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Trail makes economic sense

By **ROBIN DROPKIN**

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Henry Miller's recent call ("Recognizing New York's finest," Perspective, Jan. 11) to refocus statewide economic development efforts around demonstrated strengths with unrealized potential, including tourism, is most welcome. His mention of the historic Erie Canal as perhaps our most "wasted tourism resource" is absolutely right. A key element of the canal's promise is a proven public investment: the Erie Canalway Trail.

The 260 miles of this multi-use trail along the historic waterway now in place (out of an eventual 366 miles between Buffalo and Albany) already are bringing new economic vitality to canal towns across the state along with public health and quality of life benefits to more than a million New Yorkers.

The trail also is well on its way to becoming a world class international bicycle tourism destination. Parks & Trails New York's annual Cycling the Erie Canal tour fills to capacity with 500 riders, two-thirds of whom come from outside the state.

Our printed guide to the trail has been purchased by people from all 50 states and countries as far away as Australia. Trail user counts in western New York indicate that in some locations use approaches 200,000 people annually.

Informal surveys have found that bicycle tourists from outside the immediate area spend up to \$250 a person a day. Thus just one party of six spending 10 days on the trail would bring an infusion of up to \$15,000 into upstate businesses and communities.

But to achieve its full appeal and potential, the trail must be completed. There are six "shovel-ready" projects that will bring the Erie Canalway Trail within 64 miles of completion. For two of them, the state already has in hand federal funds to cover almost 90 percent of the cost of construction.

In difficult economic times, it is especially important to invest in a brighter future for upstate communities. We can and should "close the gaps" by finding the relatively modest resources needed to finish the job.

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