

Is the Canal System a Waste of State Resources? Or a Generator?

by **Pete Bardunias**, Senior Vice President, Community Advancement, Capital Region Chamber

Every now and then it is reported that the New York State Canal System “only brings in \$2 million in revenue.” This dubious and flawed statistic, which is impacting both public perception and government policy, is apparently a result of some numbers a few years ago that calculated the amount of money raised by tolls on the canals from the relatively small number of commercial vessels that plied the waterway in that year. The easiest counter to this line of thinking is to simply state that the \$2 million raised is still \$2 million more than the Northway (I-87 north of Albany), Taconic State Parkway, I-88, US 20, US 9, US 9W, NY 22, NY 5, NY 9D and many more roads generate for the state coffers. There are zero tolls collected on any of them. Should they all be closed down, or tolls enacted on them? Of course not. Their value to our state is derived from far more than any toll could possibly generate.

The way it is portrayed, the Erie Canal is just there for a bunch of people in yachts, and doesn't bring much money into state coffers. This viewpoint is completely incorrect. In real dollars, the 524-mile New York State Canal System generates \$7 Billion-plus from tourism and non-tourism sources. Yes, yachts traverse the canal. But what if you decide to bring the family upstate and take a ride on a commercial tour boat in Schuylerville, Little Falls or the many other places they are found on the Canal System? That business wouldn't be here were it not for the canal. It brings in revenue, and makes the canal experience possible for thousands of people each year who never would get that chance otherwise. Same with boat and kayak rentals, bait and tackle shops, marinas and boat clubs, crew teams, dragon boats, and of course there still are commercial tugboats, barges, and so much more happening on our waterway.

We really don't want you to mangle your prop when you visit us up here. But if you do, chances are Gabe Capobianchi from Precision Propeller in Newburgh will be headed up (or you down to him) to get it fixed, paying tolls on the New York State Thruway along the way. That is income generated by the canals. Or if you stop into Byron's Village Market or Saratoga Gluten Free Goods while in Schuylerville, after having lunch at the Basin Grill and filling up at the Schuyler Yacht Basin after an overnight stay, all of that is income generated by the canals. And what about the family from say, Yorktown Heights, who gets in their car and trailers their rowboat to Cross Lake out near Baldwinsville to enjoy the lake and the nearby bed and breakfast there. They again pay tolls on the Thruway to drive to a place that wouldn't exist, or at least wouldn't be very well known, were not the world's most historic and beloved waterway running through it. They will stop and buy lunch and dinner along the way, helping towns far from the water. Every UPS delivery to Sylvan Beach, or Lockport, Spencerport, Brockport, etc. is owed in part to the fact that there is a canal there. And so many other things to do, such as waterski shows, shorefront bicycle trails, parks, historic sites, the list goes on and on.



