

VISIONS FOR ONONDAGA CREEK FORUM

"The Onondaga Creek corridor is the most intact natural system in the City of Syracuse. Although channeled, mostly hidden and badly maligned for more than a century, this corridor has the potential to be THE civic and ecological highway of the City!" - Graduate Urban Design Studio, Faculty of Landscape Architecture, SUNY-ESF, "City of Syracuse Open Space Study," Summer 2002

I. Introduction

The renewed interest in restoring Onondaga Creek as a community and environmental asset began in April 2000. After taking a guided tour of the creek, Michael Houck, chief architect of Portland, Oregon's pioneering regional greenspace master plan, noted Onondaga Creek's great potential. He described how restored creek corridors in Denver, CO, Silver Springs, MD and Anchorage, AK revitalized neighborhoods, improved recreation and transportation, and sparked community redevelopment. This motivated a small group of greenspace advocates in Central New York to introduce elected officials and citizens to Onondaga Creek as a potential community asset.

Since that visit, interest in the creek has gained momentum. In the summer of 2001, greenspace advocates organized a canoe trip down Onondaga Creek for Syracuse Common Councilors Mike Atkins and Van Robinson, neighborhood residents, and school children from Frazer School. The trip drew attention to Onondaga Creek's dramatic possibilities. In September 2002, Cornell Cooperative Extension of Onondaga County organized a clean-up of the creek in which 70 volunteers removed several dump trucks full of trash, and generated even greater discussion of and interest in this unrealized asset in the heart of our city. Another clean up is planned for September 2003.

Meanwhile, various research, design, planning, and educational efforts related to Onondaga Creek are taking place. Professor Emanuel Carter and the ESF Graduate Urban Design Studio included the creek corridor as a major component of their open space study (completed 2002) for the City of Syracuse Comprehensive Plan. In 2002, thanks to a major grant obtained by Congressman Jim Walsh through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Economic Development Initiative, SUNY-ESF professors Ted Endreny and Don Leopold began a restoration feasibility study for Onondaga Creek.

In April 2003, Canopy, the umbrella organization for park associations and community garden groups in Syracuse (see Appendix E), sponsored a forum entitled "Visions for Onondaga Creek," which was co-sponsored by SUNY-ESF, Centers for Nature Education, and the City of Syracuse. The two-day forum, featuring keynote speaker Jeff Shoemaker, Executive Director of Denver, Colorado's Greenway Foundation, sought to bring together the numerous people

and projects involved with Onondaga Creek. The forum had several objectives: (1) to learn from the success of Denver's prize-winning South Platte River restoration model; (2) to bring together interested citizens, city and county officials, educators, and greenspace advocacy groups; and (3) to begin the process of identifying priority objectives and the issues surrounding their realization.

The report that follows reflects the deliberations that took place during a visioning process on the first day of the forum, held at SUNY-ESF, together with an article that highlights the main elements of Jeff Shoemaker's presentation at the public forum the following day. The results of the forum have set the stage for a coordinated Onondaga Creek corridor restoration effort that is currently getting under way.

II. Visions for Onondaga Creek Forum

On April 4, 2003, local community leaders gathered at SUNY-ESF in Syracuse to discuss their visions for restoring the ecological and social values of Onondaga Creek. (A list of attendees is found in Appendix A.) Richard Smardon, professor and chair of the Faculty of Environmental Studies, facilitated the visioning process. Community leaders discussed the following issues related to the creek:

- A. Potential functions of a restored Onondaga Creek.
- B. Potential land uses adjacent to Onondaga Creek.
- C. Key issues surrounding the restoration of Onondaga Creek.
- D. Opportunities to restore Onondaga Creek.
- E. Framework for action to restore Onondaga Creek.
- F. First steps.

A. Potential Functions of a Restored Onondaga Creek

Participants were asked to write the three most important functions they saw for a restored Onondaga Creek. These ideas were then collapsed into six categories or themes. (The complete results are found in Appendix B). These are the categories of responses:

- Recreational resources fishing, biking, walking, events, alternative transportation. (16 responses)
- Economic/social/neighborhood revitalization that instills community pride and improves quality of life by connecting neighborhoods and resources. (15)
- Ecological restoration that improves wildlife habitat and aquatic ecology. (10)
- Flood control, storm water management and watershed function. (10)
- Educational resource particularly for youth. (5)
- Water quality improvement. (4)

B. Potential Land Uses Adjacent to Onondaga Creek

Participants were then asked how they anticipated that land adjacent to Onondaga Creek would be utilized. (A complete list of the results is found in Appendix C.) This is a summary of potential uses of land adjacent to the creek:

