

For New York, cycling could be a rich niche market

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In his new job as director of the **state Canal Corporation**, **Brian Stratton** isn't only concerned with boats and locks, but also bicycles (there's an almost continuous path that runs for nearly 400 miles, the entire length of the Erie Canal) and economic development. Like boats and locks, those last two shouldn't be seen as separate: Bike tourism can have a significant impact on the economy. If he can come up with the money, Stratton, himself a cyclist, would like to find out just how significant by commissioning the nonprofit group Parks & Trails NY to do an economic impact study for bicycling.

That study should be focused on the Canalway, where each July hundreds of people make the trip from Buffalo to Albany over eight days, sleeping at campgrounds or motels or B & Bs along the way. Such long bike trails are heavily used in Europe and other parts of the country, such as Missouri, which has a 237-mile trail that stretches across most of the state. More people would come for bike vacations on New York's if it were better marketed, and paved. Many parts are not smooth asphalt, allowing for road and touring bikes, but crushed stone, requiring hybrid or mountain bikes with heavier frames and thicker tires. (Stratton, who has done all his cycling on the road in the past, says he plans to buy one of those sturdier bikes and keep it in the car for when he is around the canal on business.)

But there's no reason the study should be restricted to the canal and bike paths, whether they're riverfront trails like the Mohawk Hudson Bikeway, or inland trails like the one between Glens Falls and Lake George or the just-completed Zim Smith Trail (which Saratoga County wants to promote for tourism).

Upstate New York, with its great geographic variety, beautiful scenery and quiet back roads, is as good as it gets for bike tourists, who tend to have money and are willing to travel considerable distances for a cycling weekend or vacation. They'll explore their own state, but will also travel to other states, and even Europe, to pedal.

So why not upstate New York, which has the picturesque Schoharie Valley, the Finger Lakes, the Adirondacks, the horse farms of Saratoga County, and the rolling hills and farmland of Washington County. When people think cycling in the Northeast, they think of Vermont, but New York's roads are just as scenic, with wider shoulders and smaller hills.

What New York does not have is a reputation as a place that embraces bicycling, with tour operators, B & B associations, other businesses and economic development agencies promoting the activity and catering to cyclists. Stratton's economic impact study could open their eyes and motivate them.