Onondaga County Save the Rain and Onondaga Lake’s Remarkable Recovery

by Joanie Mahoney

Onondaga Lake is experiencing a rebirth. The old story of public sewers overflowing into its tributaries and industrial waste being piled on its shores is no longer.

Today, the water is clean, the shoreline is being restored and people have rediscovered our urban lake. The combination of public and private investment turned what was once a liability into one of the county’s biggest assets. People now flock to the lake to bike and walk on the miles of new trails, and they come by the thousands to watch concerts at the new Lakeview Amphitheater on the shore. There is a real renaissance occurring for this once neglected waterbody.

Several years ago, Onondaga County began to imagine what a clean Onondaga Lake could do for the region. We began to see the potential in our publicly owned shoreline and imagined what a bustling inner harbor connected to the heart of our downtown could mean. We knew pedestrians would enjoy a trail system that made it possible to safely loop the lake without having to dodge traffic.

After many years of work, a billion dollars of public and private investment and a lot of public input, we are now realizing that potential. In addition to the national acts taking the stage at the Lakeview Amphitheater, the lake now hosts boating, fishing and running events, cycling, a dog park, a skate park and many year-round activities. Future plans include a public beach, more trails and dredging of the harbor to welcome travelers who come by boat.

After 20 years of infrastructure improvements intended to satisfy a consent decree to clean the lake, we decided in 2008 to find a more environmentally friendly way to meet water quality requirements. Instead of building three more regional treatment facilities, we looked for a better way. The treatment facilities were expensive to build and operate, and caused real harm to neighborhoods when they were constructed. In addition, the hulking plants consumed massive amounts of energy and didn’t clean the water as well as nature could. When a site was being prepared for a treatment facility in the heart of downtown Syracuse, we stopped what we were doing and looked instead at green infrastructure.

We knew our combined sewer system overflowed when it rained. So instead of paying to capture, clean and pump all that water, we decided to keep the rainwater out of the sewer system in the first place. We invested in parks, created green streets and put green roofs on our buildings. We built basketball courts using porous pavement and planted trees to soak up the rainwater; we used rain barrels and cisterns to capture the stormwater; and we are making the ice for our hockey team out of recycled rainwater. We also built two underground facilities to store millions of gallons of combined sewer overflow during heavy rain and we direct those overflows to our existing wastewater treatment plant once the storm has passed.

We are very proud that Onondaga County was the first municipality to convince a federal court to amend a consent order to require green infrastructure to address combined sewer overflows. As a result, we developed what we call Save the Rain, a program now...
nationally recognized for its innovative use of green infrastructure to capture rain and snow melt to return it to the ground for natural filtration.

Approximately 200 green infrastructure projects have been completed to complement the more traditional gray infrastructure improvements. This more balanced approach resulted in our ability to capture over 97 percent of our overflows by 2016, exceeding the consent decree requirements and doing so years ahead of schedule (OCDWEP 2017). We continue to work hard implementing even more green infrastructure projects because our intention is to run through the finish line. We know we are able to improve water quality as we continue to further reduce overflows.

We are also planning for the next phase once the consent order is lifted. We are working to reduce the litter that makes its way into Onondaga Lake and its tributaries. Approximately 98 percent of the litter that reaches the lake started out on the streets in Syracuse. Food and beverage containers, plastic bags and other items discarded improperly are carried by water or wind either into our sewer system or directly into the lake and creeks. The litter detracts from the great gains in improved water quality that we’re seeing through the Save the Rain program. In 2016, we introduced “Connect the Drops,” our newest outreach effort to educate the public to make the connection between street litter and water quality.

As part of our “Connect the Drops” campaign we are working with the Onondaga County Resource Recovery Agency (OCRRA), our regional recycling partner, to encourage residents to support our Block Litter initiative. (See Madison Quinn’s story, page 52.) When neighbors pick up the litter on their own block and encourage their neighbors to do the same, we are working together to improve water quality.

We know that the investments in our infrastructure and the effort to get the public involved have already improved the water quality in Onondaga Lake. The northern two-thirds of the lake are even meeting swimmable standards every day of the year (Upstate Freshwater Institute 2015).

Fishing is an enjoyable pastime on Onondaga Lake, and it has become a very popular location for black bass and carp anglers. As with some other lakes in New York, there are currently health advisories for eating fish from the lake; however, the catch-and-release sport fishing opportunities are abundant.
The Onondaga Lake fishery is thriving now as well – with 66 different species identified recently in sampling efforts. Sport fishing has become popular again on Onondaga Lake and we were proud to welcome Bassmaster Elite pros in 2016 when they came to fish on the lake (Figura 2016).

All the new activity on the lake is making an impact on the local economy. When we built the Lakeview Amphitheater on the western shore of Onondaga Lake, we immediately welcomed visitors from all 50 states, as well as Washington D.C., Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. People from all 62 counties in New York purchased tickets as well. Over 62 percent of tickets purchased were from zip codes outside of Onondaga County and over 30 percent were from outside the State of New York. We had hundreds of thousands of people come to the shores of a lake that only a few short years ago people went out of their way to avoid. Onondaga Lake is now an extraordinary asset to our community, bringing tourism and sales tax revenue from outside of the county.

The Loop the Lake Trail, when complete, will be 14 miles of continuous trail fully looping the lake. The project has been talked about for years and is now becoming a reality, thanks to the newly cleaned lake and a commitment from Onondaga County to keep the land accessible to the public. The Loop the Lake Trail will also connect to downtown Syracuse via the existing creek walk that follows Onondaga Creek to the heart of downtown Syracuse. This creek walk is an attractive feature for residents and tourists alike. People want to live in places where they can experience a variety of recreational opportunities. While the trails and parks on the lake already provide many different options, once the Loop the Lake Trail is completed, it will connect residents and visitors to the Erie Canal Towpath and ultimately the Empire State Trail that Governor Cuomo announced in January of 2017.

A newly revitalized Onondaga Lake is also an attractive feature for businesses near the lake and in surrounding areas. Restaurants, hotels and other businesses in the hospitality industry benefit as we attract visitors from outside of Onondaga County to visit the lake (Beach 2016). Additionally, more commercialized development is happening at the Inner Harbor, where an Aloft Hotel recently opened. Further development is underway on other mixed-use buildings for offices, housing and more places to dock boats. Attracting businesses to this previously under-used area will create jobs and further satisfy the growing demand from people to be on our urban lakeshore.

Another economic benefit of a clean Onondaga Lake is attracting and retaining the young professionals that businesses need. Young people are attracted to communities that protect our natural resources, offer recreational opportunities, and offer entertainment opportunities like those now available on our lake.

Onondaga Lake has become a real source of pride in our community. Our clean lake is welcoming visitors and making our economy more vibrant. The investments we have made are paying dividends that the whole region will enjoy for generations to come.

Joanne M. “Joanie” Mahoney serves as the Onondaga County Executive. For inquiries about this article, contact savetherain@ongov.net.

References