

Chapter 7 Canals

New York State's canal system serves many varied interests including commercial shipping, recreation, tourism, flood control, water supply, irrigation, and hydroelectric power generation. Since its opening in 1825, the Erie Canal has played a vital role in development within Herkimer and Oneida Counties and across upstate New York.

It is difficult to address the NYS canal system from just a two-county perspective because the canal is part of the larger statewide canal system. Many of the major issues and recommendations that affect local development and use of the canal are matters addressed in the Statewide Canal Master Plan, the Mohawk Valley Regional Canal Plan, and the Mohawk Valley Greenway Plan.

Statewide and Regional Planning

The New York State Canal Recreationway Plan was completed and adopted by the Canal Commission, Thruway Authority, and Canal Corporation in 1995. The plan evaluated four concept alternatives conforming to specified evaluation criteria, canal goals and legislative objectives. The plan includes moderate actions that balance conservation and development with moderate intensity of uses in appropriately designated areas, and also outlines responsibilities at the local and regional level. In 2005, an interagency task force was developed in order to establish a regional approach to land use planning, tourism, recreational trail development, and other collaborative projects along the Canal System. Initiatives developed by the task force are seen by the Canal Corporation as vital to establishing the Canal System as a world-class tourism destination and viable economic engine for Canal communities and the State of New York.¹



Erie Canal Lock E-21, New London, Oneida County

In 1995, the Herkimer-Oneida Counties Comprehensive Planning Program (HOCCPP) prepared a Regional Canal Plan for the Mohawk Valley Region that evaluates canal system resources and the potential for certain types of use. In 2008, the Oneida County Planning Department initiated a project to develop a Comprehensive Greenway Plan for the Mohawk River Corridor within Oneida County. The broad vision for the Mohawk River Corridor Greenway in Oneida County includes the establishment of a network of land along the river corridor and Erie Canal, which preserves and highlights the unique environment of the Mohawk River. The focus of the greenway is to protect and enhance natural features, natural processes and wildlife habitat, while providing opportunities for recreation, and appreciation of the area's cultural and historical significance.

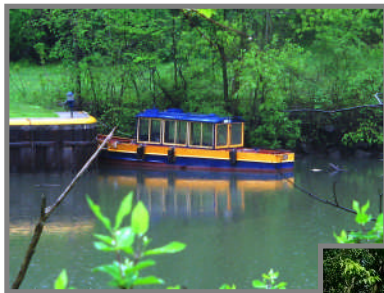
These efforts provide the foundation for canal-related planning activities and project development in Herkimer and Oneida Counties.

¹ NYS Canal Corporation: A Report on the Future of New York State Canals, 2005.

Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor

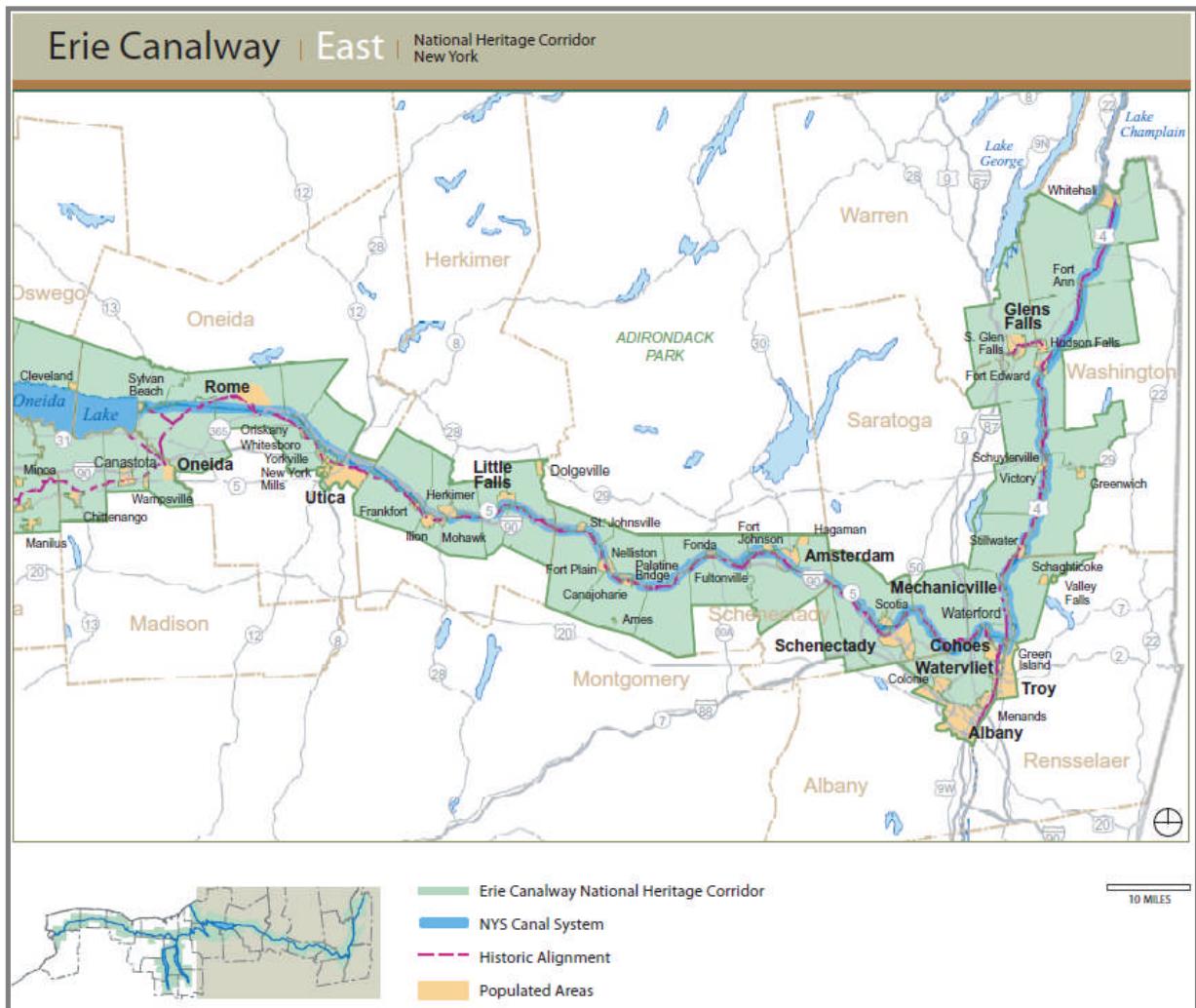
The Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor stretches 524 miles across upstate New York. It encompasses the navigable waterways that make up the New York State Canal System, including the Erie, Cayuga-Seneca, Oswego, and Champlain Canals, as well as their historic alignments, and the 234 cities, towns, and villages that touch the canal system. From east to west across Oneida and Herkimer Counties, the Corridor includes the towns, villages and cities in close proximity to the current and historic alignments of the Erie Canal. Figure 7-1 shows the Corridor boundary. Upon receiving the National Heritage Corridor designation in 2000, the Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor Commission was formed to initiate and implement a management and preservation plan for the corridor. The Erie Canalway Preservation and Management Plan outlines strategies for achieving six key goals:

- The Corridor's historic and distinctive sense of place will be widely expressed and consistently protected.
- The Corridor's natural resources will reflect the highest standards of environmental quality.
- The Corridor's recreation opportunities will achieve maximum scope and diversity, in harmony with the protection of heritage resources.
- The Corridor's current and future generations of residents and visitors will value and support preservation of its heritage.
- The Corridor's economic growth and heritage development will be balanced and self-sustaining.
- The Corridor will be a "must do" travel experience for regional, national, and international visitors.²



²Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor: <http://www.eriecanalway.org/>

Map 7-1. Erie Canal National Heritage Corridor – Eastern Region



Mohawk Valley Heritage Corridor

The Mohawk Valley Heritage Corridor Commission (MVHCC) is a partnership of people and organizations committed to strengthening the economic health of an eight county region which spans the Mohawk Valley, including the Oneida and Herkimer Counties area.

