

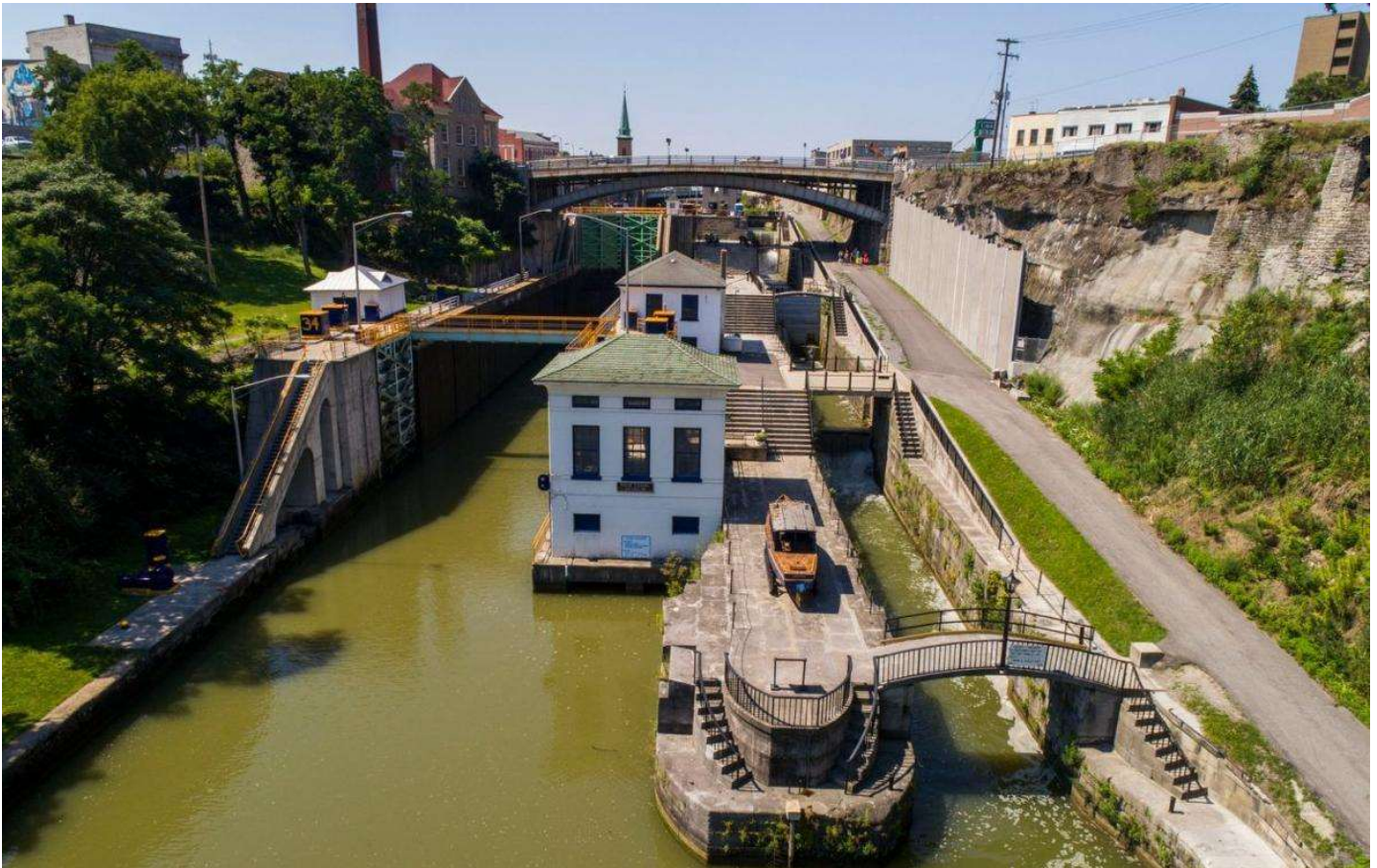
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## Boaters worry, but official says 'we are serious about investing' in Erie Canal

Thomas J. Prohaska

Mar 1, 2021

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In this view of the Erie Canal locks at Lockport, the two modern locks are on the left and the 19th century Flight of Five is on the right.

