

**DOWNTOWN
REVITALIZATION
INITIATIVE
IN FOCUS**



Downtown Revitalization *Along the* *Erie Canal*



Department of State
Planning, Development
& Community Infrastructure

[DOS.NY.GOV/Downtown-Revitalization-Initiative](https://dos.ny.gov/Downtown-Revitalization-Initiative)

Kathy Hochul
Governor

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Walter T. Mosley
Secretary of State

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Introduction

The DRI and Downtown Revitalization Along The Erie Canal



Governor Kathy Hochul's Downtown Revitalization Initiative (DRI) is transforming downtown neighborhoods for all New Yorkers. Recognizing that companies are increasingly seeking to relocate and invest in vibrant, walkable downtowns in an effort to attract and retain a talented workforce, DRI is an investment to improve the vitality of urban centers across New York State.

Happy 200th Birthday, Erie Canal! That's right! Beginning in 2017 and ending in 2025, New York State is celebrating the Bicentennial of the construction of the world-famous Erie Canal.

The Bicentennial gives us an opportunity to celebrate more than just the Canal itself. We're also celebrating the many Upstate communities whose growth, history and heritage are inextricably linked to the Canal.

These communities experienced rapid growth and expansion in the 19th century as the Canal allowed people and commercial goods to make their way from New York City to Upstate communities and beyond—an urban development Big Bang, you might say. But with post-war de-industrialization and suburban sprawl, they experienced a prolonged period of decline, disinvestment and de-population in the 20th century. Now, however, the tide is shifting in the direction of re-birth and revitalization, thanks in part to support from the DRI and other Department of State (DOS) programs.

Introduction



Over 20 DRI communities are located along the Erie Canal system; Oswego, pictured above, is one of them. (Photo provided by Meem)

Just as Upstate NY's history is connected to the Canal, so now is its future—in very exciting and constructive ways! With help from the DRI and other DOS programs, many of these communities are using their Canal heritage not as a whimsical look backward at a lost and bygone era, but as a catalyst for future growth and redevelopment. They've even shed their negative monikers, like “rust-belt” or “shrinking” cities. Who wants to be associated with rust and decline?! Now known as “Legacy Cities,” these communities are drawing on their past to define and guide their future growth.

These are the cities that made and defined New York State. They still have the bones, grit and entrepreneurialism needed to flourish and foster another era of Upstate urban growth and resurgence.

Over twenty DRI communities sit along the NYS Canal System. And many are using the DRI to re-connect their downtowns to their historic Canal waterfronts. In turn, this provides the spark for broader downtown vibrancy, revitalization and economic development.

In this case study, we'll explore how five DRI communities are accomplishing this goal—Rome, Lockport, North Tonawanda, Oswego, and Amsterdam.



All Canals lead to Rome... or at least they start there!

First, let's kick off this Canal anniversary tour where it all began—Rome, NY. Dateline: July 4, 1817—the first shovel hits the ground, and the Canal is born, with construction simultaneously extending both west to Buffalo and east to Albany. The rest, they say, is history...

Rome's relationship with canals actually dates back before the Erie Canal to the construction of the Rome Canal in 1796. The Rome Canal created a connection between Lake Ontario and the Mohawk River, which enabled the city to become one of the most important transportation points in Upstate New York for both people and commercial goods. Nearly 30 years later, the completion of the Erie Canal ushered in another unprecedented period of growth and population increase.

Rome wasn't built in a day...but it sure grew up fast when the Canal was built!



Shuffling out west, we'll stop at Lockport—a city named after the “locks” that lift boats and allow them to navigate the various geographic elevations along the Canal. Lockport's locks are no ordinary locks; they are the crown jewel of Canal locks known as the “Flight of Five”—a series of five locks that were strategically built to traverse the very steep Niagara escarpment. Not incidentally, they also provided hydro-power that helped fuel the industries that grew the City.

So it's not a stretch to say that Lockport owes much of its existence to the Erie Canal. And the DRI is building on that connection by

supporting projects directly linked—either physically or historically—to its rich Canal heritage.

“Flight of Five” Canal Locks

The full historic rehabilitation of the historic Flight of Five is the centerpiece of the City's economic development and downtown revitalization strategy. A completely rehabilitated Flight of Five, with its interpretative elements, is expected to draw 230,000 visitors to Lockport annually and generate \$17 million in spending.

The DRI funded the main interpretive element of the Flight of Five—the Lock Tender Tribute Monument. This collection of statues seeks to enhance the amazing technological feat exemplified by Flight of Five by telling the stories of the people who labored long days, 7 days a week to ‘lock through’ the boats in the late 1800's. Projects like these generate new interest and excitement in the Locks District, resulting in new new investment in the downtown.



*Flight of Five Restoration
Lock Tender Tribute Monument*



Lockport, NY

“

Thanks to the Downtown Revitalization Initiative, many Erie Canal communities are witnessing a resurgence in community vibrancy and economic development. The rich heritage of the canal has become a catalyst for future growth and prosperity throughout the entire Canal corridor.