The Mohawk Valley Heritage Corridor Commission was established by state legislation to create a comprehensive plan for the Mohawk Valley. The most important elements of the Corridor plan involve intertwining community revitalization, heritage, tourism efforts, and historic interpretation.

The commission's master plan identifies the following seven needs for the corridor region:

- (1) to create a clear image and identity for the Mohawk Valley;
- (2) to interpret the history of the region according to the three major themes of the Iroquois Confederacy, the Revolutionary War, and the Erie Canal;
- (3) local community revitalization;
- (4) creating a broader sense of regional identity;
- (5) preserving communities;
- (6) tourism marketing; and
- (7) improving the tourism product and the visitor's experience. MVHCC also provides technical assistance for regional planning projects.

Additionally, part of the plan's objectives is to develop physical linkages such as trails, designated scenic routes, canal-side docking points, and signage to make the region fit together as a more seamless set of visitor experiences.

The MVHCC and the Herkimer County Area Development Corporation in 2004 have partnered to promote the Revolutionary Byway and to develop a corridor management plan. The Revolutionary Byway begins in the Capital District and travels west on NYS Routes 5, 49, 69 and 13 and connects on the east with the Mohawk Towpath.

The Mohawk Valley Greenway

The purpose of the Mohawk Valley Greenway project is to develop a written plan to organize and manage existing and future publicly held land within the Mohawk River Corridor in Oneida County. The plan will also act as a guide for municipalities and private landowners within the greenway to collectively develop and manage lands according to a broadly accepted framework. The project emphasized the development of partnerships and public involvement within the corridor. New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT) and New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC) are key agency partners in the project. A number of local, state, and regional agencies are partners in the project as well as representatives of the general public. HOCTS staff participated in focus group meetings during the development of the plan.

The goals and objectives of this project are to:

- Identify and protect key open space and natural areas having ecological, environmental, recreational, scenic and educational value within the corridor;
- Improve intermunicipal coordination as it relates to the great potential that exists for linking respective community centers and managing common resources;
- Provide for enhanced recreation and health benefits;
- Ensure continued compatible development and opportunities for new economic development;
- Provide alternative transportation modes; and
- Improve flooding and stormwater management capabilities in affected municipalities.³

³ Oneida County Planning Department: www.ocgov.net/planning, 2008.

Creating a Greenway in Oneida County: Part of the Mohawk River Corridor, the planning document generated from this project, identifies key sites along the corridor that offer opportunities for recreation, open space preservation, flood plain protection, stormwater management, historic preservation, protection of critical environmental resources, river access, wildlife habitat protection, wetland restoration, and public education. In addition, the plan identifies specific actions, activities, and recommendations that will provide linkages of these resources and the various programs that exist.

The Greenway Plan provides the framework to:

- Identify networks of land, which comprise the spine of the greenway.
- Identify opportunities within the corridor (ecological, recreational, historic/cultural).
- Accommodate multiple uses while minimizing impacts to natural processes and wildlife.
- Identify themes and develop a marketing concept.
- Develop greenway interpretation and wayfinding plans.
- Provide policy recommendations, implementation strategy and action plan.
- Provide a management plan for managing greenway lands.

According to the plan, “A greenway along the Mohawk River in Oneida County will provide opportunities to protect valuable resources, enhance recreation, encourage ecological and cultural education, minimize flood damage, and spur compatible economic development. There exists a multitude of publicly held lands along the Greenway Corridor. There is an opportunity to mass and link these lands to create a body of land for the benefit of the environment and the public.”⁴ The complete plan is available online at www.ocgov.net/oneida/planning/greenwayproject or by calling the Oneida County Planning Department at 315-798-5710.

Canal Projects in Herkimer and Oneida Counties since 2005

• Utica - Section 4 Headquarters (Oneida County)

Harbor Point Project: continue maintenance operations, visitor center, and city redevelopment plan, and improve access to hotels and restaurants: possible Adirondack Park Gateway and Thruway linkage; potential commercial shipping site.

• Canalway Trail - Mohawk to German Flatts

Asphalt trail extending from the intersection of Routes 28 and 5S in the Village of Mohawk to the Fort Herkimer Church in the Town of German Flatts. This trail project was constructed by local effort and was funded by Herkimer County.

