

Closing the Gaps: A Progress Report on the Erie Canalway Trail 2010

Prepared by:

Canalway Trails Association New York
in collaboration with
Parks & Trails New York



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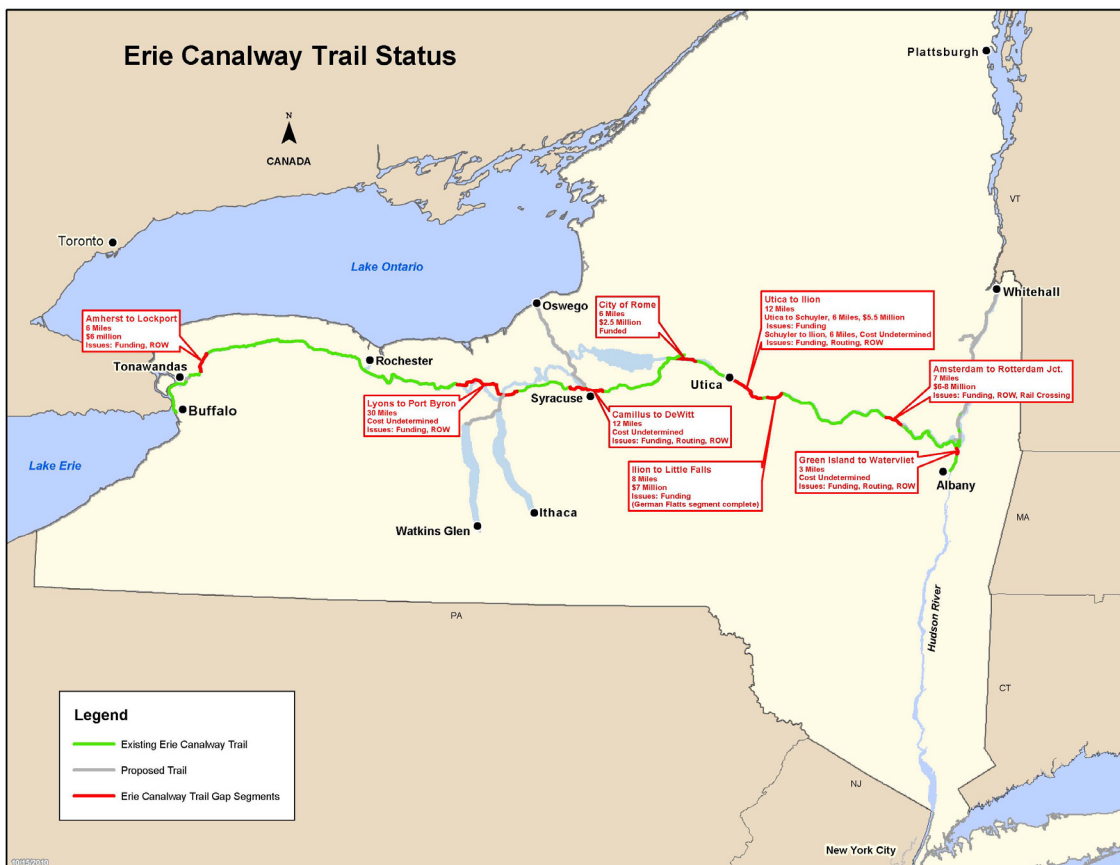
Executive Summary

Extending 366 miles across New York, the Erie Canalway Trail brings important economic, public health, tourism, and quality of life benefits to more than one million New Yorkers living in upstate canal communities. The Erie Canalway Trail is 75% complete and on its way to becoming a premiere tourist destination for cyclists and other outdoor enthusiasts.

However, the Canalway Trail cannot realize its full potential as a world-class tourism destination until it is finished from Buffalo to Albany as a continuous off-road trail. Only by closing the six significant remaining gaps will the State and the communities along the corridor reap the full benefit of additional tourism dollars.

Although no new trail construction occurred in 2010, three major projects to be undertaken by the New York State Canal Corporation will close or narrow existing gaps in the trail in the near future moved toward construction. Nevertheless, in several places across the state, efforts to complete the trail remain stymied by one or more factors, including lack of funding, no identified route, the need to acquire a right-of-way, physical obstacles, and lack of local support. A current cost estimate for closing all gaps is approximately \$50 million.