”

– Walter T. Mosley
New York Secretary of State

Historic Lockport Post Office

Historic preservation craft beer often serve as cornerstones of downtown revitalization.

Both elements are present in the DRI-funded renovation of Lockport’s Historic Post Office, which will include a new Big Ditch Brewery—“Big Ditch” being a 19th century reference to the Erie Canal. So we’re combining the old with the new.



Historic Lockport Post Office

Top-Right: existing building; Above: Rendering with new brewery addition.

Harrison Lofts at Harrison Place

Downtowns need housing, business development and the arts in order to thrive. And the Harrison Place DRI project provides all of the above.

Once home to General Motors before the company left, the Harrison Radiator industrial campus remained largely vacant and blighted for decades. The county foreclosed on the property and there were calls for it to be demolished.

But in a complete reversal of fortune, the Greater Lockport Development Corporation—a non-profit charged with furthering economic development in the City—gradually transformed most of the campus into a business incubator, which is now home to more than 50 businesses that employ over 400 people.

So it checked the box for business development. Now, what to do about the remaining vacant building on the campus, known as Building 3? That's where the DRI enters the picture.

With a DRI award and a growing need for housing in the downtown, the City contracted with Kearney Realty Group to rehab Building 3 into a mixed-use, mixed-income housing development, creating 82 units of housing—41 of which are reserved for low-income artists, with gallery and communal space to display their work. (The developer is constructing similar artist housing projects in other DRI communities throughout the State, including three Canal communities—Utica, Rome and Gloversville.)

The picture is complete:

- ✓ Housing
- ✓ Businesses
- ✓ Artists

And that's how vacant Building 3 is being transformed into the vibrant "Harrison Lofts"!

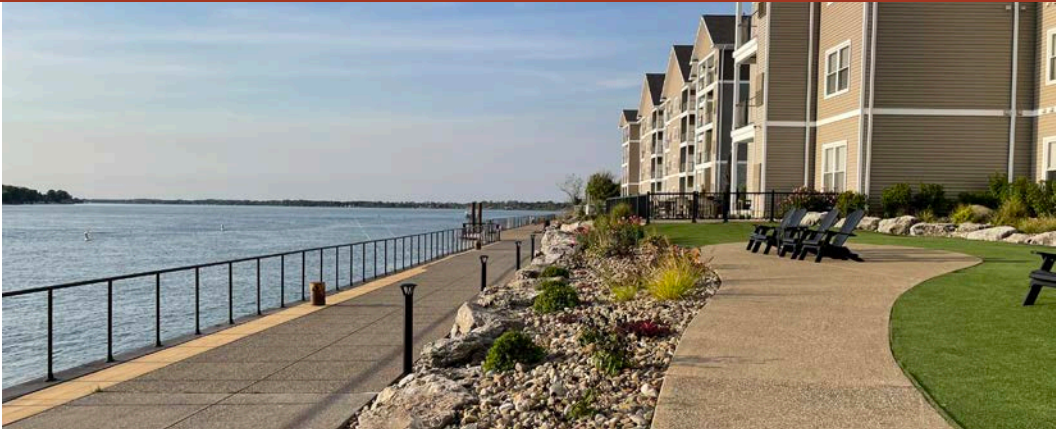
The City of Lockport was, and still is, wedded to the Erie Canal — and the DRI is helping enhance that perfect marriage.



Heritage Tourism

Projects that revitalize Canal downtowns contribute to a type of niche tourism called "heritage tourism." Heritage tourists seek to experience places, artifacts and activities that authentically represent the stories and people of the past. These types of tourists often tend to visit longer and spend more money within a community—which is great for the local economy.

North Tonawanda, NY



North Tonawanda River Walk

Heading south on the Canal brings us to North Tonawanda—the westernmost terminus of the Canal. True to its Canal-based industrial past, North Tonawanda is known as both the “Lumber City” and the “Gateway to the Erie Canal.” It’s situated at the confluence of the Niagara River and the Erie Canal.

Like many other Canal communities, North Tonawanda’s downtown prospered and then declined with the growth and decline of manufacturing in upstate New York. But the Lumber City is back—thanks in part to the DRI and several other key State investments.



Tonawanda River Walk

To enhance access to the waterfront, the DRI supported the construction of a publicly accessible River Walk along the Niagara River. The project connects to an existing bike trail and supports a large, adjacent multi-unit apartment complex (which was also supported by the DOS Brownfield Opportunity Area program).

Enterprise Lumber & Silo/211 Main Street

The Enterprise Lumber & Silo project at redeveloped a former lumber mill located on an abandoned, remediated brownfield site on Main Street into a professional services business incubator. The building houses the designer of the project, KBC Architecture (a women-owned business), and will house and incubate small design-related firms in the region with an emphasis on green development.

North Tonawanda, NY

And for good reason—the project is green and sustainable in several ways, with a green roof, rain gardens, geothermal and passive heating and cooling, solar panels and re-used timber and foundations from the former building on the site. The project received a Carbon Neutral Community Economic Development Program grant from our DRI partner agency, NYSERDA, for many of these green features.



