

Closing the Gaps: A Progress Report on the Erie Canalway Trail 2013

Prepared by:

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in collaboration with
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Executive Summary

Extending 360 miles across New York, the Erie Canalway Trail brings important economic, public health, tourism, and quality of life benefits to more than 3.7 million New Yorkers living within the 14 counties where the trail is located. With 277 miles now open to the public, the Erie Canalway Trail is 77% complete and on its way to becoming the longest, continuous intrastate multi-use trail in the nation and a world-class destination for cyclists and other outdoor enthusiasts.

However, the Canalway Trail can neither realize its full potential as an internationally known tourism destination nor offer maximum economic and quality of life benefits to the more than 200 communities along its length until it is finished from Buffalo to Albany as a continuous off-road trail.

Since Parks & Trails New York (PTNY) and the Canalway Trails Association New York (CTANY) launched their “Closing the Gaps Campaign” in 2010 in conjunction with U.S. Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, interest in completing the Erie Canalway Trail among citizens, community leaders, and local, state and federal government officials has reached an all-time high.

- Seven miles of trail were constructed, six miles between Newark and Lyons in Wayne County and one mile in the City of Little Falls.
- Construction will begin on 14 miles of trail in 2014. The most significant project will be the eight-mile gap between Amherst and Lockport, which, when complete will result in more than 134 miles of continuous off-road trail in western New York.
- The Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council completed its study and presented a

CTANY and PTNY are committed to vigorously advocating to “Close the Gaps” in the Erie Canalway Trail so that the full quality of life, economic, and health and tourism benefits of the trail can be realized. There still is much work to do: 83 miles of trail are still unfinished, federal transportation funding for trails has shrunk, budgets are tight at all levels of government, and, in several locations, right-of-way issues still present challenges to defining or developing a trail route.



Summary of Trail Gaps

Location	Length (mi.)	Issues/Status	Impact	Est. Cost	Timeline
Amherst to Lockport	8	Funding, ROW Final design report & advance detail plans complete	~134 miles of continuous trail from Buffalo to Lyons	\$4.6 million	2014 WORK TO BEGIN
Lyons to Port Byron	24	Funding, route, ROW	~180 miles of continuous trail from Buffalo to Camillus	\$6.2 million	
Camillus to DeWitt	14	Funding, route/corridor through the City of Syracuse	Connects trail through Syracuse; removes route from streets	\$ 4.1 million	2013 STUDY PHASE I COMPLETED
Rome	5	Design being finalized; 2005 Bond Act and Canal Greenway grant funding	50 miles of continuous trail between Dewitt and Utica	\$3 million	2014 WORK TO BEGIN
Utica to Little Falls	19	Funding, ROW, wetlands, cross CSX line	~50 miles of continuous trail in Central NY	\$13.1million	
• (Utica-Schuyler)	6	(Funding only; Final Design Report & advance detail Plans complete.)		\$5 million	
• (Schuyler-Ilion)	6	(Funding, ROW, wetlands, cross CSX line)		\$2.7 million	
• (Ilion-Little Falls)	7	(Funding, ROW, 2-mile German Flats section open; Final Design Report & Final Plans complete.)		\$5.4 million	2013 1 MILE IN LITTLE FALLS COMPLETED

Location	Length (mi.)	Issues/Status	Impact	Est. Cost	Timeline
Amsterdam to Rotterdam Junction	8	Funding, including bridge rehabs; ROW; cross Pan-American RR line; westernmost part only needs funding	Connects completed sections on either side	\$7 million	
Cohoes-Green Island-Watervliet	5	Funding, route, ROW, local support	Connect Niskayuna/Colonie to Corning Preserve in Albany	Undetermined	
TOTAL	83			\$38 million	

Purpose of this Report

The idea of constructing a multi-use trail along the length of the Erie Canal corridor has existed for nearly 40 years. Today the trail is 77% complete as an off-road path primarily paralleling the current or historic route of the canal. When finished, it will not only bring important economic, public health, tourism, active transportation, and quality of life benefits to more than 3.7 million New Yorkers living within the 14 counties where the trail is located but it will also become a premier international tourist destination for cyclists and other outdoor enthusiasts.

