Reimagine the Canals Community Engagement Report

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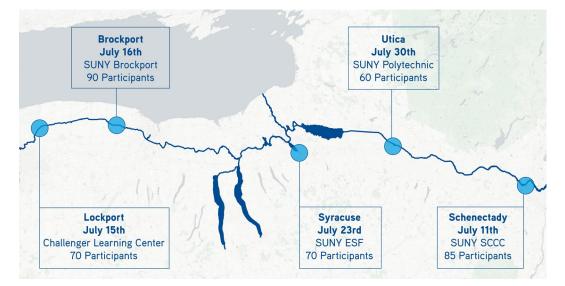
Reimagine the Canals Community Engagement Report

1. Introduction

On May 17, 2019, Governor Andrew Cuomo announced the Reimagine the Canals Initiative, which seeks to strengthen the Erie Canal for the 21st century. Engagement with the public and community stakeholders is a critical component of this initiative. As such, the *Reimagine the Canals* Task Force commissioned the Rockefeller Institute of Government (hereafter the Rockefeller Institute), a SUNY-affiliated public policy think tank, to collect data from Canal-area residents on how this historic waterway can better serve their communities. The Rockefeller Institute held **five community engagement sessions** over three weeks in July 2019. The goals of these meetings were to (1) socialize the idea of revitalizing the waterway, (2) better understand the concerns and needs of Canal users, (3) identify projects likely to increase Canal engagement, and (4) maximize outreach and press coverage to encourage participation going forward.

2. Outline of Community Engagement Sessions

FIGURE 1. Overview of Community Engagement Sessions



The Rockefeller Institute hosted five community engagement sessions across the Canal corridor. Nearly 400 people participated; dates, locations, and participation are indicated in the map above. At each meeting, participants heard from Task Force leaders and learned about *Reimagine the Canals* competition finalists, with the goal of inspiring participants to think broadly and imaginatively about the future of the Erie Canal. Facilitators from the Rockefeller Institute led small group discussions oriented around the following themes: tourism, local businesses, water recreation, land recreation, nature and the environment, history and culture, agriculture, or flooding and ice jams. A participant registration survey determined the themes. See <u>Appendix 1: Meeting Details</u> for descriptions of the outreach efforts, meeting format, and data collection methods.

3. Summary of Major Findings

Participants voiced a desire for projects and programs that allow local residents to enjoy and economically benefit from the Canal's presence. From the five meetings and dozens of discussions, one overarching vision emerged: the Erie Canal of the future will be a waterway that connects communities across New York and an attraction that draws visitors from New York and beyond. Residents and community leaders understood that to achieve this vision, the Canal must be well promoted and well maintained.

Conversations were facilitated around the eight small group discussion topics described above, each of which overlap and influence one another. For example, in discussing the creation and retention of local businesses, participants advocated for businesses focused on recreation. Canal-related tourism would greatly benefit from improved water quality. Flood mitigation protects historic sites, local businesses, homes, and public spaces.



The following key findings emerged consistently in all regions and across discussion topics.

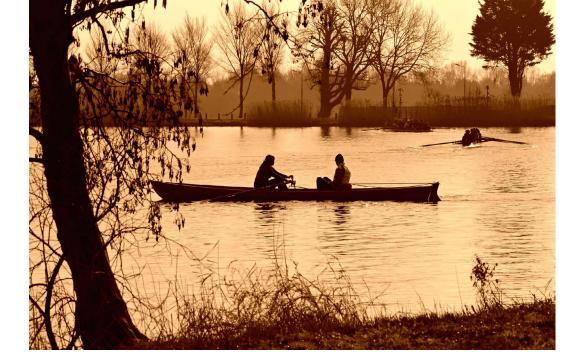
Balancing Land and Water

- Participants view the Erie Canal not solely as a waterway, but rather as an **integral component of a linear park** a scenic backdrop against which they can bike, walk, attend events, and enjoy time outdoors in proximity to fish and wildlife.
- Participants tend to use the Canal as **public space for outdoor recreation**. The most popular activity was attending events, followed by biking and exercising (namely walking or jogging). Boating was the fourth most popular activity.
- Participants, many inspired by the Pocket Neighborhoods project,¹ advocated for walkable Canal-side neighborhoods and business districts connected to the Canal by ADA-compliant paths or trailways.