*Enterprise Lumber & Silo building at 211 Main Street
Top: before the DRI; Bottom: after the DRI*

Drawing further on the City's rich history, the DRI invested \$1.2 million in the expansion of the historic and iconic Riviera Theatre. Known as the “Home of the Mighty Wurlitzer,” the Riviera Theatre is a major cultural, artistic and economic anchor of the downtown.

The 90-year-old theatre was saved from demolition in the 1980's and now attracts over 100,000 visitors annually, directly benefiting nearby restaurants, retailers and other destinations. DRI funds were used to construct a new box office, concession area, artist merchandise area and ADA accessible restrooms. With these new amenities, the theatre will be able to attract higher quality shows and bring more residents and visitors to this burgeoning downtown.

Finally, to further enhance and maximize the Canal experience, the City of Tonawanda—North Tonawanda's “Twin City” across the Canal—also received a \$10 million DRI award. The Twin Cities can now expand on their history of collaboration and common Canal heritage on both their Canal waterfronts.



Oswego, NY



Oswego Canal/River, Lake Ontario, and Oswego skyline. Photo by Meen

Heading east on the Canal, we'll take a northward route on the Oswego Canal to visit the City of Oswego. The Oswego Canal is a northern off-shoot of the Erie Canal that empties into Lake Ontario. The city straddles the Canal, with DRI projects on both the east and west shorefronts. So when it comes to downtown revitalization, the city benefits from three waterfronts—both sides of the Oswego Canal/River, as well as Lake Ontario. And the city has taken full advantage of its abundant maritime history with its DRI plan and projects.

A primary goal of the Oswego DRI is to maximize connections between the downtown and the Canal waterfront. That's why the community chose projects in its DRI Strategic Investment Plan that are not just drawing more residents, businesses and visitors to the downtown, but are also allowing them to more fully access and enjoy the Canal.



Kayakers on the Oswego Canal/River.



Harbor View Square DRI Project

Waterfront Housing

Waterfront housing helps a great deal, too. Oswego's DRI has plenty of that. Harbor View Square is a former contaminated wire manufacturing building that was re-purposed into a mixed-use, mixed-income housing project. The Cahill Building, the oldest commercial building in the city, was converted to apartments. And a restaurant and East Lake Commons, formerly a vestige of failed urban renewal, was converted to mixed-use and affordable housing.



Water Street Square Pocket Park

Finally, public gathering spaces are a key element of downtown revitalization and waterfront access and enjoyment. Oswego's Water Street Square pocket park is a perfect example.

Oswego took an under-utilized and uninviting dead-end alleyway and transformed it into a vibrant pocket park. The small park provides a place for people to relax, recreate and enjoy performances—indeed, the city now sponsors a summer concert series in the park. But its location is key to its success, too—it now provides a critical link between the downtown and the Canal.



Amsterdam, NY



X-Squad Water Ski Show Team
Photo from X-Squad Facebook

Mohawk Valley Gateway Overlook Bridge

Heading back east to finish our trip, the City of Amsterdam sits on the Mohawk River section of the Erie Canal. (Its European namesake is also famously located along canals.) Like Oswego, Amsterdam straddles both sides of the Erie Canal—with a magnificent pedestrian bridge that doubles as a linear park connecting the two.

X-Squad Water Skiing Amenities

Amsterdam got really creative in maximizing the use and enjoyment of its waterfront! They're building a new dock, boat-lift and storage facility for X-Squad—a water ski show team that trains and performs weekly shows along the Mohawk River. The relocation of the X-Squad expands the City's tourism and recreation opportunities, especially during the summer months.

But there's an educational component to Amsterdam's plan, too! The X-Squad selected children from the city with passing grades; trained them; and featured them in ski shows—at no cost to their parents. Who'd have ever thought the Canal would host water-skiing shows?

South Side Boardwalk

Next up—what better way to access and enjoy the waterfront than a world-class boardwalk! Amsterdam's state-of-the-art boardwalk/linear park will transform the south side of the

Canal into a vibrant, walkable area with plenty of well-designed places

to sit, gather, interact and appreciate the waterfront with other people.

And it will connect the downtown to the Mohawk Valley Overlook Bridge.

This is what a waterfront should look and feel like.



“

Governor Hochul's DRI is one of the most effective economic development tools available to our Canal communities from Buffalo to Albany.

”

– Brian Stratton

New York State Canal Corporation Director

“

The Erie Canal provides unique heritage-based economic development opportunities for communities to attract visitors and improve local quality of life.

”

– Bob Radliff

Erie Canalway Heritage Corridor Executive Director



Department of State
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New York State's **Downtown Revitalization Initiative (DRI)** is a cornerstone of the State's economic development program. The DRI transforms downtown neighborhoods into vibrant centers that offer a high quality of life and are magnets for redevelopment, business, job creation, and economic and housing diversity. These compact, walkable downtowns are a key ingredient to helping New York State rebuild its economy from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as to achieving the State's bold climate goals by promoting the use of public transit and reducing dependence on private vehicles.

The DRI is led by the Department of State, in close partnership with Empire State Development, NYS Homes and Community Renewal and New York State Energy Research and Development Authority.

Scan the QR Code to Learn More



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