

# An Unusual Erie Canal Experience

by **Pete Bardunias**

Senior Vice President,  
Community Advancement, Capital Region Chamber

My wife and I took a boat trip west on the Erie Canal for a few days this past September. We were eager to enjoy a few days of end-of-summer cruising. The canal remains a scenic, enjoyable waterway with plentiful recreation options on and off the water. You can catch a big bass on the canal, ride your bicycle on rustic waterside trails and visit historic nationally significant sites all on the same day. The Locks are professionally maintained and operated by the New York State Canal Corporation and the New York Power Authority, helping boaters navigate the waterway in an efficient and safe manner.

2020 was not a normal year on upstate New York waterways. The Canal Corp had been in the middle of several major maintenance projects on the Canals when the COVID-19 crisis struck in March, delaying completion until mid-summer in some cases. That drastically curtailed canal operations and delayed many travelers such as Canadian nationals returning from southern winters and Great Loopers eager to cruise towards the Great Lakes before winter, or south along the Eastern Seaboard before the height of hurricane season.

On our trip, we also learned that many communities had not yet recovered from a major flood last October which took out floating docks in Fultonville and Canajoharie, and worst of all, rendered inoperable the gas pumps at St. Johnsville Municipal Marina. Thus there were no available waterside fuel facilities between the Schenectady Yacht Club in Rexford and the Ilion Marina some 70 miles west. We found out about this issue the hard way, because unfortunately the boat had a mechanical issue which made us decide not to continue further west, but then the question became, "what to do about gas?" Our twin-engine inboard cruiser contains about 114 gallons of gas, enough to make Ilion, but we didn't want to make the extra 36 mile round trip from St. Johnsville with a suspect engine just to get fuel. Thankfully we got some help from a few friends, and St. Johnsville Mayor Charles Straney made sure we were safe and cared for. In the end, we schlepped gas cans of 91 octane from the nearby Stewart's Shops to fill the tanks (plus ice cream of course!) and returned home two days later.

So, lessons learned were: (1) we need to keep advocating for the waterways and adequate shoreside facilities, and (2) thank goodness there are Stewart's Shops within walking distance of marine facilities all across upstate New York!

