



Reimagining New York's Canals

New York State's 500-mile-long system of navigable waterways connecting the Atlantic Ocean with the Great Lakes is among the state's greatest assets.

As New York State and its residents embark on *Reimagining the Canals*—under the direction of the New York Power Authority, New York State Canal Corporation, and the Reimagine the Canals Task Force—the Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor seeks to offer perspective, goals and strategies that contribute to this momentous process. We are eager to discuss opportunities that the iconic NYS Canal System presents to current and future residents and visitors.

Our recommendations are based on many years of investment and work as a federally-designated National Heritage Corridor tasked with bringing vision, leadership and energy to the nation's most successful and influential canal system. Working with a wide range of federal, state, and local partners, the National Heritage Corridor is focused on the following interrelated goals:

- preserving and interpreting our nation's past;
- providing world class recreational and educational opportunities;
- fostering economic revitalization;
- improving the quality of life in canal communities;
- guiding the re-emergence of the Erie Canalway in the 21st century.

POWER OF A CONNECTED SYSTEM

The transformative power of the New York State Canal System lies in its ability to connect communities as a "string of pearls" stretching across the full expanse of upstate New York. Its national and international allure lies in its historic integrity and its ability to deliver authentic high-quality visitor experiences.

The health of the region's waterways, communities and surrounding natural and historic landscapes are the basis for many recreational activities and are essential ingredients of the Corridor's quality of life.

Heritage development strategies that integrate preservation, conservation, recreation, regional partnerships, and economic growth will maximize the competitive advantages of the Canalway Corridor for present and future generations.

PRIORITY GOALS AND STRATEGIES

The following list includes new strategies as well as fundamental, critical investments that are key to the success of all efforts to grow and sustain economic, environmental and community vitality in the region.

1. Preserve the historic and authentic New York State Canal System as a navigable waterway connecting the Atlantic Ocean with the upper Great Lakes and as critical public infrastructure for economic development.

- a. Continue ongoing maintenance and strategic capital investments to ensure that locks, bridges, guard gates, and other iconic and historic canal structures remain fully operational.
- b. Maintain channel depths and bridge clearances.
- c. Elevate maintaining the historic integrity of the NYS Canal System as a priority for New York State, the New York Power Authority, NYS Canal Corporation, NYS Department of Transportation, and related agencies.
- d. Continue support for large-scale canal tours. Tours such as the Corning Museum of Glass GlassBarge (2018), the Albany Symphony's Water Music New York tour (2017), and the *Lois McClure* (multiple years) generate significant economic impact and invite residents and visitors to experience the canals.
- e. Celebrate and raise awareness of commercial traffic as an environmentally-responsible alternative to truck and rail transport and as a sight for residents and visitors to see. While commercial traffic is no longer the canal's chief use, there continue to be commercial shipments of bulk cargos (e.g. crushed stone) and high value specialty cargos (e.g., Genesee Brewery tanks, GE steam turbine rotors, US Navy sonar components).
- f. Continue to measure and raise awareness of the NYS Canal System's non-tourism impacts (\$6.2 billion annual economic impact; see: <http://www.canals.ny.gov/economic-benefit-report.pdf>).

2. Maximize connectivity between water routes, trails, canal communities, and attractions.

- a. Increase investments in strategically spaced amenities required to make the NYS Canal System and Empire State Trail a world-class destination. Boaters, cyclists, paddlers, and touring visitors need and expect to find basic services and amenities, including: water, restrooms, showers, storage/security, Wi-Fi; universal accessibility, overnight accommodations, and visitor information. Consider transforming locks at strategic locations into canal amenity centers.
- b. Invest in overnight accommodations on and off the water to increase connectivity for travelers. Consider lodging options that strengthen the canal brand, such as stationary canal boats or lodging barges, and floating "marinas" for visitors who may not own boats, but who want to experience staying on the water.
- c. Continue to improve informational, directional and interpretive signage for locks, land and water trails, and attractions.

- d. Host periodic canal community summits and nurture a community network to facilitate information sharing, facilitate regional partnerships, and strengthen economic development along the canals.
- e. Review and, where appropriate, implement any remaining recommendations of the [New York State Canal Recreationway Plan](#).
- f. Review and, where appropriate, implement remaining recommendations of the [Erie Canalway Preservation and Management Plan](#).
- g. Continue to promote, expand and improve rehabilitation tax credits and implement other tools to focus private investment on preservation, reuse, and revitalization of historic buildings, main streets, open spaces, and agricultural lands. Utilize smart growth land use policies.

3. Maximize regional, national and worldwide visitation that fosters improved quality of life for Canalway Corridor residents.

