



# Autism Nature Trail

A Nature Trail for all at Letchworth State Park

**For Immediate Release:**

January 30, 2020

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**Campaign Announced to Build Autism Nature Trail in Letchworth State Park**

*Trail to be designed and built for visitors, families living with autism spectrum disorder and other developmental disabilities;*

*First-of-its-kind in the U.S.*

**Castile, N.Y. – [The Campaign to Build the Autism Nature Trail](#)** (ANT) today announced the public phase of its campaign to raise the final \$1.9 million toward the \$3.9 million goal for creating a first-of-its kind nature trail in Letchworth State Park. Designed by a nature play specialist and landscape architects, in consultation with academics, practitioners, and family members with firsthand experience of autism spectrum disorder (ASD), the Trail will provide a unique and welcoming experience in nature, inviting those with ASD and other developmental disabilities to push boundaries, explore outdoor activities and develop new skills.

Continuing efforts to ensure that New York State Parks are inclusive and welcoming for all, Commissioner Erik Kulleseid of New York State’s Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation kicked off the fundraising campaign, sharing plans for a Trail that will “provide a safe, accommodating, and judgement-free space” for visitors to Letchworth State Park.

“New York State Parks is committed to expanding access to outdoor recreation to all New Yorkers,” State Parks Commissioner Erik Kulleseid said. “This innovative trail is an example of how we can encourage a direct connection to nature for everyone, young and old, and people of all abilities. I commend the local advocates for their dedication and hard work in bringing the project to this crucial stage.”

Led by local advocates for the Trail Susan Herrnstein, Loren Penman and Gail Serventi, the first phase of the campaign has already raised \$2 million dollars toward construction of the Trail. Now, in this public phase, the campaign is looking to raise the remaining \$1.9 million of the \$3.9 million goal to fully fund a Public-Private Partnership to maintain and operate

the Trail and to provide specialized programming for the target audience and training for Park staff.

The Public-Private Partnership supporting the Campaign to Build the Autism Nature Trail at Letchworth State Park includes the [Natural Heritage Trust](#), [Perry Central School District](#), [Letchworth State Park](#) and the [New York State Office of Parks, Recreation & Historic Preservation](#), all of whom are committed to the success of the Trail as both a way to engage the local community and local schools in providing access to nature for an underserved audience and to serve as an engine for regional economic growth, development, and tourism. The partnership is also supported by [Camp Puzzle Peace](#), a Rochester based not-for-profit organization pioneering outdoor recreational opportunities for individuals with ASD and their families – who will provide on-site programs at the ANT.

Leslie VaillanCourt is a frequent visitor to Camp Puzzle Peace and has a son with autism spectrum disorder. The trail will provide more opportunities in the area for her family, close to home. “Our family has benefited in a huge way from spending time with other autism families, camping outdoors and taking advantage of the respite time that Camp Puzzle Peace offers. The Autism Nature Trail will allow us to continue that family time exploring the outdoors and hiking with our son,” says Leslie. “We are particularly excited about the Music Circle, as our son and many of his friends love music so much. The marriage of nature and music in that space is sure to be a hit!”

Superintendent Daryl McLaughlin of the Perry Central School District believes in the educational value that the Autism Nature Trail will provide to students in the district. “The ANT is an innovative, inclusive, one-of-a-kind sensory destination that will provide all with an unforgettable education experience,” he says. “The Perry Central School District is fortunate to partner with outstanding individuals, organizations and municipalities to make the ANT a reality.”

Plans for the Autism Nature Trail designate a one-mile loop with eight stations offering a range of experiences from quiet engagement to active exploration and adventure. Planned stations include the Sunshine Slope – a gentle sloping maze in a natural clearing, the Music Circle – a circular grove of pine featuring nature-inspired instruments, and the Meadow Run & Climb – a dedicated space for running, jumping, climbing, balancing and testing strength, coordination and confidence. Specialized elements like a cuddle swing, gliders, and “alone zones” are also planned for the trail, each created with the intent of providing a more inclusive environment for visitors of many different needs and abilities. The Trail and stations will be marked with signage telling visitors what to expect as they approach each curve of the trail and station – an important addition creating purposeful consistency and predictability for visitors.

“We sometimes forget that children with autism become adults with autism – and they are adults a lot longer than they are children,” says Joe Mantegna, actor, autism activist and honorary board member for the Autism Nature Trail. “The Autism Nature Trail will provide a welcoming environment for visitors of all ages to experience the excitement, joy and comfort found in the wonders of our natural world. This unique form of a direct and

accepting engagement with nature in a world-class park adds a new dimension of exposure, with the potential of providing a lifetime of meaningful and fulfilling experiences.”

The Autism Nature Trail will be open to all park visitors and originate adjacent to the Humphrey Nature Center, a recent addition to Letchworth State Park opened to the public in July 2016. The Nature Center interprets the spectacular landscape found within Letchworth State Park, encourages deeper exploration, and expands the public’s appreciation for the natural environment. The Autism Nature Trail will further this mission by welcoming to the Park a community that has been historically underserved in terms of recreational space and engagement with nature.

“On behalf of myself and the Genesee Regional Commission, we are truly excited about this opportunity to enhance the natural experience for everyone in Letchworth, including those on the autism spectrum,” says Peter Humphrey, Chair of the NYS Parks Genesee Region Commission. “This unique project, similar to the Nature Center project, is yet another example of working together in a public-private partnership to share resources and knowledge in order to achieve a common goal.”

“With Letchworth State Park’s reach across two counties and two state tourism regions, new offerings such as the ANT assist in keeping the Park relevant, increasing its visibility and – in this case – attracting an entirely new demographic of visitors,” says Elissa Russell, Director of Tourism & Marketing at the Livingston County Area Chamber of Commerce. “Continued investment in the development and promotion of projects like the Autism Nature Trail in our parks serves to enhance the quality of life in the region and contributes to its economic health and the ability to attract and retain supporting businesses.”

To learn more about the Campaign to Build the Autism Nature Trail at Letchworth State Park or to donate to the project, visit: <https://autismnaturetrail.com/>.

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### ***About the Campaign to Build the Autism Nature Trail at Letchworth State Park***

*The Campaign to Build the Autism Nature Trail at Letchworth State Park is a public-private partnership with plans to construct a recreational trail within the park, that allows children with autism and other developmental disabilities to push boundaries, explore new activities and develop skills that will aid them later in life. To date, the campaign has raised \$2 million of a projected \$3.9 million needed to construct the trail and aid in ongoing maintenance, operations and specialized programming. The public phase of the campaign is now active, with plans to raise the additional \$1.9 million. To learn more about the Campaign to Build the Autism Nature Trail at Letchworth State Park or to donate to the project, visit: <https://autismnaturetrail.com/>.*

*Project Partners for the Campaign to Build the Autism Nature Trail*



Perry Central School  
District  
Home of the Yellowjackets

