



In partnership with the National Park Service

# 2011-16 STRATEGIC PLAN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor

## 2011-2016 Strategic Plan Executive Summary

### Overview

The Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor (ECNHC) is now fully ten years old. It is among the largest of the 49 National Heritage Areas that have been designated by Congress since 1981. It spans New York State nearly border to border, east to west for 524 miles, encompassing all 234 municipalities linked by the Erie, Champlain, Cayuga-Seneca and Oswego Canals, and Cayuga and Seneca Lakes – together known as the New York State Canal System.

The ECNHC's authorizing legislation (December 2000) established a federal commission as a governing body and required the development of a comprehensive Preservation and Management Plan. The Plan was approved by the Secretary of the Interior in 2006 and serves as a comprehensive roadmap that articulates a vision of re-connecting Corridor communities and residents with the canal system and many other heritage resources.

In the spring of 2010, the Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor Commission and staff decided that a strategic plan was necessary to help guide the work of the Commission over the next five years. Developing a strategic plan provided the opportunity to step back from day-to-day work to assess the unique role and future needs among the many partners at the local, regional and state level, assess accomplishments to date, and prepare for a likely reduction in federal funding from the National Heritage Area Program.

The Strategic Plan serves as a tool that defines specific priorities and strategies for the coming five years. And, it is intended to be used in conjunction with the Erie Canalway Preservation and Management Plan.

This touchstone for the Commission and staff keeps as a priority the need to achieve fiscal sustainability through diversified funding. Further, the Strategic Plan addresses staff work by creating a system for prioritizing programmatic goals and clarifying how the Commission and staff will work with partners.

The Strategic Plan is intended to be a "living document" that prescribes an internal process enabling the organization to remain focused on key priorities, while retaining flexibility should unforeseen opportunities or challenges arise. It is also used to guide the development of the Commission's annual workplan and associated programmatic budget.

## The Process

The ECNHC Commission's strategic planning process was informed by the work we have done over the past several years implementing the Preservation and Management Plan. The Commission began the process by creating a Strategic Planning Committee tasked with addressing key organizational objectives. These included establishing a process for achieving financial sustainability, activating an associated nonprofit fundraising organization, and creating internal efficiencies by setting priorities for programmatic focus.

The Strategic Planning Committee engaged the services of Heritage Strategies, LLC to facilitate a team approach that explored options for focusing strategic direction and envisioning a path to organizational sustainability. Over the course of a year it conducted a comprehensive programmatic analyses. This included two commission retreats and intensive interviews community stakeholders, Commissioners and staff, National Park Units located within the Corridor, and four other National Heritage Areas. Also included were considerations of the priorities of the National Park Service's National Heritage Area evaluation process.

## Defining the Commission's Work

The strategic planning process reduced an extremely complex mission of the Commission to its fundamentals. The Commission:

1. **Preserves** the Corridor's nationally significant resources.
2. **Promotes** the National Heritage Corridor as a unifying framework to raise the profile of the region's heritage awareness and increase the reach and effectiveness of existing tourism and marketing efforts.
3. **Informs** and educates the public and key audiences about the Corridor, its rich history, and the objectives of the Preservation and Management Plan.

The result of this work is **community betterment** measured in various ways, including economic revitalization.

The Commission's work is accomplished by working through **partnership** and by **sustaining** a financially viable management organization.

# Strategic Direction

## Preserve

In the next five years, preservation efforts must focus on leveraging and completing existing multi-year projects and focusing attention on those areas and problems of the Corridor that demonstrate maximum need with potential for positive gain. Preservation efforts must be coupled with strong local support and undertaken in partnership with those state agencies and nonprofits with a vested interest.

## Promote

The Commission of the Erie Canalway NHC recognizes that it is uniquely positioned to raise the profile of the Corridor as a whole. By making strategic use of the region's heritage resources to increase the reach and effectiveness of existing tourism development and marketing efforts, it hopes to bring greater local and worldwide recognition of the Corridor's unique history and resources.

## Inform

Significant gains have been made in raising awareness about the National Heritage Corridor as a place, as well as the benefits that the federal designation and Commission bring to the region. However, much of this recognition is limited to a relatively small number of heritage sites, community leaders and activists, and politicians. Efforts in the next five years must focus on increasing awareness of the Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor so that it achieves greater recognition at the local, state, and national level. When seen as a unified region, centered on a nationally significant canal system, the Corridor adds place-value which can be an integral part of economic and community revitalization in upstate New York.

## Sustain

The ECNHC Commission and the Erie Canalway Heritage Fund Board have made their first priority the realization of financial sustainability by 2015. The goal is to minimize reliance on the federal appropriation, historically representing most of the resources available to the Commission. Over the past 10 years the federal appropriation has been used effectively to develop important programming, build local capacity, and create a Corridor wide sense of awareness of the value of the Erie Canalway. This positive climate now serves as the springboard to reverse the Commission's traditional reliance on the federal appropriation and make it a small part of a diverse package of public/private support.

## Manage

To achieve the goals outlined in this five year plan, the Commission, Heritage Fund Board, Management, and Staff will strive for the most effective administrative functioning of the organization while ensuring efficient and strategic programmatic output.

## Accomplishing Our Work

In honing its five year strategic direction, the Commission has emphasized partnership building and ensuring future organizational financial sustainability. A small and dedicated staff will continue to provide technical support to corridor partners while efficiently utilizing limited time and resources. The Commission also reaffirms the historic precedent of making available a small and restricted amount of financial support for projects while emphasizing that success of partner efforts is best achieved by leveraging existing external grant and award programs.

The Commission recognizes that the National Heritage Corridor primarily serves as a convener and that the only programs that it should develop on its own are ones that are fundamentally new or which could not be done by any other organization.

## Conclusion

The Commission intends that this five year strategic plan will be a tool that helps focus programmatic priority and achieves fiscal sustainability for the organization. The Commission looks with enthusiasm at the goals and strategies that have been articulated for the next five years and realizes that with much at stake, there is much more to be gained not only for the Commission, but for the communities and partners that comprise the Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor.

The completion of the Strategic Plan would not have been possible without the dedicated efforts of the Commission's Executive Director and following Commission committee members:

Robert Shibley, Strategic Planning Chair; Judith Schmidt-Dean, Commission Chair;  
Russell Andrews, Vice Chair; Pete Welsby, Treasurer;  
Alan Vincent, Secretary; Joseph Callahan, Past Commission Chair;  
Wint Aldrich, Robert Elliott, Carmella Mantello, Stuart Stein

