

Rejuvenated Erie Canal enjoys busy summer

Ernst Lamothe Jr. · Staff writer · November 14, 2010

Each April brings the waters of the Erie Canal rushing back through Fairport, Pittsford and Brockport. The opposite ritual occurs every November when the canal is locked and closed for the season.

Officials this year say the season's end, which will come at 5 p.m. Monday, arrived too soon.

Recreational, commercial and tour vessels passed through canal locks 120,868 times this season, a 1.7 percent increase over last year. Locally, Lock 32 in Pittsford saw an increase from 2,368 last year to 2,581 this season, a traffic increase of 9 percent, according to canal officials. Each time a boat goes under a bridge, it is considered one locking.

The canal season was filled with new **programs** linked across the 240 communities along the waterway, improved land trails, an international event and near perfect summer weather that produced an array of sunshine and little rain.

Five years ago, canal officials pushed for more events including major harbor **festivals**, farmers markets and cruises, increasing from 40 events a year to 330 this year. While 2009 was all about the New York State Canal System reinventing itself to stay relevant in a daunting economy, this year became their recovery victory lap.

"Two years ago we were down 20 percent and it was tough. Now, we've turned the canal into a full blown national tourist destination," said Carmella Mantello, director of the state canal system. "The canal is becoming a great daytime getaway for boating, a **picnic** or a scenic walk or an overnight getaway with people renting boats. It was simply a fantastic year."

While the season was already outpacing itself from a year ago, it peaked in September with the 2010 World Canal Conference. Seventeen countries, 50 to 100 boats and hundreds of international delegates descended onto the area for the conference, making

Rochester the first city to host the event twice. The weeklong international event came to the Flower City in 2000.

"When people saw the flotilla of boats come through on the first day of the canal conference, it was an incredible sight. Thousands of people came out and were wowed and that memory stuck in their heads and they have become spokespeople for the canal, telling their friends and family all about what they may be missing," said Tom Grasso, president of the Canal Society of New York.

"The excitement of the public and the attention that the canal received this year from the media and everyone else helped create a spectacular season."

The event also included a nighttime gala in the graffiti-covered Erie Canal aqueduct where more than 400 attendees had a carpeted party filled with art, music and lights. International and local participants also offered suggestions to Rochester on how to development their waterways, teachers took classes on better ways to **educate** their students on the Erie Canal and delegates toured western New York visiting canal communities.

This season, communities like North Tonawanda in Niagara County, Rome in Oneida County and Pittsford and Brighton in Monroe County either approved or are evaluating proposals to redevelop their canal areas with mixed-use attractions from entertainment venues and restaurants to lofts and apartments. The city of Rochester is looking to inject some thunder into a downtown waterway plan to tear Broad Street off the historic aqueduct over

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the Genesee River and filling the structure with water again.

"When I'm traveling across the state, you hear communities ask us how can they become more like Pittsford, Fairport and Brockport, which are ahead of the game in its canal development," said Mantello.

As a carryover from the waterway enthusiasm, the village and town of Pittsford have developed an Erie Canal master plan to capitalize on the waterfront.

The plan focuses on 22 acres of town-owned land and 11.3 acres of village-owned land located along the north bank of the Erie Canal between Grove Street and the Monroe Avenue Bridge. The highlights include gathering spaces such as an amphitheater, arboretum and a pavilion, using a \$50,000 matching grant through the Division of state Coastal Resources.



"We are going to expand the docks and improve the stage for the summer concert series, hoping to have it all done by June," said Pittsford Supervisor Bill Carpenter.

With restaurants, shops and recreational docks at Schoen Place, Carpenter saw more of his residents enjoying the natural wonder of the water.

"Not only was it a gorgeous summer in terms of weather, but people are continuing to just appreciate the Erie Canal ambience," he said.

Throughout the next four months, canal corporation employees will work to repair buoys and other century-old equipment used to operate the 57 locks and 20 lift bridges, ensuring the Erie Canal is ready for its spring reopening. The offseason also includes crews rehabilitating the infrastructure and performing maintenance such as brush removal, painting and replacing stones on the embankment.

"This was a year that saw people energized, and that kind of excitement went all across the canal system from Waterford to Tonawanda," said Grasso. "We displayed our canal to the world and to local residents and gave them a five-star canal season."

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