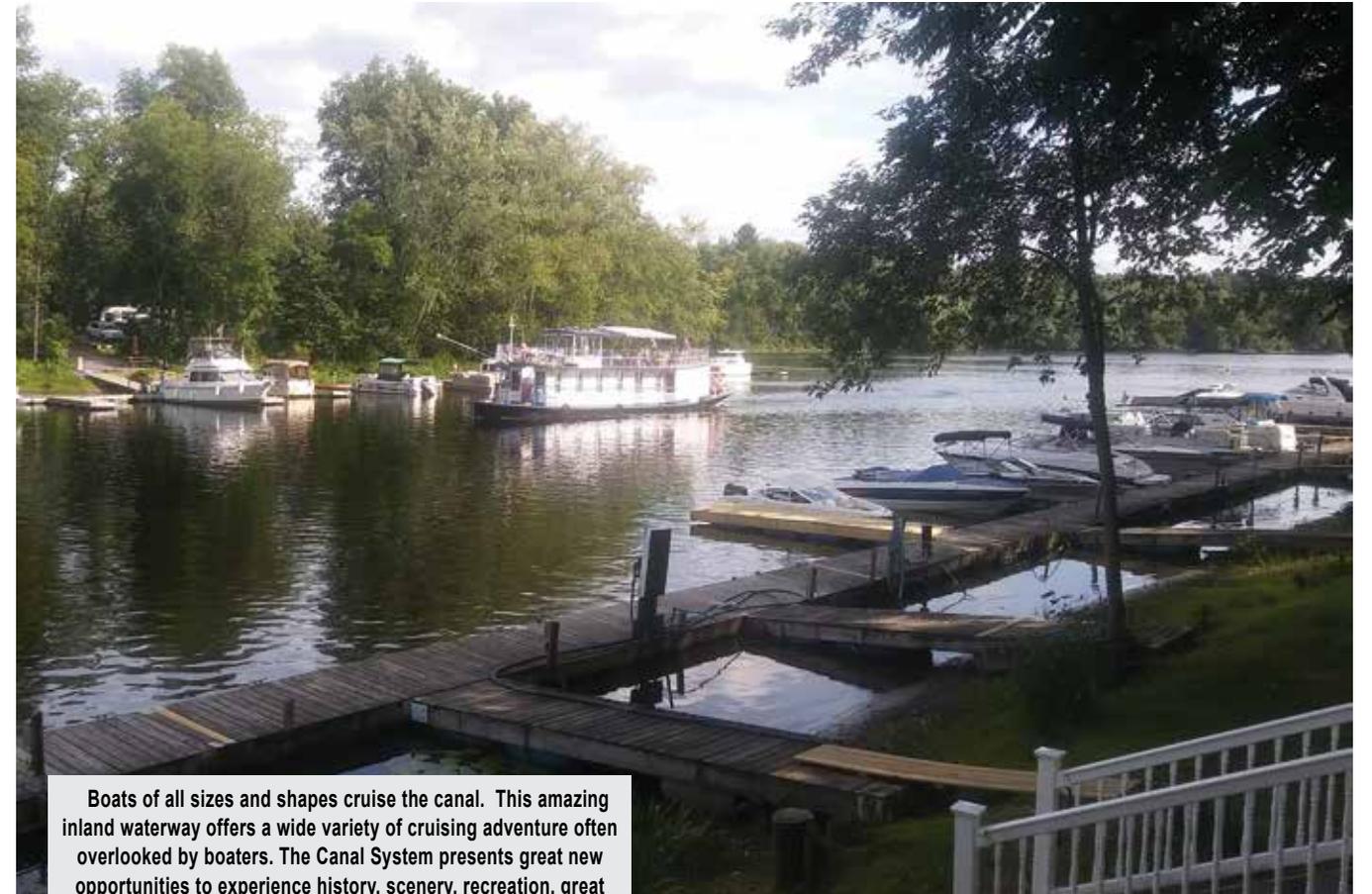
Locking through can be a challenge for first timers, but it can be mastered and the average cruising boater becomes pretty adept at it after awhile. Plus, the various locks give access to waterways all over the state and into the interior USA and Canada.



Working tugboats can be seen on the canals, especially on the Champlain. In recent years there have been less of them, but commercial interests along the Hudson and Mohawk Rivers are working to change that. These tugboats belong to the NYS Marine Highway Transportation Co., the largest transporter of cargo on the Canal System.

Other intangibles exist too – a lot of hydroelectric power is generated on the canals (they used to call it Niagara-Mohawk for a reason!), and farms get water for irrigation from it. Flood control is also a part of Canal System management, as is fish migration and other environmental stewardship measures. Finally, canalside property values are often higher because of the interconnectivity between lakes and cities provided by the waterway, for both recreational and commercial purposes.

There is no tollbooth on Route 9W, and we don't measure its value by the amount of (or lack of) tolls collected. Neither should we apply that thinking to as important a transportation resource as the New York State Canal System.



Boats of all sizes and shapes cruise the canal. This amazing inland waterway offers a wide variety of cruising adventure often overlooked by boaters. The Canal System presents great new opportunities to experience history, scenery, recreation, great fishing, and other recreational fun.

Busy waterfronts are a feature of many communities, such as this one at Freedom Park in Scotia next to Jumpin' Jacks, a local summertime favorite for food and ice cream. Concerts and other events are held, often with the canal as a backdrop, a reminder that these river towns all rely on this important waterway to help them generate much needed income.

