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State figures show
Champlain Canal use
leveled off in '99

By Judy Bernstein, Staff Writer



Monty Calvert file photo

A sailboat motors into Lock 7 of the Champlain Canal in Fort Edward as the craft makes its way north through the canal system. Overall use of the Champlain Canal dropped by 2 percent last summer, with Lock 7 dropping 6 percent.

Use of the Champlain Canal appears to have leveled off after several years of growth, even as state and federal money is being pumped into renovations of the canal and to help boost canal communities.

Use of the Champlain Canal dropped by 2 percent last summer while use of the entire state canal system rose just 0.03 percent, according to newly released figures from the state Canal Corp.

Along the Champlain Canal, which runs from Waterford to Lake Champlain, use was down at every lock, the biggest drops at Fort Edward's Lock 7 and Whitehall's Lock 12, with 6 and 7 percent fewer raisings of the locks, respectively.

Terry O'Brien, a spokesman for the Canal Corp., which released the figures showing the number of times locks were raised, said the Canal Corp. wasn't concerned about the figures.

"We're satisfied the canal is getting a lot of use. It's hard to sustain a continued growth in anything, whether it's the state economy or this," O'Brien said.

There likely isn't a single cause with such a small fluctuation, he said.

In Fort Edward, though, Pamela Brooks, president of the Chamber of Commerce, said lack of canal dredging near the yacht basin in that village could account for some of the local drop-off.

She said boaters who travel the Champlain Canal have an effective "hot line" to communicate news of conditions to each other.

With the silt near the yacht basin having built up so high that larger boats get stuck, boaters could easily be deciding to stay away, she said, adding that the waterway is less than the 12 feet in depth needed to be navigable.

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Business in Fort Edward was also slow last summer, Brooks said.

"Boats can't get in here. With boats down, business was down," she said.

The chamber is gathering signatures on a petition it will send to state and federal officials in an attempt to get the area dredged, she said.

Boaters in Fort Edward also have the option of following the canal along a branch that leads up to Whitehall. Numbers at those locks were also down.

In Whitehall, Heritage Area Director Carol Greenough said she was surprised at the numbers because business is believed to have been up last summer.

Whitehall Downtown Business Association President David L. Mohn said business may have been up, in part, because of a cruise boat that anchored in the canal and ran several trips per day, which drew people who arrived by land.

In the past few years, the Canal Corp. has attributed its strong growth to a multimillion-dollar revitalization project under way and its promotion of the canal.

The canal system is being overhauled and separate projects will link the state canal with private economic development projects in communities along the routes. The land-based projects aim to spruce up parks and improve walkways and lighting, thereby helping to draw tourists by land and by boat.

The Canal Corp., an arm of the Thruway Authority, announced a \$32 million, five-year project in 1996 to help communities develop attractions along the canals. Even more cash came from a \$120 million, six-year revitalization project announced in 1997 to repair and maintain the canal's infrastructure and keep it navigable.

At least \$7 million more was provided by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to help revitalize communities along the canal system.

To monitor boat traffic levels, the state keeps track of the number of times boats pass through locks during the canal season, which runs from May to November. The locks raise or lower boats to allow them to pass from one part of the canal to the next.

The state figures reflect the number of times locks were raised and lowered, not the exact number of boats that pass through a lock. Several boats could pass through a lock at once.

In addition, some cautioned that interpreting the figures for a particular canalside community can be difficult because some boats can pass through just a few and turn around, or no locks at all.

Along the Champlain Canal, the locks were raised 23,828 times in the entire canal system in 1999, which runs as far west as Lake Erie, the locks were raised 141,965 times, 36 more times than in 1998.

Staff writer Judy Bernstein may be reached at bernst@poststar.com

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