A top priority for 2011 will be to bring various stakeholders together regionally to identify and pursue opportunities for completing trail segments that are ready to build except for the needed construction funding. At the same time, we must work at a more local level to resolve other obstacles to finishing the trail where they exist.



Summary of Trail Gaps

Location	Length (mi.)	Issues/Status	Impact	Est. Cost
Amherst to Lockport	6	Funding, ROW Final design report & advance detail plans complete	Create nearly 125 mi. continuous trail	\$6 million
Lyons to Port Byron	30	Funding, route, ROW	Create about 150 mi. continuous trail	Undetermined
Camillus to DeWitt	12	Funding, route/corridor through the City of Syracuse	Connect trail through Syracuse; remove route from streets	Undetermined
Utica to Little Falls	20	Funding, ROW, wetlands, cross CSX line	Create nearly 50 mi. continuous trail in Central NY	\$17.5 million
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (Utica-Schuyler) 	(6)	(Funding only; Final Design Report & Final Plans complete.)		(\$5.5 million)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (Schuyler-Ilion) 	(6)	(Funding, ROW, wetlands, cross CSX line)		(\$5 million)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (Ilion-Little Falls) 	(8)	(Funding only; 2-mile German Flats section open; Final Design Report & Final Plans complete.)		(\$7 million)
Amsterdam to Rotterdam Jct.	7	Funding, incl. bridge rehabs; ROW; cross Guilford RR line; easternmost part just needs funding	Connect completed sections on either side	\$6-8 million
Cohoes-Green Island-Watervliet	4.5 - 5	Funding, route, ROW, local support	Connect Niskayuna/Colonie to Corning Preserve in Albany	Undetermined

The identified costs statewide, therefore, total approximately \$35 million. An estimate to include the undetermined sections is approximately \$50 million.

Purpose of this Report

The idea of constructing a multi-use trail along the length of the Erie Canal corridor has been around for nearly 40 years. Today that trail is about 75% complete as an off-road path paralleling the current or historic route of the canal. When finished, it will bring important economic, public health, tourism, and quality of life benefits to more than one million New Yorkers living in upstate canal communities.

Progress on the remaining 25% has continued, but at a relatively modest pace. We believe that the trail is destined to become a premier international tourist destination for cyclists. But to achieve its potential, it is essential that it be complete.

In order to focus attention on the need to complete the trail, the Canalway Trails Association New York (CTANY), with assistance from Parks & Trails New York (PTNY), has prepared this annual end-of-season report to update canal corridor communities on recent progress and the current trail status.

Today's Gaps and Challenges

In late 2010, there are six uncompleted gaps in the Erie Canalway Trail, totaling approximately 80 miles (please see the table in the executive summary). Several kinds of issues contribute to delay in “closing the gaps,” including:

- **Lack of funding.** Funding is needed for corridor purchase and/or design and construction. Currently, there are gaps for which construction funding is the *only* barrier to moving forward.
- **No defined route/corridor.** Over the years, parts of the canal have been relocated and the historic structure, including towpath, has been lost to other development. In these cases, alternative trail routes, such as abandoned railroad beds, must be found. In some areas, there may be no existing corridor, requiring negotiation with multiple landowners or obtaining agreements for safe on-road connections.
- **Need to acquire right of way (ROW).** To secure an alternative route, a purchase agreement or long-term easement or lease must be negotiated.
- **Obstacles.** There may be generally good corridor options within which there are specific obstacles (e.g., a need to cross an active rail line or a major highway), requiring a search for solutions (and often more funding).
- **Lack of local support.** There can be a lack of interest by elected leaders or no local advocate to maintain interest and support.

Progress in closing the gaps is achieved by addressing the specific issues in each location.

Progress in 2010

Some significant steps forward have been taken in 2010 despite the struggling economy.

