

“Reimagining” the Canals

A Good First Step

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In May 2019, Governor Cuomo announced a sweeping initiative to examine how the Erie Canal System could be reimagined for the 21st century, including the formation of a task force to review the many ideas and proposals and report on its findings. The initiative was designed to build upon past investments in the Canal corridor, including the Downtown Revitalization Initiative and Taste NY.

There were 5 objectives: Identify potential new uses for the Erie Canal aimed at improving the quality of life for New Yorkers; Evaluate how the Erie Canal can support and enhance economic development along the canal corridor; Find new opportunities to enhance recreation and tourism along the Erie Canal; Assess how the Erie Canal can help mitigate impacts from flooding and ice jams to improve resiliency and restore ecosystems in canal communities; Identify opportunities for using Erie Canal infrastructure to expand irrigation for western New York farms.

recommendations, most notably enhanced coordination between the constituencies that oversee and manage the marketing of our inland waterways. \$300 million of improvements were outlined in the 2020 state budget unveiled by the Governor on January 6.

The ideas in the report are laudable, and it certainly will help to have such a large influx of dollars to support a canal system and its neighboring communities. This really is an initiative to reimagine the canal towns, as opposed to the waterway itself. In reviewing these ideas, there may be others which are worth noting, that should be added to ensure that this will be the truly robust, far reaching and economically stimulating initiative that our state leaders have intended it to be.

Commercial marine transport is the reason the entire 524 miles of canals were created in the first place. Tugboats and paddleboats can share the waterways, and do so regularly in the Capital Region, so tugs and barges, perhaps even powered by alternative forms of energy, should be at least considered in the plan. Water transport is a “green” business, and for the right cargoes it is still a very viable operation. Additionally, to extend the perennially shrinking canal operation season, the demand (and money!) of industry should be incentive enough. Larger boaters have shared concerns about the controlling depths on the canals – will there be reason to keep the channels maintained at historic depths if commercial cargoes aren’t in danger of striking bottom?

Communities which once were home to great factories are now saddled with waterfront brownfield sites and little hope of attracting new companies to take their place. However, the inhabitants of those canal towns have industry “in their DNA”, so to speak, as memories are vivid of Moms and Dads who worked for manufacturing companies across the state. 21st Century industry is quite different, but it is possible that these canal town citizens can form the basis of the workforce at modern facilities which are springing up, if not in the same place they were before, perhaps in the next town over. High tech sites in Malta, and industrial operations in Johnstown, Amsterdam, Wilton, Mechanicville, Halfmoon and Waterford are good examples.

The Champlain Canal (Hudson River) was not considered in the report to any significant degree. This is an interesting omission, presumably to keep the scope of the “Reimagine” project manageable. Many of the ideas reviewed for the Erie Canal would seem to also apply to the Champlain.

Private business can help lead the way if we do some “reimagining” of our own. For example, the development of Solaris, the 44-foot USCG certified tour boat now based at the Hudson River Maritime Museum in Kingston, came from some aggressive efforts to demonstrate that the technology was viable and useful. The Ports of Albany and Coeymans are vibrant operations with tentacles that extend into the Canal System, as do tugboat companies such as the New York State Marine Highway Transportation Co. and Coeymans Marine Towing. And it is also true that some

commercial operations were recognized in the CFA process this year by the Regional Economic Development Councils, such as the \$1.56 million Port Schenectady heavy lift and special cargo capacity maritime facility on the Mohawk River, which has been approved for funding.



left, top: Corporate business investment in upstate New York also means social responsibility and service projects in our communities. Here a team from Momentive Performance Materials smiles after a day of cleanup work in the Vischer Ferry Nature Preserve, at Historic Lock 19 of the old Erie Canal. Corporate investment should be encouraged throughout New York State, in order to benefit from similar goodwill programs.

above: A new generation experiences life on the Champlain Canal in Schuylerville. The “Reimagine” initiative seeks to create new opportunities for today’s canal town residents and visitors alike to enjoy the now-clean waters of what was once a purely industrial waterway.

left bottom: Devastated by the flooding of Hurricane Irene and Tropical Storm Lee in 2011, Guy Park Manor in Amsterdam has been vacant and in disrepair. Under the “Reimagine” initiative, the structure would be renovated, and a new park and pedestrian footbridge erected to create a very pleasant experience and connect to the Empire State Trail.

below: In the Capital Region, commercial marine interests supported by their regional chambers of commerce have been working to keep a degree of transport operation viable on the New York State Canal System. Here, a shipment of generators was being pushed past Mohawk Valley Marine in Alplaus, NY (Schenectady County) by the New York State Marine Highway tug, Margot, near a competition of dragon boats. There’s room for all on the canals!



A 64-page report was released in January 2020 detailing their findings. Numerous ideas were identified, such as the introduction of new forms of water recreation (paddle boarding, rafting, surfing, and even ice skating), so-called “iconic infrastructure” destinations, improved waterside overnight accommodations, redevelopment of industrial property, improved trail connections, recreational fishing growth, expanding wetlands, combatting aquatic invasive species, expanded agricultural irrigation, flood and ice jam control, and Mohawk River tributary restoration. There were immediate operational improvement



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We must be diligent in our advocacy, and this is a great time to work alongside our state leadership. The boating community is vital to this exciting re-imagining and re-envisioning of our historic inland waterways!