Environmental Concerns

- Environmental protection and sustainability came up in all meetings. Participants particularly felt that water quality, flooding, stormwater management, and ecosystem restoration must be addressed and that they influence recreation, tourism, local businesses, and quality of life.
- Participants were universally concerned with **the spread of invasive species** and the effect that these species have on both ecosystems and water recreation, particularly around the Finger Lakes and in the Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge.

^{1 &}quot;Canalside Pocket Neighborhoods," New York State Canal Corporation, accessed September 8, 2019, http://www.canals.ny.gov/reimagine/neighbourhood.html.



Recreation and Tourism

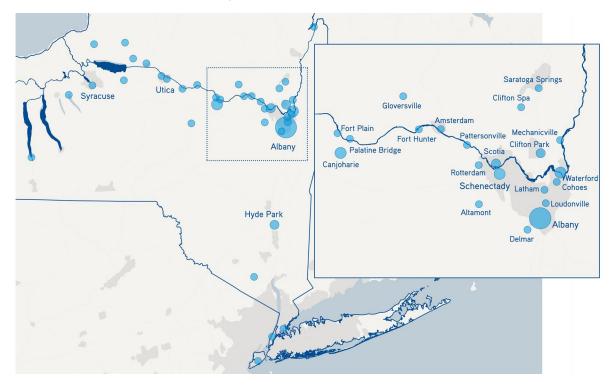
- Participants strongly expressed a desire for better recreational infrastructure, such as access points, bathrooms, information kiosks, lockers, and web-based promotions for Canal-side trips and amenities.
- There was a universal call for **improved signage** and wayfinding, helping both residents and tourists better navigate between the Canal, its adjacent towns, and Canal-side amenities.

Participants view the Canal as a connected series of sites, like "pearls on a string," as one participant put it.

- Participants are passionate about the Canal's **historic and cultural significance** and felt that its story — an important part of the American story — should be shared through improved programming and marketing.
- Participants would like to see programming that capitalizes on **local wine**, **beer**, **spirits**, **and food** production.
- Participants would like to see **enhanced coordination** among Canal-side communities. Participants view the Canal as a connected series of sites, like "pearls on a string," as one participant put it.
- To that end, participants would like to see the Canal promoted as a single entity, with **unified branding and marketing** across the Canal.

4. Mohawk Region Overview

FIGURE 2. Mohawk Region Participants



Mohawk Region residents expressed particular support for:



Improved flood control



More easily accessible docks, water recreation access, and parking



Increased opportunity for water recreation



Programming that celebrates local history



Outdoor wi-fi draw visitors to the Canal



Better maintenance of parks and public spaces

Better infrastructure for biking, kayaking, fishing, and bird watching

An extended Canal season

Canal usage in the Mohawk Region is evenly split between people who use the Canal regularly (more than 50 times per year) and occasionally (fewer than 10 times per year). Infrequent visitors primarily attend events and curated programs. Frequent visitors attend events, but they also use the Canal for everyday activities such as jogging or dog walking. This indicates the conception of the Canal as part of a linear park in which waterside activities are just as important as activities that take place on the water. Frequent and infrequent visitors represent two distinct streams of dedicated Canal visitors that *Reimagine* programming can further activate.

4.1. Dominant Themes

Flood Management and Canal Engagement: Flooding and ice jams were a distinct concern; flooding in Oneida County, Ilion, and Schenectady were noted as particularly problematic. Participants were concerned with the threat that flooding poses to historic preservation, local businesses, and homeowners, as well as its environmental impacts such as inducing pesticide runoff and topsoil loss. Participants voiced support for better stormwater management and floodplain restoration, and suggested wetland restoration and rain gardens as solutions that would complement new water management strategies.

Visions for the Future: Cleaner Water for Fishing, Swimming, and Economic Development

Dear Erie Canal: I wish you could see yourself today and, in particular, how clean you are. People actually swim and eat the fish they catch. People around the world envy how we blended environmental protection with economic prosperity. Hang in there, help is on the way!

Participants noted that many Canal communities feel cut off from the waterway by large roads or other physical impediments, suggesting that improved connectivity and investment in trails, shuttles, or other modes of access could help integrate the Canal into their daily lives.