New segments. Although no new trail construction took place on the Erie Canalway Trail this year, progress was made on funding for two segments and securing a corridor in another location that will enable closing those gaps in the future:

1. **Newark to Lyons.** The Town of Lyons previously received a federal Transportation Enhancements Program (TEP) grant of approximately \$1 million dollars to extend the trail eastward from Newark to Lyons. Earlier this year the Wayne County Board of Supervisors voted to provide the remaining cash match needed to allow this project to proceed. **Construction should begin in the next two years.**
2. **Rome.** In 2005 state voters approved the Rebuild and Renew New York Transportation Bond Act to fund a number of transportation projects, including this piece of the Erie Canalway Trail to be constructed by the Canal Corporation. For various reasons, including the state's fiscal crisis, these funds had not been released for expenditure. Over the past two years, CTANY and PTNY have pushed for release of these funds. This year that finally happened. **Construction by the Canal Corporation to close this gap should start in approximately two years.**
3. **Amsterdam to Rotterdam Junction.** Earlier this year OPRHP was able to purchase from CSX an abandoned railroad corridor that will eventually allow filling in most of this gap. OPRHP also plans to apply for construction funding during the next TEP round for the portion between Amsterdam and Lock 10.

Promotion/visibility. CTANY and PTNY also work with various state agencies to focus the attention of residents and elected leaders on the importance of completing the trail. Three significant events occurred in this regard during 2010.

1. **Senator Gillibrand interest/roundtable.** Thanks to a meeting with PTNY staff earlier in the year, Senator Kirsten Gillibrand's office decided to call a "Closing the Gaps" Roundtable, in partnership with PTNY and the Canal Corporation, to solicit ideas for completing the section of trail between Utica and Albany. Held on September 16 in Canajoharie, this meeting drew an enthusiastic group representing counties, municipalities, MPO's, state agencies, nonprofit organizations, and businesses. The group discussed their perspectives on the importance of completing the trail and possible ways to succeed. Some points of consensus:
 - The trail must be finished. One county described it as their top economic development priority.
 - There is reason for optimism about finding the funding to do so. The cost is small compared to many highway and bridge projects.
 - Municipalities/counties should jointly apply for funding rather than competing against each other.
 - We need to sell the trail as an "upstate solution" for economic development.

A discussion of follow-up steps will take place soon. We also hope that additional roundtable discussions will ensue focused on other parts of the corridor.

2. **Mighty Waters Task Force.** In an effort to further his support for completing a “green corridor” across the state that includes high-speed rail, water transportation (the canal) and biking/walking, Congressman Paul Tonko sponsored a “Mighty Waters Task Force” in Schenectady on August 9. The purpose of the task force is to help create a climate of investment, recovery, preservation, and public awareness for the waterways and communities of the upper Hudson and Mohawk Rivers and Erie Canal by bringing together representatives of the public and private sector who are involved with the business, government and environment of the region. The forum concluded with the recognition of a need for the region to work together, have a greater appreciation of its assets, and a vision and affordable plan, based on the area’s strengths, grassroots involvement, and private sector services.

3. **Mohawk-Erie Multimodal Transportation Corridor Study**
PTNY was invited to join the Corridor-wide Project Advisory Committee for a multimodal transportation analysis of the Mohawk-Erie corridor launched in September by the New York State Department of Transportation, the New York State Thruway Authority and the Canal Corporation. The goal of the effort is to create a transportation vision for the future that supports a thriving economy and livable communities and identify strategic investments that can achieve that vision. As bicycle facilities such as the Canalway Trail are considered one of the corridor’s transportation assets, PTNY advocated strongly for completion of the Canalway Trail as a cost effective addition to the corridor’s transportation system that would reap health, economic, and quality of life benefits for everyone.

Focus for 2011

The trail ultimately will be completed through the efforts of multiple individuals and communities continually working to address specific needs in particular places, with progress made each year. Below are some steps we believe should happen in 2011. CTANY, with assistance from PTNY, will focus on these in the year ahead.

1. Monitor progress on preparing for construction for the recently-funded Newark-Lyons and Rome projects so that construction by the Town of Arcadia and the Canal Corporation, respectively, can begin as soon as possible.
2. Ensure applications for TEP funding (the next round of grants is expected in the spring) are submitted by coalitions of communities for building new trail segments where funding is the only barrier to construction, as well as by OPRHP for the Amsterdam to Lock 10 segment.
3. Where gaps have other issues to be resolved in addition to funding, foster communications between the appropriate parties to resolve these issues so the projects are ready to go when funding becomes available in the future.
4. Work with Senator Gillibrand’s office to hold other “Closing the Gaps” Roundtables in central and western New York and ensure that follow-up meetings are held at the appropriate time to discuss action steps.
5. Meet with local legislators and Congressional representatives to emphasize importance of trail completion to upstate economic development and discuss options for securing funding through the Empire State Development Corporation.

