Onondaga Lake Loop the Lake Trail

AN ANALYSIS

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The Issue: Healing Relationship with Onondaga Lake

Prior proposals from Onondaga County, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and others for the Loop the Lake Trail have often depicted it directly on the lakeshore, or even on a causeway in the lake. These proposals have been problematic for a number of reasons:

- Onondaga Lake once was surrounded by wetlands. By placing the trail on the shoreline, it ends the possibility of restoration of those wetlands and the ecosystem functions they provide for Onondaga Lake.

- Onondaga Lake has been filled in over the years, resulting in a smaller and shallower lake, which no longer supports the traditional cold water fish that once lived here. To fill it in any further is unconscionable.

- For Onondaga Lake to heal, its shoreline must be restored to provide key habitat for native plants, fish, birds, and animals. It cannot be the mown grass of a park.

However, the concept of a Loop-the-Lake trail has captured the interest of the greater Syracuse community for well over a decade. It has once again come to the forefront of public discussion, with the completion of the Creekwalk along Onondaga Creek connecting the heart of Syracuse at Armory Square all the way to the southern shores of Onondaga Lake.

There is a deep yearning from local people to connect with Onondaga Lake.

At the October 21 FOCUS Greater Syracuse meeting, Deputy County Executive Matt Millea announced that he and others had been tasked by the County Executive to determine how to make the Loop The Lake Trail a reality.

Onondaga County has expressed welcome for the input of the Onondaga Nation in the creation of this trail.
Mr. Millea expressed that the “causeway” in Onondaga Lake was no longer under consideration, and that Onondaga County is also looking for ways to avoid “Murphy’s Island”, which they have promised to return to the Onondaga Nation when it has been cleaned up.

This document is an exploration of one possibility for meeting these design constraints.
Particularly Relevant Excerpts

The Plants
“In order to heal the Lake, the species that originally existed in symbiosis with the Lake must be restored.”

The Food Plants
“Corn, beans, squash, berries, and fruit trees will be planted not just for us, but all creation. Native wetlands will be restored and will include food and medicinal plants.”

The Animals
“We will clean the land around the Lake so that all of our brothers and sisters will be able to thrive.”

The Trees
“The land around Onondaga Lake once supported black ash, cedar, willow, elm, butternut, red maple, chestnut, tamarack, and others.”

The Birds
“We will be sure that wetland, shoreline, and upland habitats are suitable for the native birds that once lived on and around Onondaga Lake… herons, bitterns, snipes, ospreys, sandpipers, plovers, and other wetland and shorebirds will find a home among the shores of Onondaga Lake. Upland songbirds, bank and tree swallows, flycatchers, kingfishers, eagles, ospreys, owls, and hawks will be protected and restored…”
The Original Ecosystems of Onondaga Lake
Honeywell’s Tentative Plans

At the November 21, 2011 FOCUS Greater Syracuse meeting, Honeywell presented their concept for what the Harbor Brook area will look like after “restoration”. It should be noted that when asked, they admitted that they have no concrete plans for the cleanup of this site yet. It is considered the Wastebed B-Harbor Brook subsite of the Onondaga Lake Superfund Site.

While these plans will likely change, and their inclusion here should not be considered endorsement, there are elements to note with interest:

- The trail, for the most part, is located away from the Lake.
- Wetland “improvement” along the lakeshore

These two points seem in keeping with the Onondaga Nation’s desires for Onondaga Lake.

This trail is expected to connect to the existing West Shore Trail in Onondaga Lake Park via a yet-to-be-created trail crossing Ninemile Creek and Wastebeds 1-8.

As the trail along the Western side of Onondaga Lake is dependent upon Honeywell’s remediation of these sites, we will not address this portion further in this proposal.
Loop-the-Lake Design Challenges

One of the reasons the Loop-the-Lake trail has not been completed around the southern end of Onondaga Lake is the proximity of the CSX Railroad tracks to the edge of the lake, leaving no room for a trail. Local officials have discovered over the years that the railroad tracks cannot be disturbed without major Federal government involvement.

Other challenges are the METRO Sewage Treatment Plant, and the Roth Steel junkyard. It is hoped that both of these will someday be removed from the lakefront; when that may happen is anyone’s guess. Both sites will need serious cleanup.
The Trail: Connecting over the Railroad Tracks

This point poses the most challenging design problem of the entire trail. Here are possible options:

- The County might work with the New York State Department of Transportation to build a pedestrian bridge attached to the current existing bridge infrastructure. The pedestrian portion of the bridge would need to be safely separated from 690.

- An at-grade crossing across the train tracks at approximately the same point. However, CSX apparently does not like pedestrians on their tracks.

- A trail along the lakeshore itself is least likely, due to the proximity of the CSX tracks, the challenges the trail would pose for shoreline habitat, and the lack of a bridge across Onondaga Creek.
Assuming the CSX tracks can be crossed:

- This remnant of State Fair Boulevard is a dead-end created by the building of I-690 decades ago.
- It has very low traffic
- Wide swath of grass in the transportation right-of-way between State Fair Blvd and I-690

Challenge:
- Crossing at the I-690 onramp
Hiawatha Boulevard

- Avoids Roth Steel, the railroad tracks, and the Metro Sewage Plant
- Busy, ugly main street, neglected part of town.
- Many possibilities for redevelopment and redesign, encouraged by increased pedestrian access.
- Paul Mercurio, of the City of Syracuse Department of Public Works, is an expert in “complete streets”, which include infrastructure for bike and pedestrian access.
- Bike lanes are already planned on the bridge across Onondaga Creek as part of the existing Creekwalk, according to Mr. Mercurio.
Challenges:

- Spencer Street / State Fair Blvd / Hiawatha Blvd intersection
- There are a number of design possibilities for getting pedestrians and bikes through this intersection safely; we can leave it up to the experts to design the best one.