These impediments also prevent boaters from leaving the waterway to visit local restaurants, stores, and attractions and keep local residents from engaging with the Canal regularly. Participants would also like to see the Canal become more accessible to paddlers with facilities for access, storage, and parking.

5. Central Region Overview

FIGURE 3. Central Region Participants



Central Region residents expressed particular support for:



Invasive species mitigation



Improved outdoor education



Partnership with educational institutions to improve the preservation of heritage sites



A comprehensive inventory of culturally and historically significant sites



Improved winter programming



Solutions for ice jams and stormwater overflow



Canal-side bike trails set apart from major roads

Attendees at the Central New York meeting held in Syracuse are regular canal users with three-quarters of participants using the Canal at least once a month. Participants visit the Canal in equal measure to attend events such as festivals, concerts, and fireworks displays, and for everyday activities such as biking, jogging, kayaking, birding, and spending time with family.

5.1. Dominant Themes

Environmental Restoration and Tourism: Central New York participants advocated strongly for better management of the Canal's wildlife, water quality, and environmental impacts — particularly via stormwater management, ice jam mitigation, and the control of invasive species. Efforts to restore the natural environment were seen as beneficial to ecosystems and to local economies in the form of increased tourism around birding, fishing, and other forms of ecotourism. Participants were particularly concerned about the spread of invasive species in the Finger

Visions for the Future: The Canal as the Center of Community

My dear Erie Canal: It's amazing to see the changes since we began using ecological design to manage stormwater runoff. Children have adapted to playgrounds with permeable surfaces, and revenue is **flowing** through Canal communities.

Love, Canal 2050

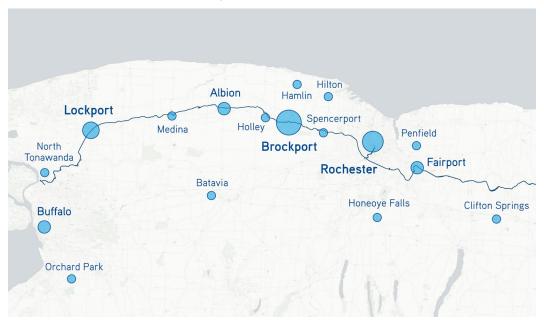
Lakes and the protection of the Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge, an important bird habitat. They advocated for the restoration of riparian corridors and wetlands, noting that these processes would benefit native species such as migratory fish, and, via their impact on the water table and Canal-area waterways, could also help foster the growth of native plants and wildlife in forest environments.

To further Central New York's commitment to nature and the environment, participants suggested investment in STEAM-based educational opportunities. These included developing curricula for local schools that use the Canal to teach science and history and developing more robust outdoor education facilities and curricula focused on both the waterway and its wildlife. One elementary-school-aged participant noted that she did not even think of the Canal as a waterway analogous to rivers and streams, illustrating the necessity of integrating the Canal with the surrounding natural environment.



6. Western Region Overview

FIGURE 4. Western Region Participants



Western Region residents expressed particular support for:



Invasive species mitigation

Addressing sewage overflow in the Canal



Flood mitigation

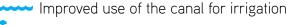
Improved support for fishing along Canal-adjacent streams



Improved coordination between Canal-side towns for promoting events and recreation opportunities



New zoning and tax breaks to encourage business and residential development along the Canal



Improved winter programming



Improved recreational infrastructure such as bathrooms, lockers, information kiosks, and boat ramps



ADA-compliant Canal-side facilities and access points

Signage to help visitors navigate between the Canal and adjacent communities

Improved marketing of historic sites



The heaviest Canal usage amongst attendees at the series of outreach meetings was in the Western Region. Almost half of all respondents citing weekly or daily visits. This is likely due to the Canal's relatively small size and placid waters in comparison with other regions, as well as proximity to the Empire State Trail, which is complete in this region and set apart from main roads. It is in this region that the Canal most clearly emerges as a linear park oriented towards locals' everyday recreation, with residents expressing their satisfaction with the Canal as a site for biking, walking, jogging, attending events, and spending time with family.