- a. Continue to encourage and support investments by canal communities and the private sector in waterfront revitalization, public access and amenities. Communities that have been able to invest in their canal waterfronts are the most vibrant places along the canals for residents and visitors.
- b. Designate ongoing funding source(s) for maintenance of the Canalway Trail/Empire State Trail. Poor trail conditions can be hazardous and quickly undermine tourism promotion efforts.
- c. Increase investments in heritage tourism, recreational opportunities, and canal events and festivals, which generate \$1.3 billion annually for canal communities (https://eriecanalway.org/application/files/3715/5147/4497/ECNHC_Canal-related_Event_Impact_2017_REV_0219.pdf).
- d. Expand hire-boat companies, especially in the Eastern Erie and Champlain Canals and work with tour boat and “small-ship” cruise operators to enhance their clients’ experiences. Evaluate solar powered electric boats for hire-boat rentals.
- e. Explore the establishment of a major event for “Great Loopers” who traverse the Canal System annually. Draw attention to the Canal System as a major international waterway transportation network. <https://www.greatloop.org/>
- f. Update the Canal Cruising Guide (last updated in 2006) in print and online.
- g. Leverage and market the Corridor’s numerous historic sites and museums and the prestigious National Historic Landmark designation of the Canal System itself (an honor granted only to properties of exceptional historical significance and integrity). Explore the possibility of future World Heritage Site listing.

4. Leverage the “Erie Canal” brand to increase awareness and visitation, and strengthen pride of place.

- a. Reinforce the NYS Canal System and Canalway Corridor’s distinctive “sense of place” in all marketing, community outreach, publications, and economic development initiatives. Promote the canal’s unique-quality-of-life benefits, natural and historic resources, and recreational assets.
- b. Position the iconic system and “Erie Canal” brand as a “must-do” travel experience for motorized and non-motorized boaters and other users from around the world.
- c. Continue to provide and expand user-friendly visitor tools, including printed publications and websites.
- d. Improve coordination of partners and strengthen a network that links stories and resources and provides context and continuity.
- e. Cultivate pride of place and future stewardship by educating youth through social studies, science, technology, engineering, math and the arts.

5. Improve water and environmental quality as a foundation of the region’s quality of life, tourism, and recreational activities.

- a. Prioritize funding for sewage system upgrades to eliminate sewage discharges/overflows and for reduction of urban and agricultural runoff. Support monitoring programs.
- b. Implement the Mohawk River Basin Action Agenda and support other watershed-level initiatives to improve and sustain high water quality.
- c. Preserve existing wetlands and look for opportunities to create new ones, particularly to absorb and store storm water where flooding is a problem. Consider the use of floating ecosystems to serve as biofilters in urban areas.
- d. Mitigate the spread of invasive species through appropriate techniques.
- e. Support agriculture throughout the Canalway Corridor.
- f. Inventory and evaluate natural landscapes and implement management strategies along the waterway to enhance landscape level conservation and protect scenic view sheds. Collaborate with NYSDEC, SUNY-ESF and environmental organizations to implement large landscape conservation projects in concert with the working Canal System (e.g., pollinator-friendly landscaping along the Canalway Trail to support monarch butterflies; nest box placement for songbirds, conservation easements to protect flood plains and wildlife habitats).
- g. Establish a Canal Conservation Corp (or similar) to support and coordinate year-round citizen-led groups focused on canal and trail clean-up, monitoring, education, and preservation.

POSTCARD FROM THE FUTURE

As part of this summer's "Reimagine the Canals" public meetings hosted by the Rockefeller Institute, participants were asked to envision what New York's Canal System might look like in 2050 and to phrase their response in the form of a postcard from the future. Here is our response:

From Canal 2050 to Canal 2019:

The New York State Canal System remains a source of tremendous pride for upstate residents having just celebrated its 225th anniversary as a continuously operating inland waterway. The system, now also developed and promoted as a 524-mile linear park, is bustling with recreational boating and paddling on the water and cycling, hiking, walking and running on the Empire State Trail network (the longest and most active multi-use trail in the nation). Visitor information and amenities that meet the varied needs of all waterway, trail and road users are high quality, strategically placed and easily found through consistent signage and wayfinding. Self-chartered boat rentals and cruise ships are now widely available and commercial use of the system is once again on the rise for specialty cargo.

New York State is so fortunate to have this legendary public infrastructure serve as the spine of upstate community revival. Canalway communities are again vibrant with waterfront facilities, locally owned businesses and economically stimulating visitation from regional, national and international travelers. People from all over the world seek out the NYS Canal System to experience this authentic working waterway. The New York State Canal System (Barge Canal) was designated a National Historic Landmark in 2016 because of its extraordinary historical integrity; in 2030 it became a World Heritage Site.

Most importantly, the quality of life for residents along the Canal System is exceptional with plentiful employment and entrepreneurial opportunities, easy access to world-class water and land trails, well-conserved natural resources, amazing scenic views and top-notch cultural sites and museums. People want to live, work, recreate and visit here. We now have community determined long-term plans and appropriate policies in place to facilitate preservation of structures, landscapes and the natural environment that further enhance this valued way of life.

We remain grateful to New York State Canal System leaders who made appropriate adjustments during the centennial and bicentennial periods that enabled upstate New York's waterways to remain relevant in a changing world. To have an inland working waterway that is beneficial to millions of upstate New York residents and accessible to millions of worldwide visitors annually is a treasure we continue to behold. Like you, we will do our best to cherish and preserve this iconic place and properly pass it on to future generations.