- Parks/community and educational centers. (20)
- Flood control/riparian zone/public safety. (8)
- Residential/mixed residential. (7)
- Commercial. (4)
- Transportation. (3)

C. Key Issues Surrounding the Restoration of Onondaga Creek

Community leaders identified the following issues surrounding the restoration of Onondaga Creek:

- *Preserve the Creek's Function as a Flood plain:* All activities related to Onondaga Creek must, first and foremost, recognize its role in controlling floods.
- *Comply with Flood Control:* Projects must comply with flood control regulations including access and development along creek.
- *Achieve Priority Status:* Onondaga Creek must become a priority for the City of Syracuse, Onondaga County and any regulatory agencies that are involved in the process.
- *Integrate With Comprehensive Plan:* The visioning for Onondaga Creek must fit with City of Syracuse's Comprehensive Plan and follow elements within that Plan that require community involvement.
- *Identify Bureaucratic and Regulatory Barriers:* There is limited understanding of all the regulations and agencies that impact development in and around Onondaga Creek.
- *Address Public Safety:* Public safety (call boxes, lighting, and access for emergency vehicles) must be addressed through thorough and committed involvement of citizens and public safety officials. Citizens from Ballantyne to Seneca Turnpike in particular will have concerns regarding the public safety of any bikeway / trail that runs adjacent to their property.
- *Identify Competing Uses:* There will inherently be competing uses for some of the same space along Onondaga Creek that will boil down to human versus ecological uses. A mechanism must be in place to resolve such conflicts.

- *Improve Access:* The fence that currently separates the public from Onondaga Creek is important for public safety. There must be ways to improve access and aesthetics while maintaining the safety that a fence provides.
- *Get Quick Results:* Identify areas that are easiest to convert and convert them first. Change zoning of these areas to green space. Stream restoration is a long and complex process compared to closing a section of road next to the creek and making it pedestrian friendly. In addition, removing or changing the fence to improve aesthetics and access (while maintaining public safety) in certain areas could be done relatively quickly provided the right people are involved and committed to the change.
- *Avoid Getting Bugged Down:* The planning process tends to slow down progress and takes away the excitement. In the interim, small projects such as the creek clean up, must continue and grow to maintain excitement about the process. These projects should be hands-on.
- *Insure Community Involvement:* There must be substantial and substantive community involvement throughout the process. This involvement should translate into community participation, action and ownership of the restoration of Onondaga Creek.
- *Encourage Youth Involvement:* Youth are a routinely underutilized resource and could contribute substantially to projects related to creek restoration. In return, the creek could contribute to their well being. For example, improved fishing habitat and fishing access could provide a peaceful and beautiful experience - an opportunity that is limited for many residents living in neighborhoods adjacent to the creek. Research supports the role of “green experiences” and nature in reducing violence and improving mental health.

D. Opportunities To Restore Onondaga Creek

Community leaders found several positives regarding the feasibility of restoring Onondaga Creek.

- Onondaga Creek has a number of things already going for it, including an existing and expanding creek walk near downtown. In addition, there exists a large amount of green space adjacent to the creek.
- Members of the SUNY-ESF faculty have begun an Onondaga Creek Restoration Project. This project, which studies the Syracuse, New York, section of Onondaga Creek in the area of lower Onondaga Park, focuses on developing methods to improve social and ecological stream function while maintaining flood conveyance. The project’s website, <http://www.esf.edu/onondaga>, contains an extensive collection of photos, and various maps, of Onondaga Creek.

- Funding exists related to flood control and urban ecological restoration through the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. There are also federal funds available to study and implement restoration programs.
- Funding exists for bikeway development.
- There are many capable and committed citizens dedicated to the restoration of Onondaga Creek.

E. Framework For Action To Restore Onondaga Creek

- Compile existing visions, plans and research, and consolidate them.
- Develop a planning framework that fits in with the City of Syracuse's comprehensive planning process.
- Establish a public participation mechanism from the beginning.
- Develop a public education campaign about creek restoration that includes activities that get people involved.
- Identify regulatory barriers to restoration, as well as a compendium of agencies and people that are involved in the management of the creek.
- Establish an Onondaga Creek Working Group (see Structure of Onondaga Creek Working Group below). Don't form committees without contacting more of the critical stakeholders. Start with a central steering committee (9-10 people) that builds a process to bring more people in.
- Spend 6-8 months bringing more people in.
- Develop goals that balance ecological and social issues.
- Identify sponsors, funders, and partners.