However, to achieve its full potential for visitors and residents, it is essential that the trail be complete. The NYS Canal Corporation estimates that closing the remaining major gaps will result in an increase of 500,000 trail users annually.¹

In order to focus attention on the need to complete the remaining miles of trail, the Canalway Trails Association New York (CTANY), in collaboration with Parks & Trails New York (PTNY), has prepared this fourth annual report to update canal corridor communities on recent progress and the current trail status and underscore the need for the resources and political support necessary to ensure the Erie Canalway Trail is quickly finished.

¹ New York State Canal Corporation, TIGER III Discretionary Grant Application 2011, Table IV-e Total Annual Community Demand by Trail Segment. P. 19

2013 Accomplishments

Trail completion

- **Newark to Lyons – 6 miles**

Construction was completed on five miles of trail between Newark and Lyons in Wayne County, funded primarily with federal Transportation Enhancement Program monies. The project was a joint effort of the NYS Canal Corporation, Village of Newark, and towns of Arcadia and Lyons. Formal opening took place in the fall of 2013.

An additional mile of new 10-foot wide asphalt trail and directional signage were completed in the Village of Lyons between Abbey Park and Erie Canal Lock 27. The project was funded by the NYS Canal Corporation in partnership with Wayne County and the Village of Lyons.

- **City of Little Falls – 1 mile**

Construction was completed on a one-mile segment of new asphalt trail in the City of Little Falls in Herkimer County, resulting in 40 miles of continuous trail from Little Falls to Amsterdam. The project, which also included a small bridge and directional signage, was undertaken with Canal Corporation funds in partnership with the NYS Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation, Herkimer County, and the City of Little Falls.

Trail construction

- **Amherst to Lockport - 8 miles**

Preliminary design work was completed in 2013 in preparation for this long-awaited eight-mile segment of Erie Canalway Trail to go out to bid in 2014. Construction will begin in late 2014. The trail is scheduled to open to the public in the fall of 2015.

The project, which is being developed with Canal Corporation funds, will include a 10-foot wide asphalt trail between the Amherst Museum in Erie County and Prospect Street in Niagara County in the City of Lockport along with a pedestrian bridge over Tonawanda Creek, trailhead parking, and information signs. Directional signage will be provided to establish an on-street link from Prospect Street to Erie Canal Locks 34 and 35.

When complete, this project will close one of the six key gaps in the trail and, when combined with the trail completed in 2013 between Newark and Lyons in Wayne County, will create more than 134 continuous miles of trail between the City of Buffalo in Erie County and the Village of Lyons in Wayne County.

- **City of Rome – 5 miles**

The NYS Canal Corporation completed the design for approximately three miles of trail in the Oneida County City of Rome between the Gryziec Field parking area and the trailhead at Rome-Oriskany Road in Stanwix. The project, funded by the 2005 NYS Transportation Bond Act, went out to bid in late 2013 and is planned for completion in 2014.

The City of Rome was awarded a 2011 \$50,000 Consolidated Funding Application (CFA) Canal Greenway grant to construct an additional two miles of on- and off-road trail between Old Erie Canal State Park and the Gryziec Field parking area. An existing section of Old Erie Canal towpath will be rehabilitated between Erie Canal Village and South Charles Street in the spring of 2014. For the section of trail between South Charles Street and Gryziec Field, multiple options are being considered including a possible in-city route and a scenic off-road section between South Charles Street and Muck Road.

Completion of this two-mile trail section in 2014, along with the three-mile section already under development in 2014 will result in more than 50 miles of continuous trail between the Onondaga County town of Dewitt and the City of Utica.

- **City of Schenectady – 1.3 miles**

Schenectady County prepared for construction of 1.3 miles of trail as part of a major private-public waterfront development at the site of the former American Locomotive Company in the City of Schenectady. Design began in 2013 with construction planned for 2014. When complete, almost all the trail will be safely off-road within the city limits. The project is funded in part by a \$140,000 2011 CFA Canal Greenway Grant.

Funding awards

- **CFA Canal Greenway Grants**

The City of North Tonawanda in Erie County was awarded \$144,707 to design and construct a pedestrian/bicycle path along the Erie Canal connecting Mayor’s Park with the terminus of the existing path at the intersection of Payne Avenue and Sweeney Street, adding approximately 1.1 miles of publicly accessible waterfront trail.

