

Seeing opportunity on the Erie Canal

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Messenger Post

Posted Apr 22, 2010 @ 07:01 AM

Gates, N.Y. —

A short walk along the Erie Canal Pathway in Gates provides the casual hiker a tale of two experiences.

The beeping of trucks backing up at the monstrous, blue Monroe County Recycling Center, just across the canal waters from Lee Road in Gates to the city of Rochester, provides the soundtrack while graffiti on the path lets visitor know that “Phil D. was here Aug. 29, 2009” — and Kia, according to her tag, was there, too.

A scant 500 yards away, however, a hiker is taken into a more serene setting, where a bumblebee buzzes across the grass, a woodpecker pecks away at a tree trunk for bugs, and the white flowers of what looks to be a dogwood tree are in bloom.

The contrasting scenes also bring up an age-old question in Gates: Is the canal experience in town fine the way it is, or does more work need to be done?

Count Sue Swanton — the Gates Democratic Committee leader who is organizing a voter registration drive this weekend as part of a statewide canal cleanup effort — among the latter.

With vision, more people will find more positive experiences along the canal trail, she said.

“Gates is not thought of as a canal town, yet it has five miles of trail,” Swanton said. “The trail is wonderful.”

To the west, the villages of Brockport and Spencerport offer several businesses and amenities that attract customers of all sorts — by car, on foot, or by boat and bike. The same can be said farther east, as the villages of Pittsford and Fairport are known for their canalfront restaurants, businesses and services for hikers, residents and boaters.

While nearby residents hike and bike the canal path, boaters might as well not even know Gates exists — just take a look at the Canalway map for boaters who use the Erie Canal, Swanton said. “It looks like a desert from Spencerport to the city,” Swanton said.

That’s why more should be done to boost the town’s profile as a canal town, she said, despite some very real physical impediments.

Although Swanton has criticized town leaders in the past about a lack of vision when it comes to canal use, Gates Supervisor Mark Assini said he is willing to listen.

Assini has jogged, ridden his bikes and walked the canal path. He, too, supports canal use and looks forward to cultivating its potential for recreational and possible commercial use.

Geography, however, is a real problem — and one that has hindered past efforts for improvements.

“The canal will not be an easy project, because much of the canal is 10 feet or more below the canal path in spots,” Assini said. Swanton, who also is a member of the executive board of the Gates-Chili Chamber of Commerce, acknowledges there is an “out of sight, out mind” problem — the trail is not easily seen by motorists.

The Canal Clean Sweep could change some minds. Last year, more than 80 groups participated statewide in the cleanup program, and the number of events has increased about 10 percent each year, said Wally Elton, project director of Parks and Trails New York in Albany. Monroe County has 10 such events planned as part of the program.

“That seems to indicate a growing level of awareness, and to keep it in good shape,” Elton said. “Part of the purpose is to focus attention on the canal and the canalway trail.”

More could be done to publicize that the path is even there, Swanton said. Businesses also could capitalize on the canal by adding bike racks to encourage potential customers to stop in, she said.

A master plan that looks at the canal area’s future growth could outline recreational opportunities and encourage public and private partnerships for improvements.

Swanton would like to see picnic tables along the path and all-weather kiosks that highlight local businesses. Also, a small pocket park at Lee Road could be expanded, she said. “You can’t keep saying this is it,” Swanton said. “You have to look ahead, and ask, ‘What do we want to have in the town of Gates?’”

A Gates resident who normally kayaks the canal waters stopped by the Lee Road parking area to scout the trail for biking. The woman, who declined to be named, said all that’s needed on Lee Road is attention and spring cleaning — and a garbage can that is regularly emptied of trash.

Assini said he is open to ideas, and to something reasonable being done. “I would entertain any ideas that residents or businesses alike have for bettering its use,” he said.