F. First Steps

- Develop a paid coordinator position to begin the process.
- Use Onondaga Lake Partnership, EPA and DEC to help support this coordinator position.
- Establish an Onondaga Creek Working Group and technical committees (social, public safety, education, ecological) working groups
- Establish a Steering/Management Committee that oversees the entire project.

III. Structure of Onondaga Creek Working Group

To address the variety of functions and uses envisioned for the creek, some participants recommended that planning and oversight of any restoration effort be multifaceted. A structure to facilitate this process could have a Steering / Management Committee at the top, with several technical working groups.

These working groups could include: Social/Public Safety, Ecological and Educational.

It was recommended that initial work be done to study other urban river restoration efforts to see how they structured the steering committees. Then teams can come together to identify the conflicts and common interests. This helps define the clear goals for development and becomes an analysis of opportunities in each type of land use proposed.

IV. Greenway Vision Saves River and Generates Investment

The following article from the Urban Parks Institute of the Project for Public Spaces website (Fall 1998 - <http://pps.org//topics/rivers/>) is an example of urban restoration in Denver, Colorado. It chronicles how Denver civic and political leaders organized the reclamation of the South Platte River into a regional greenway system, spurring not only parkland and environmental benefits but also redevelopment of large tracts of industrial land downtown. The South Platte faced equal if not greater challenges than Onondaga Creek in becoming an asset rather than a deficit to the city.

Once famously called "*too thick to drink, too thin to plow*," the South Platte River runs for 10.5 miles through the downtown, residential and industrial neighborhoods of Denver, Colorado. The formerly polluted and forgotten river is now a thriving ecological and recreation resource, a result of the development of one of the first greenway systems in America. In leveraging an original \$1.9 million investment into 150 miles of trails, boat launches, chutes, and parks in four counties and nine municipalities, the South Platte River Greenway Foundation has served as a prototype for over a dozen greenways across the country.

Project Background

The South Platte River was dumped in, neglected, and cut off from the city when, in 1965, the river struck back, causing \$325 million in damages in the worst flood in Denver's history. The flood put the river back on the city's agenda, spawning a decade of expensive studies that the city had no intention of supporting. It would be nearly 10 years before a serious plan to rescue the South Platte would take root.

The effort began in earnest in June 1974, with an unlikely combination of supporters. The impetus came from Denver's Mayor, Democrat Bill McNichols, who, in 1971, had defeated Joe Shoemaker; a powerful Republican State senator who had run on a platform that included cleaning up the South Platte River. Sensing a good cause, and anticipating the budding environmental movement, McNichols, armed with \$1.9 million in revenue-sharing funds, announced the formation of the Platte River Development Committee, and asked Shoemaker to head it up. Although they were from opposite sides of the aisle, the recent rivals agreed on a plan of attack, including cleaning up the waterway, constructing an accessible, flood-proof trail system, and developing riverside parks and several boat chutes.

Shoemaker, who had allowed dumping in the river when he was public works director in the early sixties, became its biggest advocate. However, for those living in the less affluent neighborhoods adjacent to the South Platte, the river was a liability dangerously polluted, fetid, and infested with vermin. Shoemaker saw these neighborhoods as a logical constituency for his campaign. "They had everything to gain and nothing to lose," he noted, and outspoken activists from three of Denver's low-income, riverside neighborhoods were chosen to serve on the development committee. Other members had equally diverse and sometimes competing interests, including developers, preservationists and politicians.

However, the logistical problems and bureaucratic hurdles were huge. For example, a cement company was regularly cleaning out its mixers into the river, and used diesel oil was being dumped onto the riverbank from a rail yard. In addition, many industries were operating on the river, including scrap metal yards and auto wreckers, who, although legitimate, made it an unsightly, noisy and dangerous destination for recreators. Worst of all, city departments tacitly allowed street sweepings, dirty snow, and raw sewage to be dumped into the Platte.

The committee toured the riverside, itemizing the serious conditions the river faced. Shoemaker recalls, "*The river had never had a budget, so it never had a constituency. When we approached the city for help, they thought we were nuts, and the people said it was a joke to even call the South Platte a river at all. That was what we were up against.*"

To more efficiently attack and solve the issues facing the river, the committee then divided into four groups and paired-up its members, giving each group one section of riverfront to focus on exclusively. They were required, in a very short period of time; to come back with a feasible plan for a "node" or park located along their section. There was no master plan. Shoemaker believed that the ten years of pointless, expensive studies had damned any real planning effort.

Instead, he hoped to quickly demonstrate the committee's effectiveness by building a few parks, and then connecting the nodes together with a trail, hoping

that would provide a springboard for additional improvements. On Labor Day, 1975, a few months into the committee's second year of work, the ribbon was cut at Confluence Park, the first major project undertaken by the committee. Located at the original settlement of Denver, where Cherry Creek joins the South Platte, the new park included an amphitheater, a boat chute and a riverside trail, all a short walk from the downtown business district.