6.1 Dominant Themes

Agriculture and Irrigation: Agriculture is a dominant force in the Western New York economy, and the Canal plays a role in agricultural irrigation today. Participants would like to see an increase in the number of siphons available without changes to regulation and permitting, and advocated for continued access to inexpensive Canal water. They noted labor shortages and the lack of existing pathways to market for high-value crops as potential concerns were they to implement the agricultural practices suggested by Reimagine finalists. Participants were also concerned with how both flooding and flood mitigation would affect the availability of Canal water for irrigation. Participants suggested developing stronger ties between New York State agriculture and tourism via events, such as food festivals, and partnering with foodadjacent businesses such as wine, beer, and spirits producers.

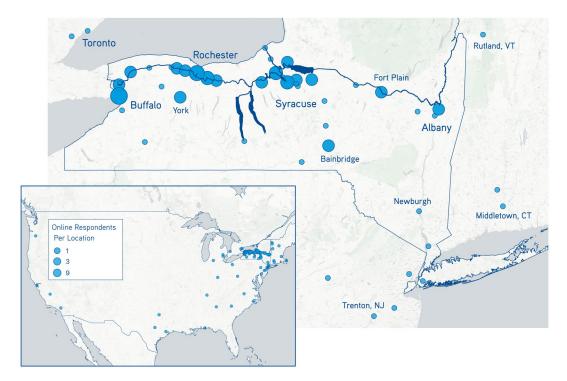
Visions for the Future: The Canal as the Center of Community

Dear 2019: We did it! The Canal has become vibrant, energized, inviting, eco-friendly, and inclusive. I'm enjoying the view now from my condo patio, impressed by the number of bikers, walkers, and boaters utilizing the trails and pedestrian loop. I plan to walk to a local restaurant for a bite to eat. You'll be so proud!

Love, Erie Canal 2050

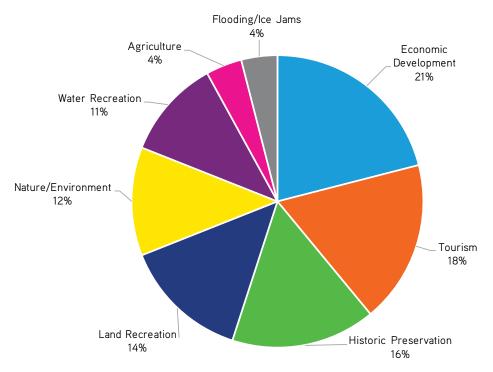
7. Continued Online Input

FIGURE 5. The Locations of Online Respondents



On July 1st, 2019, NY.gov launched a website where members of the public can submit their feedback to the *Reimagine the Canals* community engagement team. As of September 10th, 2019, the website has received 132 online submissions, nearly half of which came from participants located near the Erie Canal.

In comparison with event participants, online respondents were more concerned with water recreation and tourism, and less concerned with daily or year-round Canal usage and the economic and environmental interdependence between the Canal and adjacent communities. The online respondents heavily favor boating and Canal-side restaurants, and their concerns lean heavily towards water recreation and tourism, indicating that these respondents are vacationing boaters.



7.1 Comparing Event Participants and Online Respondents

FIGURE 6A. Topics of Greatest Interest to Event Participants

SOURCE: Eventbrite registration survey.

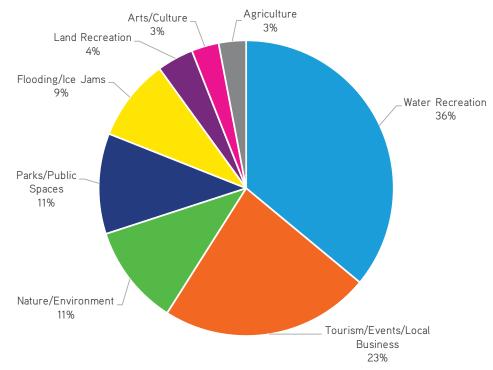


FIGURE 6B. Topics of Greatest Interest to Online Respondents

SOURCE: NY.gov Reimagine the Canals survey.

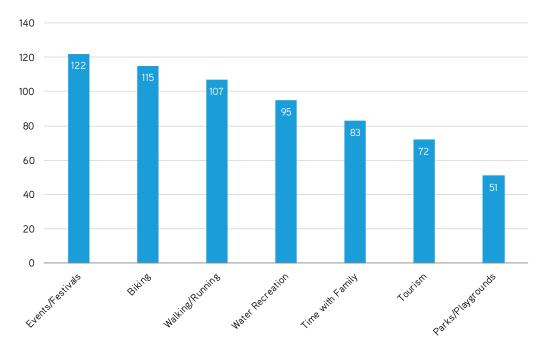


FIGURE 7A. Canal Usage Among Event Participants

SOURCE: Rockefeller Institute of Government survey.

