

## SCHENECTADY COUNTY

# Empire State Trail closes Rotterdam Junction gap

## Tunnels under tracks part of 750-mile trail system

BY STEPHEN WILLIAMS *The Daily Gazette*



PETER R. BARBER/THE GAZETTE

The Empire State Trail in Rotterdam Junction has a tunnel that goes under the railroad tracks at the foot of Scrafford Road.

For decades, two sets of railroad tracks in Rotterdam Junction impeded people looking to take a long off-road bike ride between Schenectady and Amsterdam on the Erie Canalway Trail, which runs all the way to Buffalo.

“It was one of the worst gaps in the entire system,” said Ray Gillen, chairman of the Schenectady County Metroplex Development Authority.

But the obstacles for riders are no more.

As part of developing the statewide Empire State Trail, the state has built a bike-pedestrian tunnel under the PanAm Rail tracks at the end of Scrafford Lane, rehabbed a century-old maintenance tunnel under the CSX tracks two miles west, and built three miles of new trail. Total cost: \$8 million.

“Both of the new tunnels are open and there is now a continuous off-road trail from Schenectady west all the way to Frankfort,” said Andy Beers, executive director of the Empire State Trail. “The (Scrafford Lane) tunnel is complete, and it is an amazing piece of engineering.”

Construction on the Rotterdam Junction trail wrapped up last month — one of the last pieces in the state’s three-year effort to construct the Empire State Trail, which runs continuously 750 miles, from Buffalo to Albany and from the tip of Manhattan to the Canadian border.

“The state spent \$8 million in Rotterdam Junction. It’s a major achievement, and we’re grateful to the state for doing it,” Gillen said.

Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo, who unveiled the plan in 2017, announced last week that the Empire State Trail is completed. That means the entire system — some 75 percent of which is off-road — is open to cyclists,



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The Empire Trail in Rotterdam Junction has a tunnel that goes under the railroad tracks at the foot of Scrafford Road as seen on Thursday.

hikers, runners, cross-country skiers and snow-shoers. It meets the deadline Cuomo set four years ago to finish work by the end of 2020.

Developing the trail system has cost \$293 million, with an initial \$200 million state appropriation being used to leverage an additional \$93 million in federal, state and local money, Beers said.

Completion is expected to raise the profile of the state's bicycle and pedestrian trail system, and draw millions of new visitors, from around the state, other states, and internationally. That's expected to lead to many millions in new visitor spending.

"I've already been contacted, this fall, by a company that organizes supported rides," Beers said, speaking of companies that provide ride support, meals and accommodations for traveling cycling groups. "This is going to be a world-class destination."

Along the Erie Canalway Trail, which runs 360 miles from Buffalo to Albany, the project has increased the amount of off-road trail from 80 percent of the ride to about 95 percent.

“I’d seen the condition of the trail and the need to close the gaps,” said Brian Stratton, the former Schenectady mayor who has headed the state Canal Corp. for the last decade. “The governor likes to do things bold, and when he decided to close the gaps he did it in a way that nobody could have imagined.”

The trail has scenic natural beauty, but also highlights the state’s rich history, Stratton said. The trail follows the route of the Erie Canal, which opened in the 1820s and helped industrial canal towns across the state.

Even before the opening of the unified trail system, existing recreation trails had seen a boom in use this year, as people have sought to do things outdoors during the COVID-19 pandemic. But long-distance bicycle tourism has been a growth industry for years.

“With closing the gaps, you get more trails that are closer to where people live,” said Dylan Carey, a Schenectady native who is project director at Parks & Trails New York, a non-profit advocacy group that has been closely involved in trail development. “We found that when you’ve got longer stretches of off-road trail, they become more regional draws, national and international draws.”

“For folks who like to take bike rides, they search out longer trails. This is a game-changer,” Carey said.

Much of the work has involved inter-linking what were previously 400 miles of separated segments of off-road trail, as well as improving 170 miles of existing road to better-accommodate bikes. Another 180 miles of new off-road trail were built, including in Montgomery and Schenectady counties.

One of the longest gaps was between Amsterdam and Rotterdam Junction, where cyclists had to ride with vehicle traffic on state Route 5S.

In 2018, a new five-mile off-road segment opened from Amsterdam to Pattersonville, but the remaining distance between Pattersonville and Rotterdam Junction — which includes the two railroad crossings — wasn’t completed until December. While the Scrafford Lane tunnel is open, temporary orange construction fence continues to line the path. Landscaping and similar work will continue next spring.

“From what DOT told me, this is only third location that they can find anywhere in the country where a tunnel was built under active railroad tracks,” Beers said. “It was a very complex project.”

Gillen said the Schenectady County Legislature had an essential role, agreeing to maintain the Rotterdam Junction trail, which also runs past a historic Erie Canal lock that wasn’t previously highlighted.

“People love the trail,” he said. “It was a major achievement to get \$8 million (state funding) for Rotterdam Junction. It was one of the major obstacles.”

Increased trail use is expected to boost Schenectady and other communities that sit along the Empire State Trail.

“As a former mayor of Schenectady, I can say this is going to be an economic boon for Schenectady, and as director of the Canal Corp., I can say this will be a tremendous boon for all of upstate New York,” Stratton said.

The new trail is also a platform that could support other development ideas.

Part of Schenectady’s Downtown Redevelopment Initiative calls for a major “gateway” at Mohawk Harbor, where spur trails into Mohawk Harbor and across the Mohawk River into Glenville will intersect

the Empire State Trail.

Stratton said the separate “Re-imagine the Canal” initiative is looking at ideas like lighting the Lock 11 dam in Amsterdam and installing a pedestrian bridge cyclists could use to reach the north side of the river.

The Empire State Trail has a website that includes trail segment descriptions, parking areas, restrooms, and nearby amenities and attractions. The site also features information about things like campgrounds, parks, historic sites, and popular stops in local communities.

In addition to closing the Rotterdam Junction gap, another recently opened section in the Capital Region is the 36-mile Albany Hudson Electric Trail, which runs from the city of Rensselaer to the city of Hudson in Rensselaer and Columbia counties. The \$45 million trail follows the historic route of an electric trolley.

Along the Champlain Canalway Trail, which runs from Waterford in Saratoga County to Whitehall in Washington County, 19 new miles of trail were completed from Fort Edward to Comstock, at a total cost of \$16.3 million.

Beers said about 40 percent of the Champlain trail is now off-road, and more work will be done in coming years to take routes off-road. In Saratoga County, there continue to be long sections where the trail runs on the shoulder of U.S. Route 4, though five continuous miles in Waterford and Halfmoon are now off-road.