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EPA recognized Onondaga County, Syracuse as top 10 green community

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By **Teri Weaver / The Post-Standard**



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Don Western(left), of Syracuse University, explains Wednesday to EPA Deputy Administrator Bob Perciasepe how a geothermal field was used under the building's parking lot. They were touring buildings that are part of the Near Westside Initiative. In the background, EPA Regional Administrator Judith Enck (far right) talks to Onondaga County Executive Joanie Mahoney. The EPA has announced that Onondaga County and Syracuse have been chosen as one of 10 communities nationwide to be a Green Infrastructure Partner. The city and county are planning to complete 50 green infrastructure projects this year under the banner of Onondaga County's "Save the Rain" program.

More than two decades ago, Onondaga County was a community filled with environmental finger-pointing about a near-dead lake at its center.

Lawsuits and hundred-million-dollar fees made headlines as governments and industries tried to deflect responsibility for dumping more than a century's worth of sewage and pollutants into Onondaga Lake. Taxpayers helped foot the cleanup bill, while officials mapped out unpopular plans. The debate grew so heated that protesters took to flushing the county's top official down a toilet bowl in effigy.

But on Wednesday, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency named Onondaga County and Syracuse one of the country's top 10 leaders in green infrastructure. .

The designation as an EPA "green infrastructure partner" doesn't come with money or jobs.

Instead, it puts a green badge on the community's shoulder, a stamp of approval that says the county and city are models for using environmentally sound practices in public projects, business investments and educational curricula.

"Today, to have everyone standing together, almost arm in arm — no one was fighting," said Judith Enck, the EPA's regional administrator, after a morning press conference that included leaders from the city, the county, the Onondaga Nation, companies that worked on the lake cleanup, Syracuse University staff, and neighborhood advocates.

"I think it's extraordinary," said Enck. "What that says to me is it's sometimes unpleasant. But these are things that

are worth fighting for.”

EPA Press Conference for New Green Initiative

Environmental Protection Agency officials were joined by Mayor Stephanie Miner, Onondaga County Executive Joanie Mahoney and Onondaga Nation leader Sid Hill at a press conference at The Warehouse in Downtown, Syracuse, to announce a new green initiative for the Near West Side.

The other communities on the EPA's top-10 green list don't have the same recent history of environmental strife, Enck said.

Those communities include the Anacostia River basin in Washington, D.C.; Cleveland; Denver; Jacksonville, Fla.; Kansas City, Mo.; Los Angeles; Mystic, Mass.; and Puyallup, Wash. The 10th community has not been named yet.

“It's an amazing vision,” said EPA Deputy Administrator Bob Perciasepe, No. 2 official at the agency, who traveled to Syracuse to make the announcement.

He singled out for praise Onondaga County Executive Joanie Mahoney's shift in tactics to clean Onondaga Lake.

In her first term, the Republican pushed a controversial plan to scrap brick-and-mortar sewage treatment plants in favor of dozens of projects throughout the city to keep rainwater out of sewage drains, a key step toward keeping raw sewage out of Onondaga Lake.

She, and the activists who once fought the county's plans, won. Under a new agreement, the county pledged to keep 250 million gallons of rainwater out of the sewage drains by 2018 by planting more trees, rebuilding wetlands and installing gardens on roofs.

“Some of the things we are doing have never been done before,” Mahoney said at Wednesday's announcement at The Warehouse, SU's School of Architecture. “The recognition at the federal level — that we are doing things right and that they can learn from us — can smooth the path for us to implement some of the green infrastructure so we can show the rest of the country.”

Samuel Sage, as director of Atlantic States Legal Foundation, filed a lawsuit against the county in 1988 to keep raw sewage overflows from entering Onondaga Lake. The action triggered a \$560 million cleanup plan that Sage kept criticizing over the years until Mahoney embraced a greener plan.

“It's certainly a good feeling that we're going in the right direction,” Sage said. “I couldn't have said that for many, many of those years.”

Sid Hill, Tadadaho of the Onondaga Nation, agreed.

“It's a big statement,” said Hill, the final speaker at the news conference. “Yes, we have a history of this lake being clean and beautiful not too long ago



so that everybody enjoyed the water and the tributaries. This is the goal. It's really uplifting."

Some of the other green efforts EPA officials praised:

Green roofs

In March, Mahoney announced Project 50, a series of green infrastructure improvements to keep rainwater out of stormwater drains. She's proposed building a \$1 million green roof on the Nicholas J. Pirro Convention Center. The 1.5-acre space would be one of the largest green roofs in the northeast, soaking up about 1 million gallons of rainwater a year.

Green ice

At the same complex, the Syracuse Crunch hockey team has agreed to play on ice made from rainwater. A \$1 million system would collect, treat and freeze ice for the hockey rink at the War Memorial. County officials have applied for a state grant they hope will cover \$750,000 of the project, said Matt Millea, deputy county administrator for physical services. The installation is expected to capture 250,000 gallons per year.

Green homes

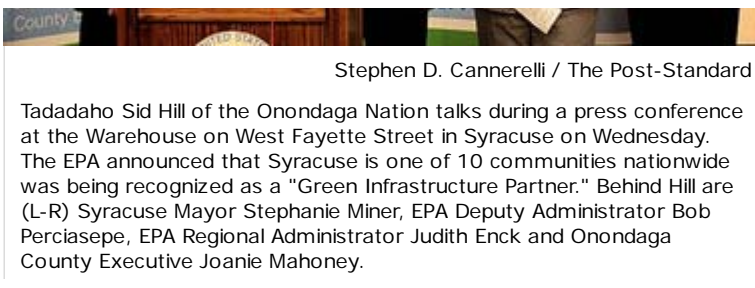
Syracuse University, the city of Syracuse and the Near West Side Initiative, a nonprofit, are working to rebuild a neighborhood just west of downtown filled with empty warehouses and run-down homes. Instead of razing whole blocks, Home Headquarters, a nonprofit community group, is refurbishing as many houses as possible without sending their guts to landfills. Plans also include using county money originally slated for lake cleanup to plant gardens, and install porous sidewalks and bike lanes along Otisco and West streets — more ways to collect rainwater. Architecture students and faculty from Syracuse University are helping with the plans, from streetscapes to housing designs.

Green warehouses

The Near West Side Initiative also is renovating The Lincoln Building, an almost unused building, into 10 loft apartments with a cultural center for the neighborhood. The building is LEED-certified, and nine of the apartments already are rented.

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Tadadaho Sid Hill of the Onondaga Nation talks during a press conference at the Warehouse on West Fayette Street in Syracuse on Wednesday. The EPA announced that Syracuse is one of 10 communities nationwide was being recognized as a "Green Infrastructure Partner." Behind Hill are (L-R) Syracuse Mayor Stephanie Miner, EPA Deputy Administrator Bob Perciasepe, EPA Regional Administrator Judith Enck and Onondaga County Executive Joanie Mahoney.