

## Environmental Update

August 2009

### A Brief Reflection on Upstate New York's Environment

This month's Environmental Update will be a departure from my regular column. Instead of examining recent decisional law or legislation impacting the environment, I've decided to write a short reflection on upstate New York's environment and history and what it means to me as an environmental professional.

What spurred this creative urge? Time away from my law office, of course. Last week, I was one of 500 riders on the 11<sup>th</sup> annual Cycling the Erie Canal. Organized by Park & Trails New York, a non-profit organization working statewide to protect New York's parks and trails, Cycling the Erie Canal is a 400 mile bicycle trip from Buffalo to Albany. Cycling primarily on bike trails along and near the Erie Canal and connected waterways like the Mohawk River, the trip also took us through the heart of central New York, along country roads and into the many small villages and towns along the way. Despite eight long days of biking, six nights of camping and a few minor bruises, I've returned to Albany with a new appreciation of the amazing state in which we live.

One of the first things to strike me as we started the ride out of Buffalo is how different things look and feel when traveling at 10 to 15 miles an hour rather than racing along the NYS Thruway at 65 mph (well, maybe 75 mph). At this speed, the beauty of the Canal, the trees, the farms and the rolling hills suddenly emerge in full bloom. Without the buzz of my car's engine, the blowing of the air conditioner and the noise of the car radio, I could actually smell, hear and see what was around me. And what I found was that there is vast natural world that I whiz by day in and day out.

Of course, we all know that New York is a beautiful state with many, many natural wonders. However, in our rush to live our daily lives – driving to work, driving the kids from one event to another, traveling by car or plane from home to some distant location for vacation – most of us rarely have – or take -- the time to really look and appreciate this wonderful resource. It is out there but only when we take the time – really take the time - to find it.

The other great treat while cycling across New York was that I got a first hand glimpse of those many of the towns and villages which were, prior to the trip, simply a name on an exit sign on the Thruway. What I discovered was that there are many, many small communities along or near the Canal which are rich in historical significance and beauty. Many of these places first grew up around the economic activity generated by the Canal itself. Fortunately, some have been able to convert these former canal hubs into Erie Canal museums, celebrating the history of the Canal and their community's role in it. I was happily surprised by the abundance of information, artifacts, photos, books and other memorabilia that is available at these places.

Sadly, many communities filled in the Canal after the rise of the railroads and the decline in the use of this water route. For example, the Erie Canal Museum in Syracuse is located smack in the middle of downtown (where there is no canal or flowing water in sight). Indeed, we cycled on more Erie Boulevards than one can possibly imagine.

In addition to their connection to the Canal, these communities played a role in our national history. We traveled to Seneca Falls and learned of the important role it played in the Woman's Suffrage Movement. In Rome, we camped at the Fort Stanwix National Monument which played a significant role in the French and Indian War, the American Revolution and was the site of treaty negotiations between the United States and the American Indian Six Nation Confederacy.

Of course, many of these small communities along the Central New York corridor are experiencing difficult economic times. Many are typical, post-industrial towns, some with closed store fronts on Main Street and abandoned former industrial or manufacturing facilities along the waterfronts. (I even passed a few of the Brownfield projects I've worked on in the past couple of years). Despite this, these communities are filled with wonderfully generous and friendly people. Indeed, numerous villages set up their own water and food stops just for us cyclists. Several even opened up their Main Street shops at odd times just to accommodate us.

This trip also gave me the opportunity to reflect -- as an environmental professional for over 20 years -- on what these remarkable sites and resources mean to me. Cycling the Erie Canal not only gave me a much deeper understanding of what is at stake but also a stark reminder as to why I do what I do. It is clearer than ever before that, whether one works for a government, an environmental group or represents clients in private environmental matters, I think we can agree that we care deeply about New York's natural wonders. Though there are many views as to the proper scope of environmental controls and stewardship, there is no question that it is in our collective interest to preserve and protect these amazing natural resources along the Erie Canal. We also need to work hard (either with our tourist dollars and/or as environmental professionals) on behalf of these small but vibrant communities to help them revitalize their downtowns and cleanup and redevelop their abandoned industrial properties. Finally, Cycling the Erie Canal has reaffirmed for me that my work as an environmental attorney has had and, I hope, will continue to have real meaning and positive purpose.