

## Eastern portion of Erie Canal remains closed



Written by

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With the Genesee River still volatile from last winter's snowfall and this spring's prolonged rains, the opening of the east side of the Erie Canal is not expected for at least two and a half weeks.

Although the target opening date is May 1, the actual opening for the canal system is based on weather conditions. Some years, it has come as early as April 1; other years, it's been as late as June 5.

"We have had some record highs of water and some issues with flooding that is obviously out of our control, so we have to ensure **safety** first before anything else," said Brian Stratton, the former Schenectady mayor who was appointed last month to run the State Canal Corp.

Last Sunday, the Canal Corp. opened the locks from Rochester west to Tonawanda, as planned, continuing a tradition that dates to 1825.

"We know how important the canal is to communities, especially since New York has done a great job developing the areas around the canal," Stratton said. "It is a working marine highway for barges and just as splendid for recreation."

Commercial traffic on the present canal system peaked in the 1950s and has declined slowly ever since. Although it still serves as a viable artery for **cargo** — shipping 8,674 tons last year — the canal system has evolved into a major recreational waterway. Recreational, commercial and tour vessels passed through canal locks 120,868 times last season, a 1.7 percent increase over 2009. Locally, Lock 32 in Pittsford saw a 9 percent traffic increase.

"Seeing daffodils and tulips coming up, robins singing and the canal rushing through like a little tidal wave are all signs of spring being here," said Thomas Grasso of Pittsford, president of the Canal Society of New York. "The canal is not just about boats but all the wonderful **quality** of life

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activities like biking, picnicking and going to restaurants along the water in Fairport, Pittsford and Corn Hill Landing."

The 363-mile long Erie Canal is coming off a successful 199-day season last year. Canal officials are trying to maximize the momentum from last year's World Canals Conference, which brought more than 500 delegates from 18 countries to the Rochester area. They are planning more events on the canal and are talking with canal communities about ways to further enhance their waterfronts. Two years ago, the canal struggled to stay germane. Locking numbers dropped by 20 percent and a discouraging economy hampered its relevance. Canal officials pushed for more activities throughout communities in the spring, summer and fall to reinvigorate the public's interest. The work has paid off. Events along the canal grew from 40 to more than 300 and new harbor festivals, farmers markets and cruises were organized. A total of 6,829 pleasure craft passes were sold last year, an increase of 192 from 2009.

Some of the area's canal communities are planning changes along their waterfronts. In Pittsford, for example, officials have developed an extensive Erie Canal master plan. 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. Improvements also include new sidewalks, a new dock with water and electric hookups available for boaters, and streetscape improvements to

Schoen Place.

"Pittsford is well-positioned for the future as we have both short-term and longer term canal projects that will further improve our canal waterfront," said Bob Corby, Pittsford village mayor. "The canal is a key factor contributing to the village of Pittsford's role as a popular regional destination."

In the meantime, Stratton continues to monitor the high-water situation, coordinating with the state and local emergency managers and with other involved state agencies. The canal, from the Genesee River in Rochester east to Waterford in Saratoga County, will stay closed until at least the week of May 23, officials have said.

Along the canal, routine maintenance and repairs due to the heavy rains are ongoing. But soon, all the water will flow freely.

"We should have a beautiful canal season with good boating traffic, as long as it stops

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raining," said Grosso. "Life in the Rochester area wouldn't be the same without the canal."

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Crews work at the west guard lock on the Erie Canal in Rochester. The opening of the east side of the canal has been delayed due to heavy rainfall. / JAMIE GERMANO staff photographer

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