Derek Gee

Thomas J. Prohaska

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he \$1.4 billion the New York Power Authority has committed to spending on the state's canal system over the next 10 years should encourage users of the historic waterway, and that's on top of the \$300 million supposed to be spent under the state's Reimagining the Canals program, the authority's top official said.

But authority President and CEO Gil C. Quiniones acknowledged actions – not just words – will be needed to convince them.

"We are not shutting down the canals. We are not shutting down sections of the canals," Quiniones said in an interview with The Buffalo News. "The tour boats, the larger boaters, the historic preservationists, there should be no concern. Our visions are aligned."

His comments came as he sought to reassure critics who believe the authority, the parent agency of the state Canal Corp., aims to reduce the Erie Canal's expense by reducing its use. And they're also concerned about a new measure in Albany they fear would reduce public input into the canal's future.

Two weeks ago, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo sent the state Legislature a new **Canal System Revitalization Act** among a stack of budget amendments. As it now stands, the canal measure would not be voted on separately from the other budget bills.

The measure would abolish the Canal Recreationway Commission, in existence since 1992, and create a new public benefit corporation to be named the Canal System Revitalization Trust.

The trust would have the power to buy and sell property and make grants to any person or group that might advance its goals. It could arrange payments in lieu of taxes to local governments when the trust takes property off the tax rolls.

The NYPA would also be allowed to impose tolls on the canals, while abolishing the requirement for public hearings if tolls are planned. The measure includes no provision for public input into any of the proposed trust's actions.

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"You won't have any input in anything they're planning to do," said Mike Murphy, owner of Lockport Locks and Erie Canal Cruises and a frequent NYPA critic. "There's nothing you can do. They can do anything they want."

"We believe that actions taken with respect to our National Historic Landmark treasure should be done with transparency and thorough, meaningful public engagement," the Preservation League of New York said in a statement that also criticized the new trust as a "largely governor-controlled entity."

"We believe the act's last-minute introduction during the end of the budget process is an indication of the administration's strategy to minimize debate and control outcomes," said Scott Croft, vice president of public affairs for the Boat Owners Association of the United States, a group of recreational boaters.

"It is important that this 30-day amendment be stopped so that the proposal can receive the thorough review and public comment it deserves," said David Granoff, chairman of the private promotion agency Canal New York.

According to the Canal System Revitalization Act, the trust board would be composed of 12 members: three state agency/authority heads and nine appointed individuals knowledgeable about economic development and planning, tourism, engineering, outdoor recreation, historic preservation, commercial farming or aquatic ecosystems.

Cuomo, the Assembly speaker and the Senate majority leader would each choose three members.

"It's independent of NYPA. It's nine individuals, only three state entity officials," said Vince Esposito, assistant general counsel for the power authority. "I think this was a conscious attempt to make the board fairly balanced."

"If we wanted to control this, all nine would have been gubernatorial appointees," Quiniones said.

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The power authority's stewardship of the canal has drawn criticism from canal stakeholders.

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A citizen advisory committee created by state law hasn't met since the power authority took over the canal from the Thruway Authority in 2017. The length of the navigation season has been reduced. And business people whose livelihoods depend on the waterway have said they find it hard to find someone at the power authority to talk to.

"I understand that showing them specific actions will prove our point and will convince them that what I am saying is exactly what we mean," Quiniones said. "You will see by our actions, not just by our words today, that we are serious about investing in this very historic and very important asset of the state. We believe the benefits can be increased significantly, but we need to be smart in how we invest that \$1.7 billion over the next 10 years."

According to the NYPA budget, the canal will cost \$88 million to operate this year, plus \$40 million in major construction and maintenance projects, while earning only \$1.5 million in revenue. On the other hand, NYPA's budget projects an overall operating profit of \$319.6 million.

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### **Thomas J. Prohaska**

Reporter

I have covered Niagara County for The Buffalo News since 1995, when I joined the paper after 10 years as news director at WLVL in Lockport.

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