Benefits:

- Connection to Creekwalk (in green along Onondaga Creek)
- Pedestrian revitalization of a disused commercial street, which may attract new businesses.
Creekwalk Connection

- The trail would follow the Onondaga Creekwalk as it crosses Hiawatha Blvd. under the bridge near Onondaga Creek, and follows the creek towards the Lake.
- Creekwalk crosses under railroad tracks to provide access to Onondaga Lake shore and Murphy’s Island.

The Creekwalk ends at Onondaga Lake. It was completed Autumn 2011. Future Creekwalk projects will include more green infrastructure and plantings, according to Mr. Andrew Maxwell, Director of Sustainability for the City of Syracuse.
Use inner roadway and sidewalks at Carousel Center

- Avoids the Eagle habitat and land promised to return to the Onondaga Nation at Murphy’s Island
- Requires minimal re-painting and signage changes, few infrastructure changes. Drivers expect to encounter pedestrians in the areas closest to the mall and drive very slowly.
- A “herd path” already exists from the Creekwalk to the parking lot, clearly showing the existing need for safe pedestrian and bicycle access from the Creekwalk to the mall.

“Carousel Center is proud to be located along the creekwalk... The creekwalk links the gateways of the city and is a great asset to the movement or fluidity of the city’s population.”

- Robert Congel
  Op-ed in the Post Standard, November 9, 2011
Crossing Ley Creek & Liverpool Interchange:
Benefit:
- Creates safe connections to the Farmer’s Market, Regional Transportation Center, and Alliance Bank Stadium. Currently, pedestrians must walk on the shoulder of the road and cross a busy intersection with no crosswalks.

Challenge:
- Narrow roadway under railroad tracks.
- Transportation planners call narrowing a three-lane road to a two-lane road a “road diet”. This is currently happening in many places around Syracuse, to slow traffic and accommodate bike lanes. It might happen here.
Crossing Ley Creek using Forgotten Bike Trail

Benefit:
- Utilizes existing bike path & bridge over Ley Creek.
- This bike path was apparently built and forgotten. Neither end connects to any further trail, which can be easily fixed.

Challenge:
- Crossing the on-ramps and off-ramps of the Liverpool / I-81 interchange. These crossings already exist as a bike trail.
Despite being surrounded by highways, the trail is quite pretty.

All necessary signage for this trail already exists.

The roads crossed are relatively low-traffic.
Forgotten Bike Trail cont’d

When these pictures of the trail were taken, a young man was observed walking his bike on the shoulder of the busy road, on the opposite side of the fence from the trail.

He did not know this trail existed.

The trail’s beginning and end are both hidden from public discovery.

This trail will need portions re-paved to bring it up to the appropriate standards.
Onondaga Lake Parkway: A Park Once Again

The trail would connect with the NE side of the Onondaga Lake Parkway, running along the ponds and historic ruins. The parkland is wide enough here to allow for the trail to be separated from the busy road.
Onondaga Lake Parkway

Historical ruins exist all along Onondaga Lake Parkway from past eras of Onondaga Lake; the Loop the Lake Trail will provide safe access to them.

Onondaga Lake can be seen all along the Parkway. The presence of both the Onondaga Lake Parkway and the railroad tracks so close to the edge of Onondaga Lake in this area is unfortunate, which makes it all the more important to keep the Trail out of the few remaining wetland areas.
The Lake side of the Parkway past the railroad bridge is too narrow to support the Loop the Lake Trail.

Creating a pathway under this bridge is a design challenge, but not an insurmountable one.

The public support for a Loop the Lake Trail may be enough to counteract any opposition to narrowing the Onondaga Lake Parkway to fewer lanes, in order to accommodate safe passage for pedestrians and cyclists under the railroad bridge.
The Trail can either travel along the front or back side of the Ste. Marie Among the Iroquois complex, perhaps using some of its underutilized roads.

Another, perhaps more long-term option would be to close the Parkway permanently to motor vehicles, narrowing or moving it, and allowing a healthy riparian shoreline once more to exist along Onondaga Lake.
The Loop the Lake Trail finally becomes a loop when it crosses over Bloody Brook and enters Onondaga Lake Park in Liverpool, connecting to the existing Lakeshore Trail.

Whether to cross Bloody Brook at the Parkway or to create a new bridge over Bloody Brook, connecting the Park to the Butterfly Garden, is a question.

Staying further away from the Lake would allow for dechannelization of Bloody Brook near the Lake someday, and the restoration of lakeshore ecosystems within Onondaga Lake Park.
Returning to the Old Ways of Transportation—for our Future

Ultimately, the Loop-the-Lake Trail is not the end goal in restoration; it is a pathway to reconnect people with Onondaga Lake.

Currently, with the sole exception of the new Creekwalk, people must drive in order to see or experience Onondaga Lake; it is already looped with many high-speed roadways. This proposal provides interconnectedness for the snippets of pedestrian and bike access that currently exist. It also creates a comprehensive pathway network allowing for a much slower and more contemplative, as well as environmentally beneficial method of transportation.

People will be able to safely travel on foot, rollerblade, or bike, from downtown Syracuse (currently) to the Farmer’s Market, to the skate park in Liverpool, all the way up to Long Branch Park at the north end of the Lake. People may even be able to get to the Fairgrounds without a car. The Creekwalk is intended to stretch as far south as the Onondaga Nation’s borders someday.

In this era of climate change, this is part of the recipe for our future. When we slow down and look, perhaps we will begin to listen as well.