

Bicyclists Bring Business Roundtable



Final Report 2011

Prepared by Parks & Trails New York

for the

New York State Canal Corporation

Background

Each year, more and more cyclists are choosing to take vacations in Upstate New York, many because of a desire to experience the Canalway Trail either for a trip of several days or a short ride of only a day or less. Studies consistently show that bicycle and other outdoor tourists come from high-income households, typically spend between \$100 and \$300 per day, and will travel significant distances to regions offering a good mix of cycling, attractions, and services. The Canalway Trail Corridor has all the right ingredients to become an international bicycle touring destination: a premier off-road trail, peaceful country roads with wide shoulders, picturesque villages, impressive historic sites and museums, charming B&B's and inns, ample campgrounds, and country stores and farm stands.

Program Goal

The goal of the program is to help local business people, elected and tourism officials, and citizens discover what services and amenities make a difference to bicyclists when choosing a touring destination so that they can better attract and profit from the growing bicycle tourism market.

Roundtable Location

Parks & Trails New York and the New York State Canal Corporation presented a free roundtable entitled "Bicyclists Bring Business" on October 27, 2011 at the Knights Inn in the Mohawk Valley city of Little Falls. Little Falls was chosen because it is located at the western end of a more than 40-mile unbroken stretch of trail and because of the community's renewed interest in completing the trail from Little Falls west to Utica and finding additional ways to attract tourists.

The roundtable was held from 6-8 p.m. so business owners could attend on their way home from work. More than 50 persons participated in the event.

After light refreshments and introductions, NYS Canal Corporation Trails Director John Dimura began the roundtable with a power point presentation designed to review accomplishments and ongoing work along the Erie Canalway Trail, including efforts to repair the damage sustained from Hurricane Irene and Tropical Storm Lee. Subsequently, Parks & Trails New York Executive Director Robin Dropkin presented multiple images of other bicycle-friendly communities and cited statistics that substantiated the impact of bicycle tourism on local economies. Photos from her visits to the Le P'tit Train du Nord in Quebec and the Katy Trail in Missouri illustrated how trail-side communities have created programs and developed infrastructure to cater to the bicycling tourist.

Following the power point presentations, participants were encouraged to ask questions and offer ideas on how to attract additional cycling tourists. Cycling club members had some good suggestions as did persons who had been in Little Falls since their boats were stranded after the storm. (See Appendix A for a summary of those comments). Participants were also encouraged to contact Parks & Trails New York if they had further questions or needed additional assistance in encouraging bicycle tourism. Everyone present received a copy of Parks & Trails New York's *Bicyclists Bring Business: A Guide for Attracting Bicyclists to New York's Canal Communities*.

Roundtable Summaries

After the roundtable, participants were sent a summary of the comments from the discussion session either by email or by post. Participants who registered for a roundtable but did not attend also received a copy of the summaries. A summary of the 2011 roundtable comments was also posted on the Parks & Trails New York website.

Publicity

CARE assisted PTNY in publicizing the event by emailing an invitation letter and flyer to a comprehensive list of clubs, shopkeepers, associations and local governments in the Little Falls area. CARE asked that these groups in turn send the information out to their members and mailing lists. CARE also placed flyers in public spaces around area business centers and hand delivered others. Nearer the date of the event they sent email reminders.

PTNY also sent the invitation to area state and national legislators and bike shops, B&Bs and inns not included on CARE's distribution list. The majority of persons were contacted by email but letters were sent to those without email addresses.

A press release was sent to Mohawk Valley, Little Falls, and Utica newspapers and television and radio stations. Prior to the event an article appeared in the *NY Outdoors Blog* and the *Utica Observer-Dispatch*. Articles announcing the roundtables were also included in *Canal Alerts* and Parks & Trails New York's monthly electronic newsletter, *Parks & Trails E-News*.

After the event, stories appeared in the *Little Falls Times*, Montgomery County's *Courier-Standard-Enterprise*, and *Parks & Trails E-News*.

APPENDIX A



Bicyclists Bring Business Roundtable Knight's Inn Little Falls, NY October 27, 2011



Parks & Trails New York and the New York State Canal Corporation held its tenth Bicyclists Bring Business Roundtable on October 27 in Little Falls.

While the eight mile gap in the Canalway Trail to the west of Little Falls was noted as a deterrent to some cyclists, much of the discussion focused on how best to meet the unique needs of cycling tourists while also enhancing their visit. Readily available information on lodging, rest facilities, and parking were among some of the factors noted as being essential. Attendees offered the following specific ideas to promote bicycling and the region to cycling tourists.

Information needs of cycling tourists

- Bicycle tourists have different needs than Car Tourists. They need advanced info, often following published tours such as those found in *Adventure Cyclist* magazine.
- The availability of emergency information for cycling tourists is crucial.
- Would a smart phone app be a good way to share information with cyclists?

Other needs of cyclists

- Parking - Designated parking for trail users would help them feel more welcome. There may be some already in the community but it needs to be advertised.
- Campsites - Is 30mi campsite separation effective? It may be too long for cyclists with children and too short for those wishing to travel further in a day. John Dimura from Canal Corp stated that they are placing them where they can.
- Cyclist friendly infrastructure (bike lanes, bike racks) encourages cyclists. The City of Little Falls is working on bike lane designation on bridge.
- Good trail conditions - the surface on the Mindenville segment was mentioned as being too soft to the point that it's deterring use.

Tips for marketing the trail

- Stories of a bike trip are the selling point. Consider interpretation as a way to share your community's story with your visitors.
- A trail notebook in restaurants/lodging is a good way to capture traveler's stories.
- Cyclist guests are interesting in the local culture such as the history, restaurants and cuisine, and the roots of local place names.

- Availability of a bike shuttle would be an asset.
- What about forming a Canalway Trail Chamber of Commerce? CanalNY (<http://www.canalny.com/>) was mentioned as a possibility that already exists, but others mentioned that its focus is more on boating than biking
- What about using AAA for promotion? AAA has promoted a Little Falls bike/boat package in their regional magazine. A group has already visited the area and stayed at local B&Bs.
- Place an ad in *Adventure Cycling*
 - Ad could be sponsored jointly by a number of businesses in a section of trail
 - Has the Canal Corp and PTNY considered an ad? Cost is significant. Is there any I Love NY funding available to assist with this?
- A welcome map of the community, based on a walkable/bikeable scale is important PR piece to offer to trail users. There may be some information catering to boaters that can be used as a base to develop these materials.

Complete the Trail to the west of Little Falls

- A Facebook group has been formed to help coordinate efforts. It can be found by searching CNY Erie Canalway Trailblazers or directly at <http://www.facebook.com/groups/302993713049842/>
- The connectivity of the trail is vital. Right now Little Falls is an endpoint and doesn't entice the cyclists into the city.
- Canal Corp is submitting a TIGER III grant application to apply for funding to bridge some of the gaps in the Canalway Trail. Support letters from local elected officials would help the application.
- Upcoming dates for local Close the Gaps meetings. 11/9 Ilion. 11/15 at the Rome City Chambers