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At last, the Creekwalk shows Syracuse is treating Onondaga Creek like it's an asset

Published: Monday, November 26, 2012, 11:38 AM Updated: Monday, November 26, 2012, 12:04 PM



By **Dennis J. Connors, Post-Standard contributing columnist**

In 1977, I was a new employee with the Onondaga County Department of Parks and Recreation, hired to run its [history](#) museums. At that time, one could drive a car straight through **Onondaga Lake Park**, from the parkway all the way to Longbranch Road. Automobile traffic passed right in front of the **Salt Museum**.



A family strolls along the Syracuse Creekwalk earlier this year.

David Lassman / The Post-Standard

Many commuters used that park road during afternoon rush hour as a Liverpool bypass. If I were walking from the parks headquarters to the Salt Museum anytime after 3 p.m., I took my life in my hands, dodging traffic.

Parks Commissioner Jim Johst had a controversial plan that year to eliminate cars from most of the park road and to turn it into a bike and pedestrian trail. Some officials feared a public backlash and [asked](#) that [bollards](#) be installed on a trial basis, so the road could easily be re-opened.

One day, the commissioner stopped me and essentially said, "Forget that!"

He wanted to remove the road in front of the museum entirely and replace it with a landscaped, pedestrian plaza. He was convinced that an auto-less trail would be a success, and he wanted to eliminate the chance of turning back. He asked if I were OK with that. It took me about two seconds to [agree](#).

Of course, he was right. The **Onondaga Lake Park Trail** has been a huge success — so much so, that it now is two trails: the original park road for rollerbladers, bicycles and trams and a smaller, more meandering path for pedestrians, closer to the water.

Humans are drawn to water. And cities across the world have long recognized water as one of the great urban amenities. European cities were generally ahead of American towns in making pedestrian access to waterfronts, be

they rivers, lakes or the oceans. But over time, many U.S. cities have re-discovered waterfronts once covered with industrial ruins or even highways.

One of the earliest was the Paseo del Rio, in San Antonio, Texas. In seeking to control flooding of the San Antonio River — a small, unattractive stream running through town — officials in the 1920s proposed cutting a bypass channel, then [draining](#) the river bed to make it a storm sewer with a street built over it.



The River Walk in San Antonio, Texas, includes water taxis, restaurants, shops and plenty of walking paths. The project is considered a model for urban development that values public access to a water feature ... like Syracuse's Creekwalk.

Sue Ogrocki / AP

Citizens argued against covering it and advocated for enhancing the riverbanks. Eventually, they won, with a good deal of the money for improvements coming from President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration in the 1930s.

Today, **San Antonio's River Walk** is a remarkable urban corridor, with restaurants and shops lining its path and water taxis plying its course, all along a stream no bigger than Onondaga Creek.

More recently, cities as diverse as Richmond, Va., Milwaukee, Wis., Covington, Ky., and Providence, R.I., have invested considerable financial and design resources to create imaginative river walkways in their urban cores. In **Providence**, especially, it has been credited as one of the major catalysts for that city's downtown rejuvenation.

Our urban waterway is, unfortunately, not tagged with the nobler name of "river." It is a "creek," which sounds a bit ... well, uninspiring. But Onondaga Creek flows as well as many rivers elsewhere and sure looks nicer than what they call a "river" in Los Angeles.

Additionally, it has some very appealing history.

For starters, did you know the creek was one of the reasons Syracuse was founded, a dozen years before the first shovel was turned to build the Erie Canal? And that three magnificent 19th century stone bridges still span the creek in the heart of downtown?

Yet much of the stream and its banks were turned to industrial uses from the beginning. A multitude of factories and salt fields concealed its northern reaches from view, making it a convenient place to pollute with sewage and industrial waste. People complained about its odors for decades.

With downtown portions hemmed in by industry, its southern section often flooded after heavy rains, causing more

negative associations. It was artificially channeled and fenced off. By the 1970s, we had abused and shunned the creek, a waterway running through the middle of our city, while at the same time lamenting that we had allowed the Erie Canal to be filled.

We first got a taste for Onondaga Creek's potential in the 1980s, when the revitalization of **Franklin Square** got under way and the first portion of the Creekwalk was finished. Now we have finally linked that section on both its north and south ends, creating a 2.6-mile urban path from downtown's Armory Square all the way to the shore of Onondaga Lake.

It was not an easy task. Money had to be secured, and when found, it came with tight budgets and strings attached that, together, limited some of the more imaginative design options. A route had to be snaked through complex property ownerships. But the city and its consultants stuck with it, and the public has embraced the result.

The city is looking to extend the Creekwalk farther south, toward Kirk Park. And Onondaga County has begun to re-focus on completing the "Loop-the-Lake" trail.

Truly, the Creekwalk is just getting started. The Onondaga Historical Association and the city are working together to add creative interpretive stations that will explore the route's history.

And we already have Walt, the imaginative blue sea serpent guarding the Creekwalk at Fayette Street. There should be other places along the Creekwalk identified for public art, perhaps some that speaks to cultural characteristics that define Syracuse.

The addition of landscaping would be a benefit, as well as some selected pruning and clearance of the creek bed. And there is no reason why we cannot consider some side extensions to the walk, especially ones that would help us discover other hidden nuggets of city history.

Even today, if one detours west where the Creekwalk hits Water Street, to loop around back to Erie Boulevard, you can get another close-up view of the creek, walk past the 1860s Empire Mill, enjoy the ornate 1885 former office of the Amos Flour Mill, touch perhaps the last surviving Erie Canal docking hardware in the city and stand just above an 1838 canal culvert — a worthwhile, two-block-long option.



Walt

2011 file



And I am sure there are many other enhancements that the city can consider ... which, of course, begs questions about money, maintenance and upkeep — always a task in an urban setting with challenging winters. Perhaps, as a community, we need to begin thinking about a "Friends of the Creekwalk." New York City has a



Ursula and Joe Maunder, of Syracuse, enjoy a quiet moment at the Creekwalk's end as the sun sets in July over Onondaga Lake.

Lauren Long / The Post-Standard

model of citizen support for a linear park with its successful **High Line**.

We are very fortunate that we have this opportunity as a community to re-discover and re-connect with this waterway. It has tremendous potential to be a catalyst for substantial economic rejuvenation along its route while enhancing our overall quality of life. As a community, we are finally starting to look at it as an asset rather than a source of embarrassment.

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