

## Statement on New York State's *Reimagine the Canals* Initiative

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The Preservation League of New York State is New York's statewide nonprofit focused on investing in people and projects that champion the essential role of preservation in community revitalization, sustainable economic growth, and the protection of our historic buildings and landscapes. In June 2019, Governor Cuomo announced the *Reimagine the Canals* initiative of the New York Power Authority and New York State Canal Corporation, with the goal "[to boost local economies, inspire new opportunities for tourism and recreation, and strengthen environmental resiliency along the historic waterway.](#)" The Preservation League believes that the power of our New York State Canal System, a National Historic Landmark, is rooted in its history, authenticity as a continuously operating end-to-end canal system, vibrancy, and ability to leverage tourism now and in the future. In the midst of the Erie Canal's bicentennial celebration (built 1817-1825) and on the heels of the centennial of the National Historic Landmark Barge Canal System, we offer the following comments.

The Preservation League works closely with canal communities and advocates from Whitehall to Waterford, Albany to Watkins Glen, and Oswego to Buffalo. We support historic preservation along the Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor through technical services, grants, advocacy support, and loans. Since 2014, we have made grants and loans of over \$2.5 million in 36 municipalities from Albany to Buffalo. We recently received funding from the 1772 Foundation to identify and study vacant and underutilized historic buildings for potential new uses along a 180-mile section of the NYS Canal System and Empire State Trail. The Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor is working with the Preservation League to identify needs for users of the Canal System and associated trails.

Our work has shown that NYS Canal communities seek to capitalize on their historic resources and connection to the canal to benefit their residents, the larger region, and to encourage economic development and tourism. Where historic canal towns like Medina, Pittsford, and Little Falls have led the way in linking their downtowns and historic buildings to the canal, villages such as Clyde, Fort Plain, and Fultonville have followed. Currently, there are over 126 National Register Historic Districts within the Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor. Of those, 46% were created in the last 15 years, demonstrating the increased recognition of historic preservation's positive impact on economic development, as well as the pride of these communities in their connection to the Erie Canal.

### Significance of the NYS Canal System

In 2017, the New York State Canal System was designated a National Historic Landmark Historic District. This honor, given to only 3% of National Register of Historic Places designations, [“specifically recognizes the canal for its role in shaping the American economy and settlement, as an embodiment of the Progressive Era emphasis on public works, and as a nationally significant work of early 20th century engineering and construction.”](#) From its start as the original 1825 Erie Canal, through the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century enlargement that created wider and deeper channels, culminating with the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Barge Canal system that we know today, the NYS Canal System has been and continues to be an integral part of New York’s history and economic development.

The NYS Canal System/Barge Canal National Historic Landmark Historic District includes 450 miles of navigable waterway, 151 miles of manmade channel, and 299 miles of canalized rivers and lake crossings. This historic district includes not only the waterway, but also the locks, dams, culverts, bridges, terminals, canal shops and canal-related features that are essential for canal operations as well as shore lands maintained as part of the system. The [National Historic Landmark designation report](#) outlines the architectural and engineering significance of these features in great detail. The engineering infrastructure that created the NYS Canal System boasted many superlatives when completed, including the highest single lift lock in the world (Little Falls), five locks that formed the highest lift in the shortest distance in the world (Waterford), and movable dams in the Mohawk River unlike any other in North America. In addition to the historic district, the canal system has several historically significant, National Register-listed and eligible vessels.

The NYS Canal System significantly contributes to the life of communities along its corridor. It is an economic generator, adding billions into local economies through both tourism and commercial activities. [A 2017 economic impact study](#) by Level 7 Market Research for the Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor found a **\$1.3 billion annual impact on tourism**. The study focused on events, boat tours, paddle sport rentals and historic site/museum tours. [An April 2014 report](#) for the New York State Canal Corporation on the economic benefits of **non-tourism** use of the canal system found total annual economic impact of \$6.2 billion, direct employment of 8,821 jobs and indirect employment of 26,472 jobs. Historic communities along the canal are capitalizing on their connection to the canal. Those with long-standing canal traditions, such as Fairport (Monroe County), serve as models for communities like Lyons (Wayne County) and Fultonville (Montgomery County).

In addition to the above quantifiable effects, anybody who has watched a vessel navigate one of the locks, or a tug push freight along the canal, can attest to the wonder that generations of New Yorkers and tourists have experienced. Thousands of school-aged children board canal vessels, ride through locks, and learn how this engineering marvel in our own backyard

contributed to the growth of our state and nation. Indeed, practically every 4<sup>th</sup> grader in many canal communities experiences the canal firsthand, stoking a love of history and pride in our state.

### Vision for the Future

The Preservation League believes that the best future for our NYS Canal System lies in capitalizing on its past, marketing itself as a historic transportation corridor, improving amenities for canal users, and strengthening local, regional, and international partnerships to promote tourism, as well as recreational and commercial use.

Our *Reimagine the Canals* vision maintains the entire NYS Canal System as a navigation corridor for motorized and paddled vessels, keeping all pieces of the National Historic Landmark Historic District intact and functional. Key components of the canal system, such as National Register-listed and National Register-eligible vessels, are maintained and restored as part of our living canal history. These historic vessels, as well as the infrastructure that includes locks, moveable dams, and guard gates remain in use, and are celebrated, promoted, and interpreted for canal visitors from near and far.

Over 20 years ago, when Governor Cuomo was Secretary of the Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development, he made a significant investment in New York's waterfront communities, especially those along the NYS Canal Corridor. Governor Cuomo then noted that the Erie Canal was "[literally a gold mine](#)," rich with tourism and recreational opportunities. The Governor's \$2 million HUD canal award was leveraged dozens of times over with the creation of the Greater Amsterdam Riverlink Park and Mohawk Valley Gateway Overlook, linking boaters with Amsterdam's downtown, which just received a \$10 million New York State investment through the Downtown Revitalization Initiative.

New York State should continue to capitalize on its Canal System as the rope that tethers our state together, linking communities from NYC to Buffalo, promoting our wonderful, unique asset. The Corning Museum of Glass's GlassBarge showed the tremendous potential of the NYS Canal System to generate tourism through community connections throughout the canal corridor. This wildly successful 2018 initiative traveled the waterway from Brooklyn to the Finger Lakes with many stops along the way. "[In addition to sharing the story of glassmaking in Corning, the GlassBarge tour emphasized the continued role of New York's waterways in shaping the state's industry, culture, and community.](#)" Projects like this demonstrate how New York can build upon the canal's potential over the next 20 years, 50 years, even 100 years without losing sight of what already works so well throughout the NYS Canal System. Building on investments that have already been made will continue to promote municipal collaborations, tourism, and community pride for years to come.