

**JULY 15, 2021**

# **ERIE CANAL 2025 AT CANALSIDE VISITOR EXPERIENCE PLANNING: PHASE I**



**PREPARED BY BMC CONSULTING  
FOR THE ERIE CANAL HARBOR DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION**

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# Visitor Experience Planning: Erie Canal 2025 @ Canalside Vision

## Visitor Experience Planning

Applying the **VEP** process to Erie Canal 2025 at Canalside provides all stakeholders with an essential planning tool to return to throughout project development and implementation to keep it on course.

### I. Process

The VEP process for Erie Canal 2025 at Canalside began with key stakeholders at a kickoff meeting on Friday, November 6, 2020, via WebEx due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, to discuss what VEP is, why it is needed, the components that comprise the process, best practices, and next steps.

On Friday, March 5, 2021, the first in-person visioning session took place at the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library's Central Library (B&ECPL) to discuss and ideate the vision of success for Erie Canal 2025 at Canalside. Participants included individuals from CHAG, New York State Canal Corporation (NYSCC), Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor (ECNHC), Erie Canal Harbor Development Corporation (ECHDC), Buffalo Waterfront, Young Audiences of Western New York, and other guests.

Following an in-depth explanation of visioning and the process, session participants wrote a vision for Erie Canal 2025 at Canalside and shared, evaluated, and discussed them with the group. Following the session, each participant's vision was analyzed and assessed in detail. Reoccurring themes emerged, were categorized, developed and expanded, and consolidated into a comprehensive picture of success. Subsequently, a Webex meeting took place on Friday, April 23, 2021, to present and approve the "in-progress" long-format vision.

As a follow-up, the second in-person visioning session took place on May 14, 2021, to discuss and approve project vision and mission statements, audiences, and interpretive themes. A tentative list of interpretive devices initially ideated at the March 5th session were also itemized into preliminary categories to provide organization before beginning Phase II of the VEP process. The core message/theme was also touched upon and will also be part of the second phase of the VEP process.

The long-format vision and vision statement for the Erie Canal Bicentennial commemoration at Canalside below results from the VEP process detailed above.

### II. Vision (long-format)

The **Vision** for Erie Canal 2025 at Canalside is:

1. We are diverse, equitable, accessible, and inclusive
2. We are OF/BY/FOR ALL the Community
3. We are visitor-centered
4. We are an Omnivorous Experience

5. We create connections
6. We are a one-of-a-kind destination

### 1. We Are Diverse, Equitable, Accessible, and Inclusive (DEAI)

We embrace, integrate, and adhere to the principles of diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion (DEAI) "so every voice is heard, and everyone is invited in."<sup>1</sup>

We attract a **diversity** of visitors and staff, regardless of race, color, national origin, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, disability, education, socioeconomic status, language, or any other identifiers that make an individual or group different from another. Visitor diversity at Canalside is reflective of the melting pot of individuals who worked, inhabited, and traveled through the Western Terminus of the Erie Canal and the Canal District 200 years ago.

We also provide a safe, compassionate, and **equitable** environment, actively listening to and treating everyone with mutual respect and understanding while simultaneously "trying to identify and eliminate barriers that have historically prevented the full participation of some individuals or groups."<sup>2</sup>

We are **accessible**, welcoming, and accommodating for everyone's physical and emotional needs and abilities, meeting individuals and groups where they are. We provide everyone access, regardless of their education, socioeconomic status, language, as well as those without access to transportation.

We are an **inclusive** destination where "all feel welcomed and valued."<sup>3</sup> We attract all abilities and ages, including Generation Z (1997-2012/15, aged 6-24 yrs.), Millennials/Generation Y (1981-1994/6, aged 25-40 yrs.), Generation X (1965-1979/80, aged 41-56 yrs.), Baby Boomers (1946-1964, aged 57-75 yrs.) and also Pre-War adults (aged 72+).<sup>4</sup>

Many visitors are multi-generational families, consisting of parents, children, and grandparents. Families are diverse comprising traditional family structures, single-parent, co-habitation, same-sex couples, and extended families. Many families and individuals also visit with friends and relatives (VFRs).<sup>5</sup>

### 2. We Are FOR ALL the Community

We understand that as caretakers of Erie Canal 2025 @ Canalside, we work on behalf of the public. Consequently, we are **FOR ALL** the community.

