niagara Falls State Park is still advertised as being of Olmsted design, the facts are these: In 1886, Olmsted persuaded the state to pass an enactment establishing the first state park in the nation — the State Reservation of Niagara.

At first, the Reservation operated according to Olmsted's plan. But by the mid-20th century, things changed. It was about the time when Robert Moses planned the theft of our hydro-power, falsely claiming that the New York Power Authority would preserve our prosperity better than by having local control of the world's greatest hydro-power. (In the 1950s, we had among the most inexpensive electricity in the nation. After 51 years of Albany control, Niagara Falls now pays the third-highest rates in the USA.)

Meanwhile, Albany changed the name from the State Reservation of Niagara to the Niagara Falls State Park. Other changes followed: Olmsted wanted the Reservation all-green, with only indigenous plants — no formal plantings, only as nature would design it herself — round one of her crowning achievements, the most dynamic waterfalls in the world.

"It may be safely assumed," Olmsted said, "that no improvement that the State can make will increase the astonishing qualities of Niagara."

The park was designed for people to walk in pristine setting and be "astounded" by Niagara Falls. To have a view of nature as she would exhibit herself, if left untouched. For those of reflective temperament, nature might also reveal a little of the glory of the Creator of nature. Olmsted called it "pensive contemplation." "In this respect," he added, "Niagara deserves to rank among the great treasures of the world."

To invoke this astonishment and wonder, Olmsted insisted the park be free of commercialism and man-made embellishments like statuary and gardens, which, in this setting, would be "deplorable."

Among the changes Albany accomplished, amazing in itself, was to change the flow of water over Niagara Falls — something Olmsted probably never envisioned. Formerly, there was a far greater volume going over the falls than today. (After Albany took our hydro-power, in 1957 they diverted half to three-quarters



A disgraceful first: State Park employees stand in the street to divert tourists into the state's paid parking lot and away from city businesses.



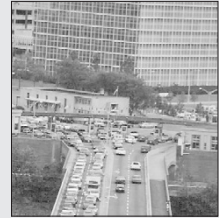
While this park "ambassador" illegally stands in the street, diverting cars to the state's paid parking lot, he ignores hundreds of pedestrians. Ironic, ambassadors were hired to guide people inside the park, not to sell parking spaces.



FREDERICK LAW OLMSTED'S PRISTINE PLAN FOR THE AREA SURROUNDING NIAGARA FALLS HAS BEEN PERVERTED INTO A MONEY-MAKING PLAN FOR ALBANY.



State Park employees, ordered to stop traffic and divert tourists into the state's paid parking lot, even move illegally onto the street and into the right lane to get tourists to make a left turn into the park.



One Niagara, left, will make a good place for a giant billboard decrying the desecration of Olmsted's memory.

NO SHORTAGE OF SIGNS — DO YOU THINK THEY WILL BE ABLE TO FIGURE IT OUT?



The state park has five — count 'em — five new signs on both sides of a 150-foot stretch of the Robert Moses Parkway, all directing the tourist to keep left for the state's paid parking lot. However, please notice that they do not mention it is a paid parking lot.

— depending on time and season — of the water approaching the falls and sent it underground to generate electricity — not for locals to use, but for New York City and eight other states. Local residents do not get their power from the Niagara — a stunning fact about Albany governance in and of itself.)

Besides halving the spectacle of the total amount of water going over the world's most famous waterfalls, reducing what people came to see — water falling — Albany changed the park, veering far from Olmsted's design.

For instance, restaurants and stores were forbidden in Olmsted's plan. He wrote, "If it were a commercial undertaking into which the State was entering, in competition with the people of the village of Niagara, it cannot be questioned that the restaurant could be made profitable." But the park was supposed to help local businesses. Olmsted called the prohibition of restaurants and stores, "a cardinal necessity of the success of the plan."

He wanted a place of contemplation, not sprawling commerce. The park presently has multiple restaurants and souvenir stores.

There was another change: Olmsted planned a single, 20-foot wide road (at that time, for horse and carriage) to run, one way, through the park. There would be no land set aside for parking except a few "shady harbors" under trees for brief stopping only. "The road should be as narrow as it can be," he added, "because at best many trees must be destroyed." But Albany felled acres of trees to make parking lots, then, routing automobiles inside the park, started charging tourists to park there.

From the awe-filled tourist who might spend days to unravel the mysteries of Niagara, coming on foot to study and to wonder, came in his place the "day-tripper?" — the partial-day visitor to the park, who would then leave the area, oftentimes for

Canada. The growingly commercial ambience disappointed many visitors and the magical properties of nature that Olmsted wished to unveil as one of the "treasures of the world" was altered by lessening the water fall, and converting green into parking lots, restaurants and stores. They even added statues and man-made gardens to complete the violation of every one of Olmsted's cardinal design points.

Had the change been for the benefit of the city, it might have been in keeping with Olmsted's plan — a little. But once Albany controlled the flow of tourism through parking, Albany sought to capture tourist dollars. Since the park is limited in size and visitation occurs mainly in summer — as far as Albany was concerned, let them come, spend their money, and be gone, making way for the next wave of tourists — up to eight million of them per year. To capture their money, they need to capture the tourist first: for parking, attractions, dining and souvenirs.

So be it. But don't call it an Olmsted park. Under the leadership of Spitzer-appointed Park Commissioner Mark Thomas, things have swerved further. This season, his assistant, Ron Peters, instituted a new role for park "ambassadors." Their traditional role is to provide information to tourists inside the park. Mr. Peters reassigned the ambassadors to flagging cars on the street so the park gets tourists ahead of local businesses. Mr. Peters also arranged for five new signs installed along 150 feet of the Robert Moses Parkway, which repeatedly instruct people to stay in the left lane. To stay right might lead to private or city-owned parking lots, stores and restaurants, including One Niagara.

Ironic: The city and State Park refused to issue One Niagara a permit for signage under a murky law that claims they have the right to approve signage near the park. While competing directly with me for busi-

ness, they want to dictate what kind of signage I have. (I did submit a signage plan more than a year ago, but the state refused to give an answer. So I did what any red-blooded American would do — I put up signs anyway.)

Meanwhile, after telling me I cannot have signs, then putting up five State Park "parking lot" signs, Mr. Peters led state employees onto the Robert Moses Parkway to divert motorists.

Kindly remember, tourists are coming to see Niagara Falls. Where they park their cars or eat is of little relevance — they will still see the falls. But "ambassadors" are now positioned outside the park, sometimes illegally standing in the street, selling parking spaces, telling tourists not to go into the city.

One ambassador was caught telling tourists that parking outside the park was more expensive than in the park — a lie. Another employee (name withheld pending referral to human resources), so upset that cars were turning toward the city, started screaming to motorists that parking in the state lot was free. In fairness, he wasn't hired to be a flagger.

Besides the contemplated lawsuit, which might compel the park to stop misleading people about Olmsted, we are considering billboards on One Niagara that could be seen throughout the park. One might read: "Attention Visitors: This park is not an Olmsted park — that is a lie the Niagara Falls State Park is telling you. For more details come to One Niagara."

That may bring some people out of the park and into the city — just like Olmsted wanted.

(For Olmsted's plan, see www.niagara-heritage.org/genplan.htm.)

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