Shoemaker had one other hard and fast rule: he refused to let the city give his committee any official contract or authority. Without any official powers, he reasoned, there were no limitations on what the committee could do. "No power is all power," he was quoted as saying -- a maxim that became known as Shoemaker's Law. Operating under Shoemaker's Law, the committee counted 240 places where pollution was being dumped directly into the river - 200 violators stopped peaceably and 40 were sued successfully on behalf of the city. Unsightly businesses were encouraged to relocate, and railroad lines were rerouted.

In 1977, with seed money from the Gates Foundation, the committee transformed itself into a tax-exempt, 501(c) 3 organization, the South Platte River Greenway Foundation, Inc., to better permit donations. In seven years the foundation raised \$14 million from private and public sources, built 10.5 miles of concrete trails, 4 whitewater boat chutes, and 17 miniparks out of dumps where the public works department and others had been dumping trash for decades.

The greenway was an immediate success, and an inspiration for outlying counties. For the next ten years, the focus shifted from the greenway to the tributaries of the river, which had the potential of serving as trail linkages to the South Platte, suburbs, and the downtown area. Neighboring Arapaho County formed a greenway foundation and built eight miles of trails linking Downtown Denver to the Chatfield Reservoir, which had been built to stop the Platte from flooding. Similarly, Adams County built a greenway, connecting Denver with the city of Thornton, Colorado. The town of Littleton persuaded the Army Corps of Engineers to abandon a flood control project that involved culverting a creek, instead creating a 625-acre wildlife reserve along the South Platte. Six state parks are also linked to the system, which now runs 150 miles up every gulch and stream in the river basin. With the success of the greenway system, the state legislature has dedicated lottery funds to a state greenway program, allowing for considerable programming, expansion and capital improvements. The South Platte River Greenway Foundation is now run by Joe Shoemaker's son, Jeff.

A Renewed Effort

Due primarily to the increasing regional population, and the redevelopment of downtown Denver, the 1990's have brought about a renewed focus on the South Platte River by residents and politicians. By focusing on parkland, development and educational programming, this recent effort has brought more recreation

opportunities for Denver residents and visitors, an increased volume of flow through the traditionally low river, and provided a springboard for additional residential development and investment in areas adjacent to the river park system.

Mayor Wellington Webb has put the river at the top of his agenda, and currently has over \$35 million invested in six separate river park projects. He has also led an effort to increase environmental education and youth programming around the river. Partnerships with Denver Public Schools have led to 25 on-site and school-based educational programs. According to the Mayor's office, when combined with reinstated youth ranger and employment initiatives, these programs helped bring over 17,000 youth to the river from 1995-1997. Mayor Webb also created and serves on the new South Platte River Commission, which comprises 27 members, and has established five task forces to implement their initiatives. Additionally, 23 outside organizations continue to be actively involved in making the improvements.

Major housing, commercial and recreational facilities are planned that will link Denver's revitalized downtown with the river through the Central Platte Valley, 60 acres of formerly industrial land and 1.5 miles of riverfront. The Downtown Partnership, Denver's largest business organization, has aided in the acquisition and planning for this segment, and is helping form a vision of parks, and mixed-use development between the river and downtown which includes more than six million square feet of mixed use development, including 3000 residential units planned, zoned and begun construction in 1998. When completed, the project is boasted to be the most substantial river-edge parkland project between Chicago and California.

Appendix A - Participants in Visioning Process

The group consisted of a wide array of agency, local government and elected officials. This is a partial list of attendees:

NYS Department of Environmental Conservation Division of Water Quality - Steve Eidt

Onondaga County Legislators - Althea Chaplin, Bill Kinne, Lovie Winslow

Syracuse Common Council - Van Robinson

Syracuse Department of Community Development, Division of Neighborhood Planning - Sam Gordon

Syracuse Department of Parks, Recreation and Youth Programs - Alix Krueger

Onondaga County Environmental Division - David Coburn

Centers For Nature Education - Patty Weisse

Cornell Cooperative Extension of Onondaga County - Sheila Myers, Paul O'Connor

State University of New York, College of Environmental Science and Forestry -
Cheryl Doble, Rick Smardon, Ted Endreny
Citizens Campaign for the Environment - Dereth Glance
Izaak Walton League - Bill Legg
Onondaga Community College - Paul Aviles
Cornell University, Department of Natural Resources - Piotr Parasiewicz
Canopy - Melanie Hale
Onondaga Nation - Wendy Gonyea
Citizens - Ollie Clubb
Greenway Foundation, Denver, Executive Director - Jeff Shoemaker