We embrace this philosophy and live up to these standards by constantly conversing and dialoguing with our community to ensure we meet and exceed their wants, needs, interests, desires, and expectations.

Utilizing audience development and visitor research tools (i.e., surveys, interviews, community workshops), we actively listen to the community to determine what type of experiences potential and existing visitors desire, expect, and are interested in and deliver on these wants and needs.

Utilizing the **FOR ALL** approach, visitors, elected officials, media, and sponsors comment that Canalside 2025 is Buffalo's "city square," freely accessible, open to everyone, and reflects the society in which we live. It is the place to gather, connect, and participate in Western New York's collective heritage and culture, making Buffalonians and Western New Yorkers feel proud of their community and shared heritage.

### 3. We Are Visitor-Centered

As a welcoming place for everyone, Erie Canal 2025 @ Canalside is unquestionably a **visitor-centered** destination. As a **visitor-centered** destination, Judy Rand's time-tested Visitors' Bill of Rights<sup>6</sup> (VBORs) is a critical part of our collective DNA.

The VBORs guide us in our day-to-day operations, our communication with visitors, constantly remind us to be **visitor-centric** ambassadors, and are vital to developing new Canalside experiences.

From a tangible, operations, and project planning perspective, Erie Canal 2025 at Canalside is a navigable destination using a combination of supportive orientation and wayfinding signage and environmental graphics. Comfort stations are easily identifiable and accessible to all. Experiences are multi-generational, engage, and appeal to all ages and abilities, and foodservice and retail amenities accommodate 21st-century visitor demands and tastes. Likewise, our embrace of Rands's VBORs is a critical ingredient of forever being a **visitor-centered** destination.

### 4. We Are An Omnivorous Experience

Referred to as **Omnivorous Experience**, "audiences now hunger for and expect experiences that suit their every need and mood."<sup>7</sup>

McManus' research on visitor motivation concluded individuals desire experiences in a "social, recreational context,"<sup>8</sup> where they can enjoy themselves, mingle with friends and family, and be amused. In this context, McManus emphasizes that visitors' "interest is general,"<sup>9</sup> meaning individuals "come when they want, leave when they want and look at what they want. Their interest is general in a personal sense."<sup>10</sup>

### Discovery Center Sensibility

For these reasons, Erie Canal 2025 at Canalside provides an abundance of exhibits, activities, programming, events, and amenities to choose from that are “hands-on” and “minds-on” to satisfy their need to “have fun” and “experience new things, and learn something new.”

Canalside 2025 takes a multi-sensory approach and provides visitors with “synesthetic opportunities,” where all senses are “working together, with the visual reinforcing the tactile, the physical reinforcing the intellectual.”<sup>11</sup>

Defined as discovery learning, Black notes it is “based on the concept of the ‘Aha!’ moment – ‘Now I understand.’ It is a form of active, experiential learning most commonly recognized in problem-solving, inquiry-based, and hands-on environments.”<sup>12</sup> Discovery-style learning is frequently associated with discovery centers and science museums.

At Canalside 2025, these Discovery Center-style experiences create “initial connections” and “pathways”<sup>13</sup> with the content and stories being shared with visitors during the bicentennial of opening the Erie Canal at its Western Terminus.

Black understands that cultural destinations like Canalside 2025 need to accommodate for a wide range of visitor tastes, since “From the one ‘heritage product’ we must seek to provide a means by which individual family and social groups can experience and interpret in their own way-on effect a palette of experiences reflecting the differing needs of audiences.”<sup>14</sup>

Consequently, Canalside 2025 is an **Omnivorous Experience** appealing to those who desire fun, social, interactive, and engaging activities.