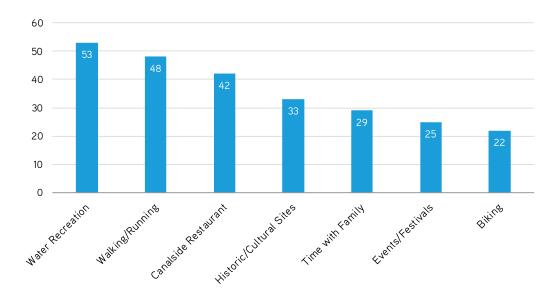


FIGURE 7B. Canal Usage Among Online Respondents

SOURCE: NY.gov Reimagine the Canals survey.

Appendices

Appendix 1. Meeting Details

1.1. Meeting Promotion

The Rockefeller Institute targeted a broad, diverse, and inclusive body of participants representative of Canal communities — an important goal for such a wide-ranging initiative as *Reimagine*. Press releases, media advisories, social media outlets, and emails were used to publicize the meetings to local news channels and media outlets, elected officials, neighborhood associations, and business organizations. The Rockefeller Institute also identified relevant organizations, institutions, and community groups, in consultation with the Canal Corporation, with whom we communicated via Facebook and email. The Rockefeller Institute focused outreach on groups dedicated to topics important to the Canal, such as historic preservation, environmental protection, and water recreation, among other topics, as well as on groups that serve populations underrepresented in upstate New York, such as communities of color. Coupled with more broadly based outreach such as earned media via local NPR affiliates, news stations, and paid Facebook advertising, this targeted outreach maximized the number of viewpoints and perspectives that would be represented during the community engagement sessions.

1.2. Meeting Format

The format of the meetings was designed to maximize participant engagement and generate conversation in an open-ended manner. Current thinking in public administration encourages engagement with affected communities at all stages of large-scale projects. The exercise is important for increasing the legitimacy and accountability of the policymaking process, increasing local communities' ownership of decisions, identifying unintended consequences on the local scale that had not been identified by planners, and tapping into local knowledge to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of public services. The meeting format design was based on current best practices in community engagement to maximize the aforementioned goals.

Participants were encouraged to think about ideas big and small, high level and granular, immediate and long term — facilitators made clear that no ideas were out of bounds. Data collection efforts were built into the process at all levels generating eight data streams noted as bold numbered entries in the following meeting agenda. The Rockefeller Institute analyzed data from all of these sources. Prior to attending, participants were encouraged to RSVP and **(1) provide input via Eventbrite**.

1.2.2. Introducing Reimagine

Goal: Introduce participants to the Reimagine project and inspire participants to think broadly and imaginatively about what could be

• Upon arrival and registration, participants were invited to view a gallery with 11 36 x 48 inch poster boards, each organized around a Canal-related theme, which depicted projects proposed for the 2017 *Reimagine the Canals* competition and precedent projects from around the world.

- As participants browsed the image gallery, they were invited to fill out a double-sided response card. One side collected information about (2) how participants currently use the Canal, and the other side invited them to write (3) a postcard to their present selves from the imagined perspective of the year 2050 at which point, the card indicated, *Reimagine* had been wildly successful. The postcards helped to spark participants' imaginations, and helped the Institute understand how the public envisioned a successful *Reimagine* process.
- Brian Stratton, the director of the NYS Canal Corporation, gave welcoming remarks, as did the Task Force cochair representing each location's region. (In the case of the Western Region, Cochair Bob Duffy was represented by his chief of staff.) Laura Schultz from the Rockefeller Institute then introduced the evening's proceedings and situated them as an outgrowth of the *Reimagine* competition; participants watched a video on the *Reimagine* finalist projects.
- The speakers described the Erie Canal's multiple reimaginations and how the evening's events would feed into the Task Force process, with the understanding that participants would be more engaged if they better understood the import of their participation and how the resulting data would be used. Participants then broke into facilitated small group discussions.



