

Albany Canal Project Gets a Boost

By Paul Grondahl

“We toured the site, reviewed the great work by the board of Albany Waterway, Inc. and determined that the canal proposal is not only feasible, but it is an incredible project that would transform Albany,” said Susannah Drake, a principal at Sasaki, an acclaimed global design located in Brooklyn, New York.

Drake and her associates described major waterway projects they completed in Brooklyn, Boston and Washington, D.C. and praised a proposal to create a one-mile canal that would bring the Hudson River into downtown Albany during a breakfast meeting at the Fort Orange Club in Albany on July 20. The event was hosted by Albany Waterway, Inc., a newly formed not-for-profit group of volunteer organizers focused on overcoming Interstate 787’s barrier to Hudson River access by creating a canal that channels the Hudson River into the northern end of the city beneath a highway overpass and returns to the Hudson in the southern end of downtown beneath a highway overpass. It includes excavation and restoration of an intact Lock No. 1 of the Erie Canal. No traffic patterns, utilities, infrastructure or buildings would be disturbed.

Cognizant of failed previous proposals over several decades to ameliorate the highway barrier in downtown Albany, the group’s motto is this: “Instead of trying to bring the city to the river, we will bring the river to the city.” The meeting was attended by 50 civic leaders, engineers, local elected officials and members of the state Assembly and Senate representing the Capital Region.

The transformative Albany Canal project would restore a once-bustling riverfront filled in during the 1960s highway construction by creating marinas and public spaces along the new canal. It would revitalize the city’s moribund core by spurring dynamic economic development including cafes, restaurants and boutiques. It has the added incentive of offering a solution to climate change’s rising river levels and increasingly frequent flooding events in downtown Albany.

“This is a perfect opportunity to marry an economic development initiative with a flood mitigation project that will ensure that downtown Albany will be a vibrant place for generations to come,” said Albany Mayor Kathy Sheehan. She noted that she recently returned from a European tour where many cities have completed or are undertaking similar canal projects that address rising sea levels and also create exciting new public spaces.

Assembly member Pat Fahy, who secured a \$5 million budget item from the office of Gov. Kathy Hochul, noted the success of Buffalo’s new Canalside downtown waterfront development and similar projects being advanced in Rochester and Syracuse.

“I’m very excited about the Albany canal project,” Fahy said. “I’m inspired that we are moving forward.” Fahy worked for more than three years to secure the \$5 million funding, which will be overseen by the state’s Department of Transportation. The next step will be for DOT to seek RFPs (requests for proposals) for an engineering feasibility study and cost estimate for the Albany canal project along with two other waterfront redevelopment proposals that involve capping the highway with green space and tearing down a bridge to increase pedestrian access to the river. For more information, go to the website: <https://www.albanywaterway.org/>