### **5. We Create Connections**

At Canalside 2025, **we create connections** to history, to the East and West, with one another, and with staff. At Canalside 2025, **we create connections** to the Western Terminus of the Erie Canal, Buffalo’s Canal District, and the people who work, inhabited, and traveled through this area 200 years ago. Consequently, we successfully bring the 200-year-old heritage of the Western Terminus of the Erie Canal, the Commercial Slip, and the Canal District to life for everyone who visits Canalside in 2025.

### Connections to Heritage

Everything that we do at Canalside 2025 **connects** to the opening of the Western Terminus of the Erie Canal in Buffalo 200 years ago in 1825. Our research uncovered that visitor awareness about Canalside history has skyrocketed since commemoration festivities began in May.

Visitors are thoroughly interested in how the terminus, canal, and the boats that traveled on it were built and engineered. They find the stories about the individuals and businesses working and living in the Canal District and the canawlers who passed through it interesting and dramatic.

#### Connections to the East and West

Visitors make the connection that the Erie Canal's Western Terminus was the East-West Gateway in the United States during its time for commerce, people, information, ideas, trends, money, and power. They understand the breadth and depth of the connections that impacted human history, science, geology, anthropology, economics, and culture. They are also interested in what Canalside means to Buffalo and the region today.

Consequently, Erie Canal's Western Terminus is the Gateway to 524 miles of continuous navigable waterway, 365 miles of Canalway Trail, and 234 municipalities. It is incredible that "Upstate New York's largest population centers-Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, and the state capital Albany-all grew up along the canal and are within the Canalway Corridor today."<sup>15</sup>

#### Connections with Others

Equally important are the **social connections** that visitors are making with each other. Canalside 2025 has become the new "city square" and Gateway to Buffalo. Visitors make connections with other visitors, including multigenerational families, teens, adults, and seniors. It is also the place where friends reconnect with other friends, and families reconnect with relatives.

#### Connections with Staff

Visitors are also making **social connections** with Canalside staff. These connections are made possible by the multitude of tangible and intangible offerings that Canalside provides, including socially interactive exhibits and activities, live programming, and events.

### **6. We Are A One-of-a-Kind Destination**

As a **one-of-a-kind destination**, Canalside 2025 is the only place to experience, from one central location, the original Western Terminus and Ruins, Main Canal, Buffalo River, Lake Erie, and New York's Queen City, Buffalo.

#### Confluence of Waterways

The one-off confluence of natural and artificial waterways, with the 200-year-old Western Terminus of the Erie Canal at its core, is an unmatched destination drawing visitors far and wide from Western New York (WNY), Southern Ontario, New York State, Northern Ohio, North Western Pennsylvania, and Europe, too.

### Media Magnet

As a desirable, enviable, and popular **one-of-a-kind leisure tourism destination**, regional, national, and international media outlets are flocking to Buffalo to experience and cover the 200th commemoration of the opening of the Erie Canal at its Western Terminus. A tsunami of feature stories has been written and developed by news, travel, and entertainment media outlets. Canalside 2025 is also a social media favorite, widely followed and trending on the top platforms.

The stories are entertaining, fascinating, and informative, covering a wide variety of subject matter and highlighting the 200-year-old heritage of Canalside, presenting Canalside 2025 in a highly positive light. The favorable publicity has raised Canalside 2025's profile and significantly increased attendance, generating significant interest in the 200th bicentennial commemoration, Erie Canal, the Western Terminus, Buffalo, and the WNY Region. Notably, national and international media attention has reignited and stimulated interest in Erie Canal heritage.

### World Canals Conference

As a **one-of-a-kind destination**, the World Canals Conference<sup>16</sup> (WCC) successfully petitioned Buffalo to host its yearly conference during Erie Canal 2025 at Canalside. The international conference began in 1988 and has "grown significantly," drawing "waterway management agencies and professionals, users and enthusiasts from Asia, Africa, Europe, and North America."<sup>17</sup> The organization has commented on how incredibly fortunate they are to have secured the conference during Erie Canal's bicentennial celebration, especially at its vital Western Terminus in Buffalo, and noted the significance and prestige it brings to the summit.

