

History

The History of the Midland Sewage Plant Struggle

on Syracuse's Southwest side

Combined Sewer Overflow Problem

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many older U.S. cities centralized their sewage treatment by building combined sewer systems, replacing outhouses and urban septic tanks. Besides conveying household, commercial and industrial wastes to a central sewage treatment plant, sewer systems also combined these wastes with stormwater run-off. Cities would then treat their combined sewage and discharge it to a waterway.

The problem with this practice was having enough conveyance capacity during wet weather. Stormwater, flowing into the sewer system through the street drains, known as catch basins, would cause sewage backups in basements or on the streets. To prevent these unhealthy backups, cities discharge their sewer lines into nearby streams. Until the passage of the 1972 federal Clean Water Act, cities viewed these discharges or combined sewer overflows (CSOs) as necessary and lawful. Since 1972, building a combined sewer system has been illegal. All new development must construct separated systems, i.e., constructing two pipelines, one for storm water run-off and one for sanitary waste. Also, the Clean Water Act put cities on notice that their combined sewer systems may be in violation of the Clean Water Act's water quality standards.

Currently, in Syracuse, New York, about 42% of the sewer lines are separated, the remaining are combined.^[1] The City of Syracuse and Onondaga County share responsibility for the combined sewer system. The city builds and maintains the smaller sewer lines that connect to properties, while the county maintains the large sewer trunk lines, which convey the city's sewage to the county's METROpolitan wastewater treatment plant.

In 1988, the Atlantic States Legal Foundation (ASLF), along with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC), sued Onondaga County for its discharges from METRO and from 63 CSOs from the county trunk sewers. The lawsuit contended that, under the Clean Water Act, these discharges were polluting Onondaga Lake and its tributaries: Onondaga Creek, Harbor Brook and Ley Creek. The following year, the federal court mandated that Onondaga County develop a plan to^[2] "bring the County's effluent discharges from Metro and the CSOs into compliance with the State's effluent limitations and water quality standards, and implement such plan."

It took another ten years for the ASLF and the NYSDEC to agree to Onondaga County's plan. The new agreement was embodied in the 1998 federal Amended Consent Judgment (ACJ). The ACJ called for five regional treatment facilities, in neighborhoods along Syracuse's creeks.

The Midland Plant Conflict

One of the biggest was the Midland Avenue Regional Treatment Facility (RTF). In 1999, Onondaga County announced its plan that would evict 35 low-income, African American residents at the proposed RTF site. Provoked by the proposed evictions, disruption and stigma associated with a sewage plant, the community asked the county to change its plan. For community residents, the county's plan was a repeat of past years when they had faced removal for government projects supposedly promoting the public good.

In the 1960s, urban renewal removed and destroyed an African American enclave, known as the 15th Ward, to make way for Upstate University hospital and Interstate 81. In the early 1970s on Syracuse's Southside, the Centro Bus Garage (adjacent to the proposed Midland RTF) displaced blocks of poor African Americans. And in the 1980s, Syracuse University expanded its steam plant into the African American community.^[3]



The Partnership for Onondaga Creek

In 2000, disturbed by the proposed residential site of the Midland Avenue RTF and its chlorine-based technology, concerned citizens started The Partnership for Onondaga Creek (POC), a grassroots environmental justice group. Over the past eight years, the POC has urged both city and county government “to do the right thing” and not force this African American community to accept yet another unwanted and environmentally burdensome project. Some highlights of the POC’s struggle for equity:

- creating a diverse voice for fairness and equity.
- collaborating with the Onondaga Nation and local and state-wide environmental and social justice groups.
- creating fairer solutions to the city-wide CSO problem.
- pressuring the City of Syracuse not to sell land to Onondaga County for the Midland Sewage Plant.
- joining, as a critical stakeholder, the negotiations between the City of Syracuse and Onondaga County and ultimately getting an underground storage tank and a down-sized Midland RTF.
- filing, along with Syracuse University’s Public Interest Law Firm, a civil rights claim with the United States Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) against Onondaga County and the NYSDEC.[\[4\]](#)
- submitting to the USEPA a book-length “Study in Environmental Racism: ‘New and Significant Information Regarding Title VI Claim 03R-04-R2.’”[\[5\]](#)
- advocating for a greener and fairer solution to Phase III of the Midland RTF project, a huge mile-long CSO conveyance.

