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What's Shakin'

Onondaga Creek Comes Clean

It's been nearly six years since an amended consent judgment demanded the county improve the water flowing into Onondaga Lake. Not only did Onondaga County jump, but many groups used the federal court order as a cue to revitalize Onondaga Creek and polish the tarnished jewel of Syracuse's South Side. And they already are seeing results. Two more visible projects are the county's proposed Regional Treatment Facility and the city's Creekwalk, to be expanded north and south. But others are up to their necks trying to solve the creek's problems.

One of these is Cornell Cooperative Extension, which organized two cleanups in September. Sheila Myers, natural resources extension team coordinator, said the cleanups attracted some 60 volunteers, and yielded enough trash to fill five Dumpsters. Among the secrets the creek gave up in its Dorwin Avenue to Gifford Street section were tires, stereos, cash registers and more than 300 bicycles. "I think the volunteers are making a difference," said Myers. "After this cleanup, people felt like they had got a lot done."

Myers said she felt the cleanup is the most positive thing that's happened to the creek in years, although she cautioned it is only one of many efforts that must be made. The creek, for instance, needs to be more accessible, especially downtown. "Fences are up," said Myers. "The creek is out of sight, out of mind, and this is a major problem. If you don't see the trash, you don't feel it needs to be cleaned up."

Another effort to revitalize the creek is spearheaded by SUNY-College of Environmental Science and Forestry, with help from the Onondaga Lake Partnership, Rep. James Walsh (R-Onondaga) and local engineering firms. The Onondaga Creek Restoration Project, coordinated by Ted Endreny, SUNY-ESF assistant professor of Environmental Resources Engineering, is studying the feasibility of restoring the aquatic habitat as well as its watershed, land from which water drains. "The health of the stream is directly affected by its watershed," said Endreny.

The creek's troubles partly are a result of its existing unnatural watershed, made up of streets, sidewalks and steep, rocky banks. During heavy rainfall, water rushes off these surfaces, much of it into 40 combined storm sewers, which then drain into the creek. Through these storm sewers also flows the pollution--raw sewage, "floatable" debris, chemicals, bacteria--that spoils the creek and lake.

According to Endreny, the county's efforts to eliminate the overflows will be augmented by creating a greener, more natural watershed, which will hold rainwater in the soil beneath parks and grassy banks before slowly releasing it into the creek. Besides, said Endreny, this form of natural storm water control fits in nicely with city plans to extend the Creekwalk and green spaces adjacent to the water.

Parks also will give the creek's banks a more natural slope, slowing the destructive rush of

storm water and giving fish places to breed and hide. Endreny's vision, then, is of a creek that serves multiple functions, providing flood control, aquatic habitat and recreation. Of these, flood control is most important. "I'm taking it very seriously," said Endreny, explaining that watershed improvements must comply with federal flood-control standards.

Which is not to say the project isn't proposing radical changes, such as recreating natural pools, shallows and meanders or realigning sections "channelized" early last century by the city and Army Corps of Engineers, another group becoming interested in revitalization. According to biologist Traci Clever, two sections of the federal 2003 Water Resources Development Act enable the corps to address the creek's needs. Section 206 calls for restoration of nationwide aquatic ecosystems and section 1135 calls for modifications to existing corps projects, of which the channelized creek is one.

Clever said the corps received a letter of request from the city's Lakefront Development Corporation to begin initial evaluation under section 206. If an aquatic ecosystem restoration plan goes forward, Clever said the corps will pick up 65 percent of the tab, the city the rest. "We want to be sure we can do everything we can to revitalize the creek," said Clever. "But we don't want to go to beautification until we know what's out there."

Clever said that while creating a healthy water resource is the goal of all groups, making the community feel good about its creek will take time. "It took 100 years for the creek to get to this point," said Clever. "We must be patient, but we will get there."

Overcoming the stigma of the polluted creek means that education is as important as decontamination or revitalization. To this end, the OLP's outreach committee sponsors a number of educational events, including a photo contest, a water quality project with Henninger High School students and roundtable discussions.

Nancy Sticht, public-affairs specialist for the Army Corps of Engineers and a member of the OLP's outreach committee, said citizen interest is being backed with action. "I'm seeing positive input from the community," said Sticht. "They seem enthused about the solution."

Sue Miller, deputy director of the county's Lake Improvement Project, explained that the OLP's Web site (www.onlakepartners.org) offers ways homeowners can help the creek on a day-to-day basis. "Don't litter," said Miller. "Recycle motor oil; don't overuse fertilizers and pesticides; don't put leaves in the street."

That last problem is a timely one. Autumn is here, and with it curbside piles of leaves. But leaves go down the drains in storms, said Miller, clogging up sewers and increasing the likelihood of a combined sewer overflow. To combat this problem, Miller said the OLP will distribute bags to branch libraries this fall to encourage residents to dispose of leaf litter properly.

--Martin Walls

