

Joanie Mahoney: I would swim in Onondaga Lake; beach study could start in 2016



The beach and dock at Pleasant Beach on the western shore of Onondaga Lake. (Onondaga Historical Association)

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Syracuse, N.Y. -- Add Onondaga County Executive Joanie Mahoney to the list of those who say they'd take a dip in Onondaga Lake.

"I would swim in the lake," Mahoney said today. "I think you're going to see very quickly that it's going to be an old conversation about not swimming in the lake."

Mahoney spoke to Syracuse.com a day after [the county issued a report](#) that said the northern two-thirds of the lake meets state health standards for swimming. Last summer, state Department of Environmental Commissioner [Joe Martens said he would swim](#) in the lake. The DEC issued a report last October saying the lake met swimming standards.

Swimming has been banned since 1940 because of industrial and bacterial pollution, and is still illegal from shore because there is no public beach. The county has for several years included \$2.7 million in its five-year improvement plan a proposal to improve Willow Bay picnic area and open a swimming beach.

The cleanup of the lake has once again raised the possibility of swimming in the lake. [Honeywell last fall completed dredging](#) 2.2 million cubic yards of contaminated lake bottom, and \$500 million spent to improve the county's treatment plant has slashed the amount of bacteria and algae in the lake.



County Executive Joanie Mahoney outlines plans for development of the western shore of Onondaga Lake in this 2014 file photo. *David Lassman | dlassman@syracuse.com*

Mahoney said today she hopes to begin conceptual design work on a Willow Bay beach in 2016, pending approval by the Onondaga County Legislature.

Any decision to build a beach would depend on the costs and public sentiment, she said, and there is no timetable for when a beach might be opened.

[Like the amphitheater](#) rising on the west shore of the lake, Mahoney said, a beach would be another symbol of the lake's rebirth.

"From a personal standpoint, I'm thrilled," she said. "I grew up here in Syracuse and you didn't want to be within 100 yards of the lake when I was a kid. The idea of swimming in the lake was impossible to contemplate."

In the 19th century, Onondaga Lake was a popular tourist attraction with beaches and a 600-foot pier. Decades of industrial pollution, sewage and phosphorous made it unsafe for swimming.

The hope of swimming again in Onondaga Lake has been raised several times since the 1940s. A 1952 report on the lake suggested a beach at the northern end, and **[a 1991 land use plan](#)** for the lake shore identified Willow Bay as the best spot for a beach.

Legislature Chairman Ryan McMahan said, he too, would swim in the lake, and he's excited about pursuing plans for a beach. "The fact that we're having a conversation shows you how far we've come in a short period of time," he said. "This is the future of Onondaga Lake, and with the right public dialogue I think the public will want to see a beach there." To open a beach, the county would have to receive approval from the state health department. Among the requirements are low bacteria counts and high water clarity.

Data from the county's annual monitoring program show that Willow Bay meets state Department of Health requirements for swimming beaches. The upper acceptable limit for a single test is 1,000 colonies of bacteria per 100 milliliters of water. The highest reading in 2013 between Memorial Day and Labor Day was 64 colonies.

The sample data also show that a black-and-white disk dropped into the water must be visible at least 4 feet deep. All 17 measurements at Willow Bay in 2013 met that standard, according to county data.

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