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Top News

CNY's future may be written in its waterways

April 18, 2004

By **Mark Weiner**
Staff writer

Water is Central New York's greatest natural asset, and could be the economic engine that drives the region's development in the coming decades.

The region's abundant water supply and proximity to dozens of clean lakes, rivers and streams gives the Syracuse area an advantage over other communities in attracting new business and residents, and improves the quality of life for those already here.

These are some conclusions from FOCUS Greater Syracuse, a volunteer organization that spent the past eight months studying the region's water supply and waterways.

The group said it found strong public interest in improving recreational and development opportunities along Central New York's waterways, which have long been undervalued or neglected.

FOCUS will make its report public at a luncheon Friday at the Onondaga County Convention Center. U.S. Rep. James Walsh, County Executive

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Nicholas Pirro and Syracuse Mayor Matt Driscoll are expected to speak. Almost 500 people have registered for the event.

Walsh, R-Onondaga, who has brought home more than \$100 million for the cleanup of Onondaga Lake, and millions more for other local waterways, said water has never been more important when it comes to development and quality of life. Communities from Baltimore to San Antonio have staked their futures on the waterfront.

"It's definitely all the rage," Walsh said. "People want access to the water."

Walsh said he spends about 25 percent of his time working on 4

+ water-related issues. His district includes more than 100 miles of Lake Ontario coastline, five Finger Lakes, the Erie Canal and dozens of rivers, streams and smaller lakes.

"I think it's our greatest asset, other than our people," Walsh said. "The availability of fresh water, clean drinking water and water for recreation is a huge asset. There's no place on Earth that has so much fresh water around it. I think if we take care of it, and keep it abundant and clean, we'll be that much better off."

That fact became clear to FOCUS Greater Syracuse as dozens of volunteers met with experts and community leaders in the past eight months, said Charlotte "Chuckie" Holstein, the group's executive director.

FOCUS, which stands for Focusing Our Community's United Strength, gave specific attention to plans for the future of Onondaga Lake, Onondaga Creek and the Erie Canal National Heritage Corridor. The group made recommendations on planning, marketing and development of the waterways for business and recreational uses.

Some of the ideas have moved beyond the vision stage and into specific plans. FOCUS and city officials are working with a class in landscape and urban ecology at the State University of Environmental Science and Forestry to design some of the first projects along the creek.

Emanuel Carter, an associate professor of landscape architecture at ESF, has two teams of students working on plans for restoration, recreation and economic development along the creek corridor. Their plans will be on exhibit Friday at the convention center.

Carter and co-professor Maria Ignatieva challenged students to create designs that develop public spaces and recreational trails and serve as a catalyst to revitalize neglected neighborhoods along the banks of the creek.

"We as an institution have had an interest in Onondaga Creek for years," Carter said. "It's a major asset to the city, county and the region. We're pretty aware the creek corridor in the city limits has been in trouble for a long time. It's pretty much a degraded corridor."

To bring the corridor back to life, Carter and his students have proposed restoring the urban forest on its banks and allowing parts of the creek to go back to its natural flow, rather than running through concrete channels installed decades ago.

The design work started in January. Carter said the goal is to have two master plans for the creek corridor delivered to the city by the end of May.

"Our intention is to indicate ways in which the city could think of this creek as one entity, and how we might break that down into fundable and doable projects," Carter said. "It's just not a student exercise."

Each of the two teams in his design studio has been asked to lay out a trail system that can be used for recreation from the Syracuse lakefront to Dorwin Avenue in the Valley.

The teams also will: recommend new opportunities for woodlands, parks and gardens in the creek corridor; suggest connections to the broader Syracuse parks system; advise on opportunities for new wildlife habitat; and point out opportunities for investment by the city in housing and neighborhood streetscapes in adjacent neighborhoods.

Charles Everett, Syracuse's director of operations, said city officials see opportunities to develop restaurants, an entertainment district and apartments along the creek corridor to meet a growing demand from those who want to live in the city's urban core.

"A lot of times people say the vitality of a community is reflected in how it maintains (its) natural resources," Everett said. "One of the things that occurred over the years is that we have not been good custodians of the waterways. But now we see an opportunity to change that because they are significant assets."

"The ultimate goal is to make urban spaces that people can use," he added. "You just kind of wonder what took us so long to recognize these assets."

Everett said the city is completing design work for extending its Onondaga Creekwalk from Franklin Square to Armory Square. Work could begin later this year. But it won't stop there. Eventually, the creekwalk could run from the Valley to the lakefront.

"The city's vision includes expansion of that creekwalk project in both directions," he said.

Eventually, the creekwalk and downtown Syracuse will link with a trail that loops Onondaga Lake, a project County Executive Nicholas Pirro said he is committed to completing.

"I don't see the loop trail as far off in the future," Pirro said. "A lot will depend on how much it's going to cost to do that. We've got some serious issues with parts of the lakes trying to make connections. But we're looking to make that happen."

For the moment, a trail connects the lake's eastern shore and western shore. But no trails exist at the southern end of the lake by the city.

Pirro said the potential of Central New York's waterways is evident in smaller-scale public projects that spurred private development along Skaneateles Lake and along the Seneca River in Baldwinsville.

"There's a lot of money in waterfronts, and I think we have a lot going for us," he said. "The potential is there. Most importantly, people have to realize these projects will help the entire community economically."

Walsh agrees.

"God was very generous to this area," the congressman said. "Water enhances everybody's quality of life. Being around water makes you feel good."

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