Time to complete the Canalway Trail

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Gazette Editorial

In his State of the State last week, Gov. Cuomo touted tourism as a key to boosting upstate’s economy. A good way to do that would be to get more visitors to come and ride the 365-mile Erie Canalway bike-hike trail that runs from Buffalo to Albany.

But it will be difficult until the few remaining gaps, including those between Amsterdam and Rotterdam Junction and Green Island and Watervliet, are filled in. The governor should commit to making that happen.

The trail’s economic development potential was recognized last month when the nonprofit group Parks & Trails New York received an $80,000 Regional Economic Development Council grant. The money will be used for an extensive marketing campaign to promote the Canalway through a website, print and online advertising, a promotional video, a presence at trade shows and trip planning assistance.

And there is much to promote. Along with some magnificent scenery and waterfront riding, the Canalway features charming villages, museums, historic attractions, and canalside parks. It’s the kind of resource that brings large numbers of cycle tourists on multi-day trips to Europe and elsewhere in this country, and could to New York as well.

A report done by Park & Trails in 2010 found that drawing 100,000 multi-day bicycle tourists annually (quite feasible considering that similar trails in Missouri and Pennsylvania draw 350,000 and 200,000, respectively) could contribute $30 million a year to the upstate economy.

The problem is those gaps. Although the trail is now 80 percent complete, cycle tourists will be deterred as long as they must get off and ride on local roads with traffic for miles at a time.
The gaps have now all been identified and plans for closing them developed. What’s lacking is funding, an estimated $50 million, which sounds like a lot but represents just a few miles of multi-lane highway. And it doesn’t have to be all at once; the work could be done over three, four or five years — as long as it’s done.

One possible funding source is the federal government. Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand has held press conferences and roundtables to advocate for closing the gaps. Let her do more than talk: Let her deliver some money.

Another avenue might be through the regional economic development council process, which would become more likely if all the regions along the Canalway with a gap made closing it a priority project in their annual plan.

Finally, if all else fails, a temporary one-half-cent increase in the gas tax, until the gaps were filled, would do the trick.