

Downtown Albany canal idea gains influential supporters, money for study

By [Michael DeMasi](#) – Reporter, Albany Business Review
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What sounded far-fetched more than 25 years ago — diverting the Hudson River through part of downtown Albany to create a canal that would become a signature attraction in the state capital — now has the backing of a growing group of influential business, government and civic leaders.

And, most critically, there is also funding to study the concept of digging up a portion of Broadway from the SUNY Administration headquarters to the area around the former Central Warehouse nearly a mile north, and having river water flow in between.

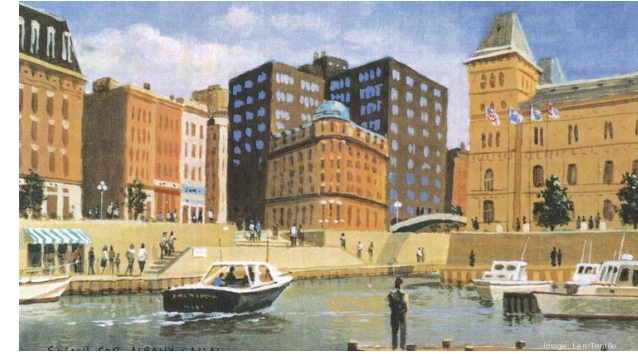
“I want to know how much of this is possible,” said [Len Tantillo](#), the local maritime and historical artist who got an enthusiastic response when he conceived the idea in the mid-1990s but never saw it examined by engineers.

“When that feasibility study is completed, then I would say to the city, here’s the idea, and the pathway to execute it,” he said. “Now it’s up to you.”

Tantillo is a founding member of Albany Waterway Inc., a not-for-profit created in April by a small group of volunteers convinced the project would be a transformative investment — similar to what canals have done for downtown Buffalo; Providence, Rhode Island; San Antonio, Texas and other cities.

The fledgling group has quickly grown to more than 300 members; [created a website touting the idea](#); hosted a presentation in July by the international design firm Sasaki explaining why an Albany canal is feasible; talked to neighborhood groups; printed a colorful brochure outlining the concept; and started raising money for research and promotion.

A list of the group's "friends" includes Heather Briccetti, president and CEO of The Business Council of New York; Albany County Airport Authority CEO Phil Calderone; Discover Albany President and CEO Jill Delaney; commercial real estate broker Tracy Metzger; restaurateur Dominick Purnomo; and Capitalize Albany President Sarah Reginelli.



Artist Len Tantillo's original vision for how a canal and boat basin would look if built in front of the SUNY Administration headquarters building in downtown Albany.

“Policymakers need to know our vision,” said [Bartley J. “BJ” Costello III](#), a veteran local attorney who is principal of Hinman Straub PC on State Street and chairman of Albany Waterway.

“When people ask the question 'How much will this cost?' I always say the real question is what’s the economic impact and what happens if you don’t do it? I think that’s the way to look at it,” said Costello, also board chairman of the USS Slater, a restored World War II destroyer escort ship moored on the Hudson River a few blocks off Broadway.

Downtown Albany needs a daily attraction that will draw more visitors and spur further investments, Costello said.

A canal would also help the city contend with rising sea levels due to climate change by relieving pressure from flooding, based on what a retired hydrologic engineer has told the group.

The concept took a significant step forward when the state Department of Transportation released a “request for qualifications” in mid-August for architecture and engineering firms to “reimagine” Interstate 787 in Albany.

The feasibility study will examine a wide range of ideas that have been suggested over the years to reconnect downtown with the waterfront — places now separated by the multi-lane highway and ramps except for two pedestrian bridges.

The analysis will include “canal/waterways,” according to the RFQ. The deadline to respond was Sept. 12. The state has not yet disclosed how many architecture and engineering firms expressed interest in the contract for the study.

Costello and Tantillo know there will be skeptics and doubters, an understandable reaction given the grand ideas that have been floated over the years for Albany ([a gondola over the Hudson River](#)) or proposed redevelopments that have been mired in litigation or haven't gone beyond ambitious renderings on paper ([Central Warehouse](#), [Liberty Park](#), [the "Nipper" building](#) and [Kenwood Convent](#)).

"I think every great idea you’ve seen in America has happened because someone has a vision and you get people behind it," Costello, 78, said. "There’s always a lot of naysayers. Here’s an idea that we think has a lot of merit."

Assemblywoman [Pat Fahy](#) of Albany pushed for the inclusion of \$5 million in the state budget for the Interstate 787 study, and for the Department of Transportation to include the idea of a canal among various scenarios.

"All of these need to be looked at in terms of the cost and the return on investment," Fahy said. "Right near Central Warehouse is where the original Lock 1 is for the Erie Canal."



Bartley J. "BJ" Costello III, left, and artist Len Tantillo on Broadway in downtown Albany near the SUNY Administration headquarters. They are founding members of Albany Waterway Inc., a

Uncovering and restoring Lock 1 — an archaeological dig 20 years ago found the top of the lock is less than 2 feet below the street — could be a more manageable first step to build public and political support on spending the money for a canal.

"You could take that lock and turn it into a park just to start with," Tantillo said. "You'd be able to go see the original Lock 1 of the Erie Canal of the mid-19th century."

A canal would not be in lieu of other ideas for reimagining the highway, Fahy said.

A different group, [Albany Riverfront Collaborative](#), has suggested converting a portion of 787 into a boulevard with lighted intersections that connect with the existing street grid.

[Scott Townsend](#), a Troy architect who has spearheaded the collaborative, wrote in an email that the group "believes in co-creation and including a wide variety of community voices in the process of redesigning Albany's waterfront, particularly those who have been left out of the decision-making in the past."

"We believe this process of community inclusion must come before we can offer any design proposal," Townsend wrote.

"The communities along the waterfront, including those who have been cut off from the city and the river by I-787, know what they need."

[Tantillo has had a long, successful career](#) painting vivid renderings of historical scenes — such as the first Dutch settlement in Albany in 1635 — based on his extensive research of maps, letters and other documents.

Years ago, Tantillo was struck by the fact the original shoreline arc of the Hudson River near Albany was parallel to where Broadway is today. The entire arc formed a massive harbor enclosed by a wharf. The starting point of the 1840 Erie Canal was at the north end of that basin.

Starting in the 1950s and 60s, the construction of I-787 gradually filled in the basin.

"The river is now half as wide as it once was," Tantillo said.

He created a PowerPoint explaining this history, with detailed renderings of how the river could be reconnected to downtown without interfering with the highway, demolishing any buildings, and keeping a section of Broadway open to local traffic.

He and Costello have visited other cities with canals and seen how people interact with them, whether strolling along on a summer day or skating on them in winter.

"There is an intimacy about the environment of a canal," Tantillo said. "They're narrow. You can see a friend on the other side, walk over a pedestrian bridge and have lunch. That's not an experience you have with a river. When you go to the Corning Preserve [on the Hudson River] and look out, it doesn't have any vitality other than when something goes past. There's no pedestrian energy there. Canals are human scale."

Tantillo, who is 76 years old, added, "Somebody told me once, 'Len, you will never live long enough to see this.' You know what I say? I can already see it."

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