Finding an alternative solution to the CSO problem has been particularly difficult because the county’s engineering consultants and the government regulatory agencies (USEPA and the NYSDEC) preferred the old “gray” methods of CSO abatement. These were: sewer separation, in-line storage conveyances, off-line storage tanks and a swirler-chlorination technology used by the RTFs. The main benefit of the long drawn-out eight-year struggle against the proposed RTFs was that the USEPA and the NYSDEC began to see benefits to green technology, and added such technology to its list of approved CSO abatement solutions. Green technology mimics nature by absorbing rainwater and keeping it out of the combined sewer system. The new green methods allowed advocates to call for a re-thinking of the three remaining unbuilt RTFs and the proposed Midland Phase III’s CSO conveyance.

Green Infrastructure Alternative

When the newly elected Onondaga County Executive Joanie Mahoney took office on January 1, 2008, she was under pressure to award the construction contracts for the Downtown RTF, the third swirler-chlorination plant out of the proposed five. Instead, she asked for a moratorium from the regulating authorities so the county could evaluate how a cheaper, green-gray technology mix might replace the chlorine-based RTF. After an initial three-month study, the regulators awarded the county the opportunity to create a newer approach to Syracuse’s Downtown CSO problem.[\[6\]](#)

Building on the example of other cities, the county began to explore how green infrastructure, such as green roofs, trees, rain barrels, rain gardens, curbside extensions and porous pavement, would complement gray sewage facilities. To study these methods and create a new plan, the county put together a taskforce with the following committees: Policy, Green Infrastructure, Gray Infrastructure, and Outreach. POC members were on all the committees except for Policy. Besides wanting a greener alternative to the proposed RTFs, the POC pushed for a greener and fairer alternative to Midland Phase III.

To read a good summary of how GI became established in Syracuse see article attached below.

The Midland Phase III Pipeline

With the completion of the downsized Midland RTF, the POC wanted to ensure that this same community wasn’t further impacted by the construction of the Midland Phase III conveyance, a 12 ft.-in-diameter, 7700 ft. pipeline. Anything less would continue the history of unequal treatment, stigma and dislocation that this community has suffered over the past four decades.



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With the new county administration the POC knew it had a sympathetic ear and so developed a green and grey infrastructure alternative to Midland Phase III. This pipe would convey upstream CSOs to the Midland RTF for storage or chlorinated treatment. In March, 2008 Onondaga County's Legislature bonded an extra \$25 million (M) for Phase III. Building this pipeline would drive the Midland RTF project to \$150 M^[7], more than double its original 1999 estimate. Using this fiscal burden to its advantage, in June 2008, the POC presented to Onondaga County and the NYSDEC a cheaper and greener alternative to the pipeline. With constant pressure from the POC and its allies, the county abandoned the Midland Phase III pipeline and is designing green and grey infrastructure solutions for these upstream CSOs. This was a solid victory after such a long struggle!!!

^[1] Syracuse and Onondaga County Planning Association (SOCPA), *Sewer Network in the Onondaga Lake Basin, City of Syracuse*, Map, 2002.

^[2] Amended Consent Judgment, United States District Court for the Northern District of New York; Atlantic States legal Foundation, State Of New York and John P. Cahill, as commissioner of the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation – vs – Onondaga County Department of Drainage and Sanitation and Onondaga County, New York, (88-CV-0066) Judge McAvoy, January 20, 1998, p 2.

^[3] Mahala Adams, Catherine, "Defending Our Place: Protest on the Southside of Syracuse," Masters Thesis, Syracuse University, 2003, p 51 – 73.

^[4] Title VI Administrative Complaint on Behalf of the Partnership for Onondaga Creek with Executive Summary, Syracuse University's Public Interest Law Firm, April 9, 2004.

^[5] The Partnership for Onondaga Creek, "A Study in Environmental Racism: 'New and Significant' Information Regarding Title VI Claim 03R-04-R2," September, 2006.

^[6] John Mariani, "Armory Sewage Plant Scrapped," *Post-Standard*, Syracuse, New York, May 3, 2008.

^[7] Monthly Report, Onondaga Lake Improvement Project, Onondaga County Department of Water Environment Protection, January 10, 2008, A-10.

Preview	Attachment	Size
	A Better Way Forward _ (Sep2012)MuniSewer&Water.pdf [1]	607.87 KB

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[1] [https://onondagacreek.org/sites/default/files/A Better Way Forward _ \(Sep2012\)MuniSewer&Water.pdf](https://onondagacreek.org/sites/default/files/A Better Way Forward _ (Sep2012)MuniSewer&Water.pdf)

[2] <https://onondagacreek.org/issue/green-infrastructure>



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