Trail Background

The Erie Canalway Trail, stretching across the state between Buffalo and Albany, is the central element of an envisioned Canalway Trail System that also will include the Champlain, Cayuga-Seneca and Oswego Canalway Trails and total more than 500 miles. It also will serve as the backbone of an emerging network of similar trails reaching into all parts of the state.

Trail History. Some canal communities, seeking new ways to benefit from the canal that had lost most of its commercial traffic, began building local trails on remnants of the old towpath as early as the 1960's. The first public expression of the Canalway Trail concept came with the release of the NYS Canal Recreation Development Plan in the early 1970's. Soon thereafter, the Office of Parks and Recreation (today the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation) and the NYS Department of Transportation entered into a formal agreement for joint development of the 524-mile long canal system for recreational purposes. Many sections of the Canalway Trail were constructed over the next two decades. More sections have been constructed by the Canal Corporation over the years since then.

The Trail, Bicycle Tourism and Economic Development

In this era of email and tweets, many Americans seek escape from their fast-paced daily lives through a slower, more active style of vacation: bicycling. Nearly 30 million Americans have taken a bicycling vacation in the past five years. International tourists in particular have a strong interest in bicycling. Not surprisingly, towns across the state desire to tap into this expanding bicycle tourism market. Who are these bicycle tourists? First, they are potential customers who can bring new money into communities. Research also has shown that:

- They typically are well-educated, older adults from upper-income households with higher than average discretionary income.
- They seek trips up to seven days long and typically ride 30 to 50 miles per day, which may include a mix of trail and on-road riding.
- They will take time to explore communities they visit and enjoy what makes them unique. They like to visit museums, discover unusual shops, tour wineries and farms, browse art galleries, and sample local restaurants.
- They will spend money! Those on longer (multi-day) trips and who come from farther away tend to spend the most – up to \$300 per day.

What is possible? Missouri's 225-mile Katy Trail, one of the oldest multi-use trails, draws 350,000 bicyclists annually. The Erie Canalway Trail has the name recognition and drawing power to exceed that figure. If 100,000 visitors take multi-day trips, the potential economic benefit is \$30 million.

About the Canalway Trails Association New York (CTANY)

CTANY is an all-volunteer organization that works both statewide and locally with citizens, state agencies and municipalities to develop the Erie Canalway Trail as a world-class multi-use recreational trail and international bicycle tourism destination. In partnership with the NYS Canal Corporation and others, it encourages the proper maintenance of the trail by coordinating the Adopt-a-Trail Program. For more information visit www.ptny.org/canalway/ctany.shtml or call 518-434-1583.

Who Else is on the Trail?

Municipalities and counties through which the Canalway Trail passes have important roles to play in completing and maintaining the trail, as do the following statewide organizations and agencies:

Parks & Trails New York works statewide to expand, protect and promote a network of parks, trails and open space for the use and enjoyment of all. It also advocates for completion of the Canalway Trail System and promotes the trail through events, including its annual Cycling the Erie Canal bike tour and Bicyclists Bring Business community roundtables. In addition, it supports the Canalway Trails Association New York in managing the Adopt-a-Trail Program. www.ptny.org

The **New York State Canal Corporation** operates, maintains and promotes the NYS Canal System and owns and manages approximately one-third of the Erie Canalway Trail. The Canal Corporation is a subsidiary of the NYS Thruway Authority. www.canals.ny.gov

The **Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor**, in partnership with the National Park Service, collaborates with communities and organizations to preserve and interpret the nationally significant heritage of New York's canal system, invite visitors to explore what makes the Corridor unique, and ensure a vibrant future for the 2.7 million people who call the Corridor home. The National Heritage Corridor extends across the expanse of upstate New York and includes the present day canal system along with its historic alignments. www.eriecanalway.org

The **New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation** manages and protects the state's system of state parks and historic sites and also is charged with coordinating and developing a statewide trails plan. OPRHP owns approximately one-third of the Erie Canalway Trail corridor, including Old Erie Canal State Park, in the central portion of the route. In some cases, the agency contracts with counties to maintain the trail.