
Greentopia,
Rochester's newest festival,
aims to enlighten and
entertain with its
environmental message.

STORY BY JIM MEMMOTT

YOU CAN'T LOOK AT ANOTHER WIND CHIME, weather vane or birdhouse. You can't eat another funnel cake, drink another freshly squeezed lemonade.

Yes, festival fatigue has set in. It's a comes-with-the-territory condition, given our area's absolute need to devote at least one weekend a year to every possible ethnic group, local food or artistic genre.

So is it wise to add another to the mix—especially one devoted to less-than-festive topics such as composting and recycling?

Don't worry, says Michael Philipson, one of the organizers of Greentopia, a celebration of sustainable living to be held in Rochester's High Falls district on Sept. 17 and 18. This newest of Rochester festivals really does promise a new experience.

"A lot of festivals are very much the same," says Philipson. "You see the same vendors, the same people. We thought about how we will make it really different."

And in addition to spreading the green gospel, Greentopia will raise awareness of GardenAerial, one of the inspirations for the endeavor. The ambitious proposal for an urban gardenscape would bring people not just to the red-brick-rich historic district of High Falls on the west side of the Genesee River but also to the area on the other side of the river for a new way to appreciate the underappreciated Upper (High) Falls of the Genesee, a stunning 96-foot drop of water into the river's gorge.

First things first: getting people to the festival. One draw will be the speakers; several of them, including actor and environmentalist Ed Begley Jr. and renowned environmental writer Bill McKibben, will appear via Skype (a nicely green arrangement: traveling by Internet carries a very small carbon footprint).

At the same time, there will be lots of live music and food, much of it locally grown or raised. The idea is to give people a good time while learning about green living.

"I think the best ways to get environmental messages across are

by making 'green' choices more fun, more rewarding and more relevant to people," says Haley Rotter, a member of Greentopia's organizing committee who is with the Center for Environmental Information in Rochester.

Greentopia will have vendors, but vendors from companies that are deemed to be environmentally aware. "People will be able to walk around and learn something they didn't expect," says Lewis Stess, a co-principal with Philipson in the Philipson Group, a company offering a variety of services including web design and event planning.

The festival organizers stress they'll practice what they preach. The waste diversion committee has already worked out methods of sorting recyclables and material for composting right on-site.

"For recycling, it seems to all come down to ease," says Liesel Schwarz, a recent graduate from the University of Rochester and a member of the festival planning committee. "Make sure all the bins (trash and recycling) are close and clearly labeled. If the process is harder than just simply throwing everything

has drawn a wide variety of support, with Monroe Community College as the presenting partner. Other partners include Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester Gas & Electric, the Rochester Area Community Foundation, Wegmans Food Markets Inc., Monroe County, the City of Rochester, WXXI and others.

Interest from both the public and private sectors reflects a growing awareness of environmental issues, says Bergmann Associates' Vince Press, the co-chair of Greentopia's public relations and marketing committee.

"All of us on the planning committee have been surprised," he says. "When you approach a company, you would expect some type of initial skepticism. But this topic is an easy sell."

Philipson and Stess hope that the festival also works to create momentum for the GardenAerial, a project modeled on the High Line in New York City, the successful conversion of an abandoned and elevated rail line into an above-ground-level park.

GardenAerial would start with the placement of trees, flowers and



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away, it won't work."

The wish is that Greentopia draws a diverse crowd—from the clean-air advocate to anyone simply looking for a good time in an historic district—and that everyone leaves happy and perhaps a little more environmentally aware.

"I hope that people see new opportunities," Rotter says, "and that they discover ideas that they want to incorporate in their daily lives."

For a first-time event, Greentopia

other plantings on the Pont de Rennes Pedestrian Bridge, the 858-foot-long structure that crosses the Genesee River and offers a spectacular view of the river's Upper Falls.

The flower-and-tree bedecked bridge would lead people across the river to the east side, the area along St. Paul Boulevard where the Genesee Brewing Co. is located. A winter garden on that side of the Genesee would be built to entice people to cross for another view of

the falls and a new events space.

If all goes as planned, the third stage would create a footbridge over the falls themselves, just south of the Pont de Rennes. This would complete a loop: People could walk from the current High Falls district, though the GardenAerial and then along the east bank of the river and back over the falls to the High Falls district.

That's why the link between both sides of the river is vital to the project, says Patrick Cullina, a horticulturalist and planner who has worked for the High Line in New York and who will speak at Greentopia. "I see the whole river gorge as the experience, not just the bridge."

From his experience with High Line in Manhattan, Cullina can say that GardenAerial "is not some starry-eyed, romantic backward-looking thing. This summer, one million people are expected to visit High Line, which transformed an abandoned and weeded-over railroad line into a scenic pedestrian walkway.

Philipson estimates the total cost for the GardenAerial project—a public-private venture—at between \$13 and 15 million.

There are, of course, possible hurdles along the way. Just as there can be festival fatigue, there certainly can be High Falls fatigue. Not that long ago, the city had grand plans to turn the area into an entertainment district full of restaurants and clubs—plans that never managed to be sustained.

On the other hand, businesses have been moving into the repurposed warehouses and industrial buildings in High Falls. Condos have sprung up, as well.

Beyond that, much of what is needed for the project—the Pont de Rennes, the warehouses, the postcard-pretty waterfall—is already there.

"We've got a jewel here, and we're just polishing it," Stess says. **R**

Jim Memmott is a freelance writer and a columnist for the Democrat and Chronicle.

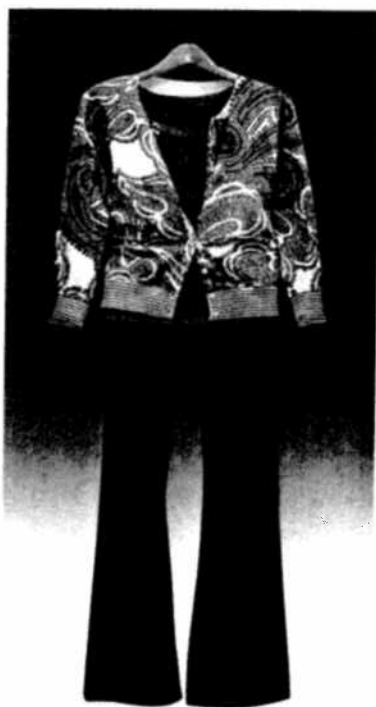


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Greentopia runs from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Sept. 17 and 18 in Rochester's High Falls district. There will be speakers, panels and displays on environmental issues, plus food, live music and beverages. For information, call 267-5555 or visit www.greentopiafestival.com.

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