

# Ortt, Hawley push state legislation to keep lift bridges open



*Photos by Tom Rivers*

*State Sen. Rob Ortt and Assemblyman Steve Hawley, right, address local officials and members of the agricultural community today about legislation they are pushing to help keep lift bridges open. They are pictured at the Knowlesville lift bridge, which has a weight restriction of 6 tons and has been limited to one lane traffic.*

By Tom Rivers, Editor Posted 20 July 2015

KNOWLESVILLE – The century old lift bridges are iconic structures on the Erie Canal. They are also a challenge to maintain and keep in working order, especially for modern farm equipment and fire trucks.

The lift bridges are critical in Orleans County, because many of the nearby steel truss bridges are too narrow and can't handle heavier traffic.

One lift bridge has a weight restriction down to 6 tons. That bridge in Knowlesville is also limited to one-lane traffic.

The weight reduction has forced farm equipment, garbage trucks, fire engines, school buses and other heavier vehicles on detours that can add 40 minutes for drivers diverted to Medina or Eagle Harbor.



*State Sen. Rob Ortt, left, and Assemblyman Steve Hawley discuss legislation that would require the state to maintain lift bridges on the canal system.*

The extended trips cost farmers, emergency responders, businesses and residents valuable time, and tear up other local roads because of the detours, State Sen. Robert Ortt said today in Knowlesville.

Ortt, R-North Tonawanda, was joined by State Assemblyman Steve Hawley, R-Batavia, in highlighting legislation that would prevent the state from shutting down lift bridges.

There are 16 lift bridges on the Erie Canal and seven are in Orleans County. Ortt said the state uses loopholes in canal law to avoid keeping up maintenance on canal bridges. The state can choose to close a canal bridge, under current canal law, as long as there is an alternate route available.

Ortt and Hawley said the additional travel time and expense for motorists in using alternate routes is a burden the state could avoid for the canal communities.



*A truck heads across the Knowlesville Lift Bridge this afternoon. The bridge is down to a 6 ton weight limit.*

"Our infrastructure is in a sad, sad state of disrepair," Ortt said.

Ortt said the money is there for bridge maintenance, but it gets diverted downstate. Ortt noted the current construction of the Tappan Zee Bridge to New York City, a project that could top \$4 billion.

That bridge has been hailed as being critical to commerce and transportation to and from New York City. Ortt said the lift bridges should be viewed with similar importance to the canal communities.

Farming is Orleans County's dominant industry, said Barry Flansburg, chairman of the Orleans County Farmland Protection Board. The 2012 Agriculture Census counted \$150 million in direct sales from farms in the county.



*Farm equipment is getting wider and heavier, too big for the Knowlesville bridge with the 6-ton weight restriction. Some farmers brought along equipment and parked it south of the bridge today during Ort and Hawley's conference at the bridge.*

Jeff Toussaint owns a fruit and vegetable farm based on Culvert Road in Ridgeway. The canal divides his acreage in half. Because of the downgraded Knowlesville bridge, Toussaint said he and other farmers have to take combines, and truck loads of crops through the village of Medina and the hamlet of Eagle Harbor to use those lift bridges.

Each trip is about a 40-minute detour, he said, and puts large equipment in business districts, especially in Medina with many pedestrians and motorists.

"Not only is the detour an inconvenience and an added cost, it's a safety feature," Toussaint said.

He worries if the weight restrictions are lowered in Medina and Eagle Harbor.

"You're getting dangerously close to a real problem," he said. "If the Medina bridge goes down, where would people go?"



*Many local farmers showed up to listen to a proposal to keep the lift bridges open.*

Toussaint said combines can weigh 15 to 16 tons. A truck hauling apples or corn could top 35 to 40 tons, he said.

The State Senate passed the legislation requiring maintenance of the lift bridges, and there should be a public hearing in case one is closed, according to the legislation. Hawley and Ortt said the State Assembly now needs to take up the issue. Hawley said he will push hard to get it passed in the Assembly.

He noted many of the canal bridges date from the canal's widening from 1905 to 1918 – "when my grandfather was in his 20s." Many of those bridges have deteriorated, Hawley said.

"It is unfair to residents, businesses and farmers in my district who must find longer and more costly travel routes because New York State has failed to make necessary infrastructure repairs," Hawley said.

To see the legislation, [click here](#).



*Barry Flansburg, chairman of the Orleans County Farmland Protection Board, said farmers face time-consuming detours due to narrow canal bridges with weight restrictions. Flansburg joins Orleans County Legislature Chairman David Calard, left, State Sen. Rob Ortt, and State Assemblyman Steve Hawley.*