### Tall Ships America

Concurrently, as a **one-of-a-kind destination**, Tall Ships America lobbied to bring its annual Tall Ships Challenge to Buffalo's waterfront and Canalside for Erie Canal 2025. Tall Ships America is a noted and respected "non-profit educational organization focused on youth education, leadership development, and the preservation of the maritime heritage of North America."<sup>18</sup>

The Tall Ships Challenge is a series of "tall ships races and maritime port festivals" informing the "general public about tall ships, our maritime heritage, and the incredible power of sail training to change lives."<sup>19</sup> Hosted in Buffalo in 2019,<sup>20</sup> the event brought over "430,000" to the waterfront and garnered over "347,000,000 media impressions."<sup>21</sup> Coinciding with Erie Canal 2025 at Canalside, Tall Ships Challenge 2025 has shattered these previous records; it is now the most well-attended Tall Ships America event since its founding in 1973!



For these reasons, the confluence waterways, a media magnet, hosting the World Canals Conference, and the Tall Ships Challenge makes Erie Canal 2025 at Canalside a unique, world-class, **one-of-a-kind destination**.

## V. Vision Statement

A **Vision Statement** needs to be clear, precise to be understood, and impactful to all stakeholders. The process requires taking the multiple-page, long-format visioning document and consolidating it into a one-sentence statement.

The **Vision Statement** for Erie Canal 2025 at Canalside is:

We are Buffalo's bustling "city square," reconnecting the community to the Erie Canal's 200-year-old history at its Western Terminus, sparking unending inquiry and discovery into our cultural heritage.

## VI. Purpose Statement

A mission statement, or more precisely, a **Purpose Statement**, is a constant reminder to key stakeholders why an organization or project exists, what it does, and who benefits. The statement is also a barometer for the community to gauge whether an organization or a project fulfills its purpose.

The Purpose Statement for **Erie Canal 2025 at Canalside** is:

To commemorate Erie Canal's Bicentennial at Canalside in a fun, festive, and participative way to create once-in-a-lifetime memories for the community.

If the CHAG successfully meets its Purpose for Erie Canal 2025 at Canalside, it will be successful at achieving its Vision, which is:

As Buffalo's bustling "city square," we reconnect the community to the Erie Canal's 200-year-old history at its Western Terminus, sparking unending inquiry and discovery into our cultural heritage.

## VII. Audiences

Audiences are the lifeblood of any cultural institution or heritage event like Erie Canal 2025 @ Canalside.

There are three key **Audiences** for Erie Canal 2025 at Canalside:

1. Diverse, multi-generational families from Western and Central NY, Southern Ontario, North Western Pennsylvania, and North Eastern Ohio

2. Individuals aged 18-40 years (Gen Y:25-40, and Gen Z: 18-24) from WNY and Southern Ontario
3. Cultural travelers and Canal enthusiasts (ex. U.S., Germany, England, Holland, etc.)

### VIII. Interpretive Themes

There are four key **Interpretive Themes** for Erie Canal 2025 at Canalside and include:

1. The Erie Canal & Buffalo Harbor
  2. Buffalo as the East/West Gateway
  3. Human History of the Canal District
  4. Canalside Today
1. The Erie Canal & Buffalo Harbor
    - key individuals & influencers
    - De Witt Clinton
    - development of the harbor and the canal system
    - securing Buffalo as the Western Terminus
    - engineering
    - canal labor
    - boat construction
    - opening of the Western Terminus and the Erie Canal
  2. Buffalo as the East/West Gateway
    - wedding of the east with the west: the "Bond of Union"
    - Erie Canal linked East Coast with the heartland (and visa-versa)
    - establishment of Canalside and the Canal District
    - development of Buffalo into a major port city
    - Canalside-a sacred spot: where the commercial slip meets the river and the river meets the lake
    - transportation of people, goods, and ideas
    - information highway of its day (Abolitionism, Women's Rights, religious and utopian movements)
    - immigration
    - commerce & cargo
    - economic impact
  3. Human & Hidden Histories of the Canal District
    - "peopling" of the Canal District (who, what, and why)
    - immigrants
    - proprietors, canawlers, laborers, jobs, and tasks
    - boat builders (packet boats, schooners, etc.)
    - Native Americans