Definition of a trail route

City of Syracuse

The Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council (SMTC) completed the *Erie Canalway Trail - Syracuse Connector Route Project Part One* in 2013 on behalf of the City of Syracuse. The project was designed to leverage the renewed interest in completing the “Syracuse segment” of the Canalway Trail and reinitiated discussions to develop an implementation plan for completing the Erie Canalway Trail through the SMTC Metropolitan Planning Area (MPA).

Part I examined three existing unsigned, on-road Erie Canalway Trail routes to determine if alternate roads and/or improvements could be made to develop a short-term on-road, signed route that will be utilized until a permanent off-road route is developed and put into place. A preferred route with suggested on-road bike treatments and pedestrian options was prepared based on extensive public input and examination of existing routes. The NYS Canal Corporation will help to blaze the route by providing “To the Canalway Trail” signs.

Identification in regional economic development plans

- **Mohawk Valley**

Completion of the Erie Canalway Trail from Rome to Amsterdam was identified in the Mohawk Valley Regional Economic Development Council's 2011 Strategic Plan as a key regional initiative that would unify and establish a new identity for the region, build an innovation economy, and make its waterfront areas attractive gathering points. The Council's desire to establish a regional source of funds to address waterfront development, connectivity and the Canalway Trail are elements of this effort.

The plan proposes an investment of \$25.5 million, to be funded as a State project through NYSDOT or through other financing measures (e.g., fractional increase in statewide bed tax, or proceeds from gaming receipts to support key investments to boost the state's tourism attractions).²

- **Lyons to Port Byron**

The Finger Lakes Regional Economic Development Council identified extension of the Erie Canalway Trail between Lyons and Port Byron as another priority project consistent with its strategic goals that the council will, when appropriate, pursue and develop over the next five years.³

Local support

- **“Closing the Gaps” continues to garner corridor-wide recognition**

A growing number of elected officials, businesses owners, and Canalway Trail community residents are using the term “Closing the Gaps” while noting that completion of the trail is vital to their economic interests. Continued media attention has helped more people appreciate how completing the Canalway Trail can improve the state's economy, tourism appeal, and quality of life.

² Mohawk Valley Regional Economic Development Council, Strategic Plan 2011, p. 77.

³ New York Open for Business, Finger Lakes Regional Economic Development Council, Accelerating Our Transformation Strategic Plan, November 14, 2011, p.46.

Ongoing Challenges to Closing the Gaps

Since the NYS Canal Corporation assumed responsibility for much of the trail corridor in 1995 it has directed construction of more than 150 miles of Erie Canalway Trail, resulting in 277 of the trail's 360 miles now open to the public. However, several factors continue to contribute to a delay in closing the remaining gaps.

Funding

An estimated \$38 million in funding is needed for corridor purchase and/or design and construction to complete the 83 miles of trail contained in the remaining major gaps. For some gaps, construction funding is the *only* barrier to moving forward.

- **Reduced federal funding from MAP-21**

Funding for bicycle and pedestrian projects was reduced by about 30 percent in the new federal transportation bill, MAP-21. Under the new legislation, both NYSDOT and local Metropolitan Planning Organizations serving areas above 200,000 persons will distribute funds for trails and bicycle and pedestrian projects through competitive grant programs. These funds should be made available to local governments and state agencies in the spring of 2014.

- **Limited recognition in economic development plans**

Only the Mohawk Valley and Finger Lakes regions include completion of the Canalway Trail as a priority in their economic development plans, making it harder for local governments and nonprofits in other regions to be competitive when applying for small projects that could enhance the trail or close minor gaps. While local governments recognize the importance of completing the trail and enhancing its appeal to tourists, most did not take advantage of the third round of CFA funds for Canalway Trail projects because of other budget priorities, the need to provide a 50% match, and the fact that these are reimbursement programs.

Right of way

- **No defined corridor or route**

Over the years, parts of the canal have been relocated and the historic canal and towpath have been lost to other development. Publicly-owned abandoned rail lines offer the best possible alternative off-road routes. However, in several locations no such alternatives exist: between the Schuyler and the Village of Frankfort s; and through Green Island. In these places it will be necessary to acquire right-of-way, utilize utility or highway corridors, or establish safe on-road routes.

- **Utility reluctance to enter into long-term agreements.**

Federal funding cannot be obtained to develop trail unless the land is secured with at least a twenty-five year lease or easement. There are former rail corridors, now owned by utilities, that could be used to close some of the remaining gaps, but they are essentially unavailable because of the utility's reluctance to grant leases of that term length.

