

Finish the Erie Canalway

The Erie Canalway Trail follows roughly the same route as the high-speed rail corridor the state wants to create between Buffalo and Albany. And it could provide the same kind of benefits, including boosting upstate's sorry economy by bringing multi-day bicycle tourists, recreational users and other visitors to it and through it. Now 75 percent complete, the 360-mile trail is already proving popular, but it won't be able to reach its full potential until the remaining gaps are filled. To finish the final 80 miles would cost \$50 million — a significant sum to be sure, but modest compared to building a high-speed rail system or even a highway.

There are six gaps in all, two of them in the Capital Region: a five-mile stretch between Cohoes and Watervliet, and a seven-mile stretch between Rotterdam Junction and Amsterdam. The main obstacle in the second case is a set of railroad tracks in Rotterdam Junction that must be tunneled through. The Canal Corp. had allocated \$6 million to do that, purchase rights of way along abandoned rail lines and pave the path, but in 2008, with the state budget crisis, it decided to use the money for canal projects.

Existing sections of the trail are heavily used. A survey last year of the Mohawk-Hudson bikehike path found 174,000 annual users, just over half of them bicyclists. And each summer, more than 500 bicyclists from around the state and beyond pedal the length of the canalway over eight days.

Bicycle tourists tend to be fairly affluent and will travel far for the right kind of experience. A report on the Canalway Trail, just released by the Canalway Trail Association of New York in collaboration with Parks & Trails New York, says that drawing 100,000 multi-day bicycle tourists annually (quite feasible considering that a similar trail in Missouri attracts 350,000 bicyclists per year) could contribute \$120 million per year to the upstate economy. Riders would sleep in local motels, inns and B&Bs, eat in local restaurants, shop at local stores, buy from local farmers.

No wonder there was such enthusiasm for the trail among local, regional and state officials, as well as the business community and nonprofits, at a roundtable called by Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand in September to discuss completing the section from Utica east.

The question, of course, with the state in such desperate shape, is where will the money come from? The federal government should be looked to first. This project should qualify for the new transportation TIGER grants, about \$600 million a year, but there is fierce competition for those dollars. To make the project more innovative and enhance its chances, the state should get Amtrak to ease restrictions on carrying bicycles on the train, which should attract many riders from New York City and elsewhere.

If the state has to undertake the project, it could finance it with a temporary half-cent-per-gallon surtax on gasoline. That could even encourage more bicycle riding, since bike sales and higher gas prices are related.