- African Americans (Slavery, Underground Railroad)
  - Red Light District (brothels and prostitution)
  - taverns & saloons
  - theaters
4. Canalside Today
- the continuing story
  - connecting the past to the present and future
  - what's happening now
  - why should the community care
  - what can the community learn from this experience (value of our cultural and collective heritage)
  - unearthing of the Western Terminus and the Commercial Slip
  - development of the artificial canals
  - development of the Canalside as a commercial and recreational hub
  - Canalside as Buffalo's new city square

#### **IX. Core Message**

The core message is typically developed as a part of an overall branding campaign for an institution, organization, project, or event by capturing its essence in a short, concise, and meaningful statement or "tagline."

For Erie Canal 2025 at Canalside, the core message communicates that the bicentennial commemoration of the opening of the Erie Canal at the Western Terminus is upcoming, provides context for the experience, and conveys a compelling reason why visitors should experience it. The core message will be developed as part of the second phase of Visitor Experience Planning.

## XI. End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Shelagh Grimshaw, "Thank You," *American Alliance of Museums*, March 17, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> "Inclusion Diversity Equity and Access (IDEA)," Indiana Arts Commission, accessed March 14, 2021, <https://www.in.gov/arts/programs-and-services/resources/inclusion-diversity-equity-and-access-idea/>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> "Gen X, Gen Y, Gen Z," *Kassa*, Accessed March 24, 2021, <https://www.kasasa.com/articles/generations/gen-x-gen-y-gen-z>.

<sup>5</sup> Graham Black, *The Engaging Museum: Developing Museums for Visitor Involvement*. New York: Routledge, 2005. 15.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 55.

<sup>8</sup> Paulette M McManus, "Visitors: Their Expectations and Social Behavior," in *Developing Museum Exhibitions for Lifelong Learning*, ed. Gail Durbin, (London: The Stationery Office, 1996), 60.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Graham Black, *The Engaging Museum: Developing Museums for Visitor Involvement* (London: Routledge, 2005), 31.

<sup>11</sup> Jocelyn Dodd, "Interactivity and Social Inclusion" (paper, presented at the Interactive Learning in Museums of Art Conference, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, England, May 17-18, 2002). Accessed March 15, 2021. [http://media.vam.ac.uk/media/documents/legacy\\_documents/file\\_upload/5761\\_file.pdf](http://media.vam.ac.uk/media/documents/legacy_documents/file_upload/5761_file.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> Graham Black, *The Engaging Museum: Developing Museums for Visitor Involvement* (London: Routledge, 2005), 138.

<sup>13</sup> Jocelyn Dodd, "Interactivity and Social Inclusion" (paper, presented at the Interactive Learning in Museums of Art Conference, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, England, May 17-18, 2002). Accessed March 15, 2021. [http://media.vam.ac.uk/media/documents/legacy\\_documents/file\\_upload/5761\\_file.pdf](http://media.vam.ac.uk/media/documents/legacy_documents/file_upload/5761_file.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> Graham Black, *The Engaging Museum: Developing Museums for Visitor Involvement* (London: Routledge, 2005), 31.

<sup>15</sup> "About Us," *Erie Canalway National Heritage Corridor*, accessed March 30, 2021, <https://eriecanalway.org/about-us>.

<sup>16</sup> "Homepage," *World Canals Conference 2021*, accessed March 31, 2021, <https://wcc2021.org>.

<sup>17</sup> "World Canals Conference," *World Canals Conference 2021*, accessed March 30, 2021, <https://wcc2021.org/world-canals-conference/>.

<sup>18</sup> "About," *Tall Ships America*, accessed March 31, 2021, <https://www.tallshipsamerica.org/about/>.

<sup>19</sup> "About," Port of Call Buffalo, accessed March 31, 2021, <https://www.portofcallbuffalo.org/about>.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> "Tall Ships Challenge," *Tall Ships Challenge*, accessed March 30, 2021, <https://www.tallshipschallenge.com>.