• Canastota to Rome (Oneida/Madison Counties)

In Madison and western Oneida Counties, the Canalway Trail follows the alignment of the Old Erie Canal, within the Old Erie Canal State Park. The trail provides a crushed limestone surface and terminates at the Erie Canal Village on Route 46. The trail establishes approximately 40 miles of nearly continuous off-road trail between Rome and Dewitt.

⁴ Oneida County Planning Department: *Creating a Greenway in Oneida County: Part of the Mohawk River Corridor*. 2008, p. 5.

- **Canalway Trail - Little Falls to Minden (Montgomery/Herkimer Counties)**

The 11-mile trail segment connects the Town of Minden in Montgomery County to the City of Little Falls in Herkimer County with 10-foot wide stone dust trail along the abandoned West Shore Railroad bed. The trail connects to the Herkimer Home historic site and connects trail segments completed in 2002, resulting in 50-miles of uninterrupted trail in Herkimer and Montgomery Counties.

- **Canalway Trail – Utica to Schuyler**

Currently in design phase, the Canal Corporation is seeking funding to construct a segment of trail connecting the existing trail that terminates at North Genesee Street with Lock E-19 in the Town of Schuyler, Herkimer County.

- **Canalway Trail – Ilion to Little Falls**

Currently in design phase, the Canal Corporation is seeking funding to construct a segment of trail connecting the existing trail that terminates at West Shore Street in Little Falls with the Ilion Marina in the Village of Ilion, Herkimer County.

Future Improvements

The recommendations presented by the Mohawk Valley Heritage Corridor Commission and the Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor Commission provide a framework for the future use of the Erie Canal corridor. Long-term planning efforts in Herkimer and Oneida Counties continue to use existing, long-term strategies as guides for transportation planning along the canal corridor. Implementation of the recommendations will continue to require additional study, designs and public input on the part of the municipalities involved. The recommendations and strategies outlined in Plans, such as those mentioned above, are consistent with the long-term goals of HOCTS with regard to development and promotion of the Erie Canal corridor. HOCTS will continue its planning efforts with associated road access, parking, trail development, and maintenance of existing roads and bridges.

A good potential for funding canal improvements will be through the use of public/private partnerships. This would include projects involving facilities on canal land, and perhaps adjacent land, such as marinas. The private developers would construct and operate the facility, and the public investment could include land contribution, infrastructure improvements and assistance in financing. Transportation Enhancement funds have been used to help fund segments of canal trail. Other projects, such as marinas, and commercial development may be totally financed by the private sector.

Summary

The Erie Canal Corridor historically has served as a catalyst for growth across upstate New York and in the Mohawk Valley and it continues to be an important local, regional and statewide transportation and tourism asset. HOCTS will continue to support improvements along the Canal Corridor and provide long-term technical assistance for canal development projects and programs.

Findings and Recommendations

Findings:

Canal

- Interpretive Signage/Information progress for boaters.
- More events and marketing is needed for the canal system in the two counties.
- New tonnage being shipped on the Erie Canal.
- Utica Marina improvements needed for recreational boaters.

Canalway Trail

- Almost 20 miles of trail in the two counties are complete.
- Paved asphalt section of trail needed in urbanized areas to accommodate diverse users.
- Canalway Trail Adopt-A-Trail volunteers are needed.
- More "wayfinding" signage is needed on Erie Canal trail that direct users to local points of interests, restaurants and bike facilities.
- On and off road connections to trail are needed.

Recommendations:

- Support implementation of Canal plans such as:
 - Mohawk Valley Regional Canal Plan
 - Mohawk Valley Heritage Corridor Plan
 - New York State Canal Recreationway Plan
 - Mohawk Valley Greenway Plan
- Continue assistance in the Canal Trail design process.
- Support marketing of Regional Canal Centers and Canalway Trail.
- Support the development of on and off road connections and connections to other Class I trails.
- Support Development of Canal Greenways.
- Encourage installation of "wayfinding" signage is needed on Erie Canal trail.
- Support the development of a Herkimer County Greenway Plan
- Support completion of the Erie Canalway Trail