Appendix B - Potential Functions

- Recreation/greenspace - 8
- Catalyst for economic revitalization - 6
- Flood control - 5
- Catalyst for neighborhood revitalization and aesthetics - 5
- Educational resource - 5
- Fishing habitat and recreation - 5
- Ecological restoration - aquatic/riparian - 5
- Watershed drainage/storm water control - 4
- Linkage to other recreational resources - 4
- Water quality - 4
- Alternative transportation (bike) - 3
- Public resource - 2
- Wildlife habitat - 2
- Source of community pride - 2
- Watershed function
- Events

Appendix C - Adjacent Land Uses

- Greenspace/parks/creekwalk/trail network and access points/transportation nodes/corridor/access - 15
- Residential/mixed use - 7
- Educational - 5
- Community facility/center/bathrooms - 5
- Restored riparian zone/wildlife preserve - 4
- Commercial/retail/restaurant district - 4
- Flood plain/daylighting tributaries - 3
- Interpretive/museum - 3
- Municipal nursery/agricultural production - 2

Appendix D - Useful Websites

River Renaissance - Portland, OR
<http://www.river.ci.portland.or.us/index.htm>

The Willamette River is the heart of Portland's economy, history, landscape and culture. Flowing northward to meet the Columbia, it unites the east and west sides and becomes the city's front yard. The River provides a connection with nature in the midst of a thriving urban area and a world class port. River Renaissance is a citywide partnership to revitalize the Willamette River.

Greenway Foundation - Denver, CO

<http://www.greenwayfoundation.org/>

Since 1974, the Greenway Foundation has led the effort to enhance and preserve the South Platte River and its tributaries throughout the Denver metropolitan area. Over the last three decades, over \$60 million of environmental and recreational amenities have been added to these valuable natural resources.

Urban Parks Online

<http://pps.org/upo/>

This website contains many pages of topics that are geared toward parks, but also relevant to greenspace restoration. These include Public Space Furnishings, Why People Need Parks, Understanding Park Use, Funding, Management (volunteers, maintenance, safety, and more), Public / Private Partnerships, Programming, Community Involvement, and Design & Planning.

Appendix E – About Canopy

Canopy is a grassroots coalition of volunteer representatives from Syracuse park associations and community garden groups that advocates for Syracuse greenspaces. Canopy is formed under the not-for-profit umbrella of the Centers for Nature Education, Inc. (CNE), which is headquartered at Baltimore Woods.

During an investigation, sponsored by the Gifford Foundation, of environmental education resources within city limits, CNE discovered that there were abundant and underutilized parks and greenspaces filled with invaluable natural, historical and cultural resources - all within walking distance of city residents. Many of these parks and greenspaces had groups of caring stakeholders who would advocate for their park or garden, but seldom networked with other park associations. It became clear that what was needed was a common group to share knowledge and resources among members, to work closely with the Syracuse Department of Parks, and to advocate for better funding, facilities and programming. As a result, Canopy was formed in November, 2000, with groups such as the Thornden Park Association, the Onondaga Park Association, Elmwood Park Neighbors Association, the Partnership For Onondaga Creek, and Friends of Burnet's Promenade as initial members.

- Canopy meets monthly so those members can network, share ideas and resources, problem-solve and plan. Meetings have featured topics such as urban farmstands, the Syracuse Comprehensive Plan, tree stewardship in the

city, grant resources for greenspaces, and the status of current park improvements.

- Canopy works in collaboration with the Syracuse Department of Parks, Recreation and Youth Programs, and advocates for increased funding for park infrastructure improvements and City Parks staff.
- Canopy has sponsored a Mayoral Candidate Forum on Parks and Greenspaces (August, 2001), helped organize Celebrate Elmwood (Sept., 2002), and co-sponsored the Visions For Onondaga Creek forum in April, 2003.
- Members of Canopy are united in the desire to improve the quality of life in Syracuse by working toward parks, community gardens and neighborhood greenspaces that all city residents can take pride in. It has been shown elsewhere that property values - and tax revenues - rise, and tourism increases, when urban greenspaces are maintained and renewed. Canopy is committed to the vision that Syracuse parks and community gardens can reach their potential as neighborhood centers for culture, recreation, nature, history and community building.

For more information about Canopy, write to Canopy at 658 W. Onondaga St., Syracuse, NY 13204, or call Lee Gechas at 446-5319, e-mail leegech@dreamscape.com.