A discussion facilitator references the image gallery in Schenectady.

1.2.3. Brainstorming Exercise

Goal: Generate excitement for potential Canal projects and identify areas important to Canal communities

- Participants sat at breakout tables, each focused on one of eight themes: tourism, local businesses, water recreation, land recreation, nature and the environment, history and heritage, agriculture, and flooding and ice jams. The distribution of tables was determined by participants' Eventbrite input. Each table had a facilitator trained by the Rockefeller Institute, and around 10 community members. Discussion focused on two questions:
 - What ideas would you like to see implemented with regards to the theme of your table?
 - What challenges do you foresee for that implementation?
- Participants (4) wrote answers to the questions on sticky notes. Based on the discussions, facilitators moved the sticky notes around on paperboards, annotated the boards, and used them as a tool to keep the conversation dynamic and make sure that all voices were heard.



A small group discussion in Lockport.

1.2.4. Conclusion

Goal: Share the results of the breakout sessions amongst the group as a whole and inform participants of next steps

• Facilitators (5) presented brief summaries of their discussions to all participants. Following each event, they also (6) provided the Institute with more detailed summaries.

- Participants were invited to (7) share final thoughts on a response card. Facilitators asked them which idea excited you them most. Were there any last thoughts that hadn't been addressed?
- Laura Schultz, representing the Institute, thanked everyone for their participation and invited them to keep the conversation going online through the aforementioned (8) website for online input.

1.3. Post-Event

Post-event follow-up had three main components: press coverage, documentation online, and the continued collection of input via an online platform, discussed in <u>Section 7</u>.

1.3.1. Press Coverage

Prior to each event, the Rockefeller Institute reached out to local press requesting that they cover the event. Goals for media engagement were (1) to maximize awareness of the *Reimagine* initiative and the community engagement process, (2) maximize participation in the community engagement process, and (3) communicate to the public that this process is ongoing, and that they can find information about its progress and submit further feedback on the *Reimagine the Canals* website.

| News Outlet | Туре | Date(s) |
|------------------------------|---|-----------|
| Daily Gazette | Schenectady newspaper | July 11th |
| | | July 11th |
| Lockport Union-Sun & Journal | Lockport newspaper | July 12th |
| | | July 21st |
| Times Union | Albany newspaper | July 12th |
| WAMC-FM | Albany radio | July 12th |
| Buffalo News | Buffalo newspaper | July 13th |
| Orleans Hub | Orleans County newspaper | July 15th |
| WBFO-FM | Buffalo radio | July 16th |
| WROC-TV | Rochester television | July 16th |
| NewYorkUpstate.com | Central New York State online news outlet | July 16th |
| Syracuse.com | Syracuse online news outlet | July 24th |
| WRVO-FM | Syracuse radio | July 25th |
| Rome Sentinel | Rome newspaper | July 27th |
| Eagle Bulletin | Syracuse newspaper | July 29th |
| Baldwinsville Messenger | Baldwinsville newspaper | July 29th |
| WKTV-TV | Utica television | July 30th |

The most notable press coverage was a front-page article in the *Times Union* of Albany on July 15, 2019. The above news outlets reported on the community engagement sessions in July 2019. Note that many of these news outlets serve regional markets and are not limited to the cities in which they are based.

1.3.2. Documentation Online

On the *Reimagine the Canals* initiative website, the section "Public Meetings" details the events that were held in July 2019. The public can view photos of each event and read a synopsis of the event's activities. The site includes a link to the page where members of the public can provide input online.

Appendix 2. Eventbrite Pre-Event Registration Information

The Eventbrite platform was used to collect information from people preregistering for the event. Data were collected on each registrant's location, age, professional affiliation, and Canal usage. Attendees were asked to identify two topics they were most interested in discussing at the upcoming event; the results are illustrated in Figure 6A.

Appendix 3. Canal Usage Survey and Postcard from the Future

The following double-sided card was given to meeting participants upon arrival:

| 1. | How many times have you visited Erie Canal sites in the last 12 months? | | |
|----|--|---|---|
| 2. | What is your favorite spot | to visit on the Canal? Lock a | 10 |
| 3. | What activities brought you to the Canal last year? (Check all that apply) | | |
| | Event/festival | Rowing | Boating/paddling Dog walking |
| | Fishing Family time | Parks/Playground | Sporting activity Tourism (out of town guests) Other (please specify) |
| 4. | | you did at an Erie Canal site in the la | |

A completed response card, Utica.