Physical obstacles

In some sections, good corridor options exist but within these corridors there are specific obstacles which must be overcome before trail planning and development can proceed. One of the most critical obstacles is the need to cross an active rail line at Scrafford Lane in Rotterdam Junction. The trail is effectively closed at this location because of train cars parked across the trail but unfortunately trail users still attempt the crossing, creating a very dangerous situation.

Focus for 2014

Additional progress in closing the gaps will result from the efforts of multiple individuals and communities continually working to address specific needs in discrete segments of the trail. In the year ahead, PTNY, in collaboration with CTANY, will continue to vigorously advocate for "Closing the Gaps" through the following means:

1. Rally local government and citizen support for “Closing the Gaps” and its ability to attract more tourists, grow local economies and positively impact the health of the region’s residents.
2. Meet with local and state legislators, Congressional representatives, and the regional economic development councils to emphasize that completion of the Canalway Trail is a priority project that will make a significant contribution to quality of life attributes needed to attract and retain jobs and improve the economy of more than 200 communities upstate.
3. Advocate for local governments and coalitions of communities to submit applications for federal transportation alternative funds and, through the CFA process, state municipal park and Canal Greenway grant funds in order to build new trail segments in those places where funding is the only barrier to construction.
4. Supply support letters for funding applications that promote completion of gap segments.
5. Foster communications and meetings between the appropriate parties to resolve issues and remove barriers to trail development.
6. Advocate for pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure projects to receive a continuous, dedicated level of funding in the SFY 2014-2015 and beyond, at least equal to that enjoyed in New York before the federal government reduced dedicated funding by 30%.

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 multi-use trails reaching into all parts of the state.

As early as the 1960s, some canal communities that had lost most of their commercial canal traffic were seeking new ways to benefit from the canal and began building local trails on remnants of the old towpath. The first public expression of the Canalway Trail concept came with the release of the NYS Canal Recreation Development Plan in the early 1970s. Soon thereafter, the NYS Office of Parks and Recreation, today the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (OPRHP), and the NYS Department of Transportation entered into a formal agreement to jointly develop the 524-mile canal system, encompassing the Erie, Cayuga-Seneca, Oswego, and Champlain Canals, for recreational purposes. Many sections of the Canalway Trail were constructed over the next two decades.

In 1992, the NYS Legislature transferred responsibility for the Canal System to the NYS Thruway Authority and its subsidiary the NYS Canal Corporation and created the NYS Canal Recreationway Commission to advise the Thruway and NYS Canal Corporation on canal-related activities. In 1995 and 1996, respectively, the NYS Canal Corporation adopted the Canal Recreationway Plan and the NYS Canal Revitalization Plan to guide development of the Canal into a recreation system. Among the major recommendations made in the NYS Canal Recreationway Plan was the completion of an end-to-end Canalway Trail along the canal system. In 2000, the U.S. Congress recognized the national significance of New York's canal system by establishing the Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor which includes the Erie, as well as the Cayuga-Seneca, Oswego, and Champlain Canals and their historic alignments.

Since 1995, when the Canal Corporation assumed responsibility for the Canalway Trail and began implementing the Canal Recreationway Plan, more than 150 miles of Erie Canalway Trail (ECT) have been built. Ownership, maintenance and management of the ECT are split with the NYS Canal Corporation, NYS OPRHP and counties and local municipalities, each owning about one-third of the trail corridor.

Erie Canalway Trail Partners

Canalway Trails Association New York (CTANY) is an all-volunteer organization that works both statewide and locally with citizens, state agencies and municipalities to develop the Canalway Trail System 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. www.ptny.org/canalway/ctany.shtml

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 advocates for completion of the Canalway Trail System and promotes the trail through events such as its annual *Cycling the Erie Canal* bike tour, the annual Canal Clean Sweep, and *Bicyclists Bring Business* community roundtables and publications such as *Canalway Trail Times*; *Cycling the Erie Canal: A guide to 400 miles of adventure and history along the Erie Canalway Trail*; and *Bicyclists Bring Business: A Guide for Attracting Bicyclists to New York's Canal Communities*. 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** 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 3.7 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.

Local governments play an important role in completing and maintaining the trail in the more than 200 municipalities and 14 counties through which the Erie Canalway Trail passes. About one-third of the Canalway Trail is owned by local governments.