Commentary: Empire State Trail is reviving towns that progress passed by

Nearly half of communities within five miles of the trail lack a safe connection to it. Now that we have proof of its economic benefits, let's get them linked up.

By **Jeff Olson**, *For the Times Union*
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Gift Article



Cyclists on a tandem bike traverse a section of the Empire State Trail in East Greenbush in 2022.
Lori Van Buren/Times Union

I spent more than 30 years building greenways across America before helping create the Empire State Trail, and in every one of those projects the hardest part was convincing people that a trail could change the economic life of the communities it ran through.

A landmark new economic impact study from Parks & Trails New York has now answered that question with finality: $1.87 billion in annual output, nearly 10,000 jobs, $206 million in tax revenue and a $5.43 return on every public dollar invested.

But the statewide numbers, as striking as they are, obscure the more important story.

Two-thirds of the Empire State Trail — 540 of its 750 miles — run through communities the state classifies as economically distressed. These are not the places that conventional economic development tools reach easily. They are canal towns and legacy cities and rural villages that have spent decades watching investment flow elsewhere. The trail reaches them anyway, because it runs where it runs, through the working landscape of the state rather than around it. The study's community case studies show what that looks like in practice.

In Rome, a city of 32,000 on the Erie Canal, trail investment prompted local restaurants and lodging operators to adapt their businesses for cyclists, while the city built connections between the trailhead and its downtown that turned pass-through traffic into local spending. In Newark, a Wayne County village of 9,000, the trail's presence helped attract a $10 million Downtown Revitalization Initiative award, which is now financing waterfront improvements and the conversion of vacant industrial buildings into housing. In –2-

Schuylerville, nonprofit partners built heritage tourism programming around the trail's trailhead — connecting visitors to Revolutionary War sites that keep people in the community for days rather than hours. In New Paltz, a single 1.7-mile gap closure in June 2025 knitted together a regional trail network built over a century and made it accessible to a statewide and national audience for the first time.

The study puts precise numbers to this pattern: More than a quarter of businesses near the trail cite it as a decisive factor in their location decision, and those businesses attribute an average of 26% of their annual revenue directly to the trail. Homes within reach of the corridor carry a 14% price premium. More than 40% of nearby businesses invest in physical improvements — bike racks, access points, signage — to capture trail traffic.

These are not passive spillover effects. They are the deliberate choices of business owners and property owners who have watched the trail change their market and responded accordingly.

Roughly 265 miles of the Empire State Trail remain on-road, and nearly half the communities within five miles of the trail still lack a safe connection to it. Off-road segments generate four times the economic return of on-road ones, making every unfinished gap a missed opportunity.

Parks & Trails New York has proposed closing those gaps and extending the network by nearly 1,000 miles into Long Island, Western New York, the Catskills and the Champlain Valley. The communities along the trail already know this investment works, and the data now proves it. The question for Albany is simple: With evidence this strong, what is New York waiting for?

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