Postcard from the Future

It is the year 2050, and Reimagine the Canals has been wildly successful. Also, time travel is possible. Write a postcard from the Erie Canal 2050 to the Erie Canal 2019. What does your community look like? How do you people use the Erie Although this is from the future, one thing is still true, Sylvan Beach + the canats have allowed good friends Canal in 2050? fram many places to meet + share. Thanks For coming and KES - you can borrow my Jet - Pack!... Reimagine

A completed postcard from the future, Utica.

Places and events that were highlighted by multiple participants:

- Mohawk Region: Popular events in the region included the Tugboat Roundup in Waterford, the Mohawk Harbor Jam concert series in Schenectady, the Cardboard Boat Races in Schuylerville, and the Bellamy Harbor Canalfest in Rome.
- Central Region: Locations that residents particularly enjoy include the DeWitt Towpath, Brewerton Range Rear Lighthouse, Chittenango Landing, the Canal Boat Museum, and the stretches of the Canal near the towns of Pittsford, Fairport, and Oswego.
- Western Region: Biking and walking the towpath are popular pastimes, as are attending festivals and events such as the summer concert series in Medina and Batavia.

The inspiration for Postcard from the Future came from the conference "Materializing the Future, Speculative Design: Post-petroleum Utopias" held at the University of Chicago in May 2019, and from Ken Eklund's keynote address. Note that the Visions of the Future in this report are amalgamations of postcards from each region and reflect a synthesis of the concerns addressed across postcards in that region.

Appendix 4. Facilitator Reports

Upon completion of each event, facilitators debriefed with the community engagement team, and then completed a report detailing the discussions that took place at their table. Each report highlighted the five opportunities related to the theme of the table that participants were most interested in seeing implemented, as well as the five challenges that participants foresaw for the implementation of those opportunities. Facilitators were given the opportunity to elaborate and summarize general themes that came up during the discussions. They then answered the following questions: What topic was the group most passionate about? What topic(s) were the source of the most disagreement/debate? Is there anyone we [the Institute] should follow up with? In addition, the team took pictures of all discussion boards and sticky notes for future reference.

Appendix 5. Online Input

The website for online input is structured as follows:

1. In your opinion, which two topics are most important to the Erie Canal's future?

Water-Based Recreation; Land-Based Recreation; Arts and Culture; Parks and Canalside Public Spaces; Flood Control; Nature and the Environment; Tourism/ Events/Local Businesses; Agriculture

- 2. How many times have you visited Erie Canal sites in the last 12 months?
- 3. What's your favorite spot to visit on the Canal?
- 4. What activities brought you to the Canal in the last year? Check all that apply.

Event/Festival; Bike Trail; Fishing; Family Time; Exercise; Parks/Playground; Winter Activities; Motor Boating; Rowing/Kayaking/Paddling; Camping; Hiking; Beer or Wine Tour; Historic/Cultural Site; Canalside Restaurant; Dog Walking; Your Job; Tourism (Out-of-Town Guests)

- 5. What is your primary Canal activity?
- 6. What new opportunities would you like to see implemented on or along the Canal?
- 7. When do you typically visit the Canal? Check all that apply.

Summer; Fall; Winter; Spring; Weekends; Weekdays; Mornings; Midday; Evenings

- 8. What is your favorite thing you did at the Erie Canal in the last 12 months? Why?
- 9. How might the canal better serve your community in the future?
- 10. What do you wish more people knew about the Canal?
- 11. Any other feedback, ideas, or observations that you'd like us to know about?

First Name *; Last Name *; Email Address *; Hometown; Age; Job; Company/ Organization



ABOUT THE ROCKEFELLER INSTITUTE

Created in 1981, the Rockefeller Institute of Government is a public policy think tank providing cutting-edge, evidence-based policy. Our mission is to improve the capacities of communities, state and local governments, and the federal system to work toward genuine solutions to the nation's problems. Through rigorous, objective, and accessible analysis and outreach, the Institute gives citizens and governments facts and tools relevant to public decisions.

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