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Activists' persistence on sewage pushed Onondaga County to 'go green'



By Tim Knauss / The Post-Standard

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Gary Walts / The Post-Standard
Community activists and Syracuse residents Aggie Lane, left, and Lionel Logan on the bridge at Midland Ave. and Blaine Street that spans Onondaga Creek. Their efforts helped keep more sewage plants, like the Midland sewage plant in the background, from being built. Gary Walts / The Post-Standard

Syracuse, NY -- In 2000, Aggie Lane demonstrated outside the home of Onondaga County Executive Nick Pirro to protest plans for a sewage treatment plant in her Midland Avenue neighborhood.

During a 2004 protest against the sewage plant, she was arrested.

But by 2008, Lane was advising the new county executive, Joanie Mahoney, and giving PowerPoint presentations to top state environmental officials in Albany.

Lane lost her battle to stop the Midland Regional Treatment Facility from being built. But she and other activists recently won the war to scrap Onondaga County's costly campaign of building neighborhood sewage plants.

This is the story of how Republican politician Mahoney sought help from community activists to shake up a complex \$560 million program to clean up Onondaga Lake and its tributaries — a program that had long been controlled by engineers and bureaucrats.

Convinced that change was necessary, Mahoney early in her tenure listened more closely to her band of outsiders than to her own county staff and paid consultants. The result was a radically new plan to develop a citywide network of rain gardens, green roofs, porous pavements and other "green" infrastructure to reduce the need for sewage plants and giant pipelines in city neighborhoods.

"It's really democracy at its best, with people who are really involved demanding and achieving change," said Joseph Heath, a lawyer for the Onondaga Nation.

The role of activists such as Heath and Lane in framing the county's policy is perhaps nowhere more evident than at the "pipe to nowhere."

Before construction of the Midland plant was finished, contractors installed the first 1,000 feet of a massive underground pipeline that was supposed to bring in half the sewage and storm water to be handled by the facility.

But the pipeline, which was intended to stretch 1.5 miles, will never be finished. The \$80 million Midland Regional Treatment Facility will forever operate at about half capacity.

To engineer Peter Moffa, who consulted with Onondaga County for three decades before retiring, that's a tragedy.

"It's just terrible," Moffa said. "You've got a facility that was built out and ... it's not being utilized to its fullest."

But Heath, who fought to exclude the Midland pipeline from the county's program, said burying a 12-foot-diameter concrete pipe along a 1.5-mile route would have been disruptive to the neighborhood.

The pipeline also would have brought more runoff to the Midland plant, which is designed to dump partially treated sewage into Onondaga Creek if flows exceed its storage capacity.

"The less it's used, the better," Heath said of the treatment plant.

The Midland pipeline was expected to cost about \$62 million, county officials said.

As alternatives, Lane and others proposed a series of smaller initiatives, such as cleaning trunk lines, installing a small storage tank and separating some storm sewers from sanitary sewers. Those "gray" projects would be combined with "green" initiatives such as vegetation-covered roofs, porous parking lots and tree boxes, they proposed.

That is now the county's approach.

It's not yet clear whether the new plan will save money. County officials say new gray projects targeted for the Midland area could cost between \$24 million and \$70 million, depending on whether all the projects get done. They have tentatively allocated \$9 million for green projects, but many of the specifics for green infrastructure are still under review.

All told, the county estimates it could spend as much as \$223 million to complete gray and green projects in the Midland, Armory Square and Harbor Brook areas, said Patricia Pastella, commissioner of water environment protection. That's roughly the estimate for the previous plan.

By 2018, green initiatives are expected to keep 250 million gallons of storm water out of sewers throughout the urban area that drains into Onondaga Creek and Harbor Brook. Another 160 million gallons will be captured with gray infrastructure, such as storage tanks and sewer improvements, according to the county's new plan. The costs and benefits of green initiatives can be tricky to estimate, because they rely on many small projects across a wide area. They also require widespread public participation, said Samuel Sage, president of Atlantic States Legal Foundation, one of the activists who pushed for the green plan.

"Green is faith-based technology — faith in the public," Sage said. "When you have to plant 10,000 trees, and you need 10,000 people to take care of 10,000 trees, engineers panic."

In the fall of 2007, when Joanie Mahoney was campaigning for county executive, she bumped into Lane at an event on the South Side.

"We need to talk," Mahoney told her.

Lane, 64, is a former engineer who retired early from Carrier Corp., in 1995. Her concern about racism and the way it divides the community prompted her to move in 1992 from Fayetteville to Midland Avenue, one of the poorest neighborhoods in Syracuse.

In 2000, she joined the Partnership for Onondaga Creek, a community group organized to fight against the Midland sewage plant and to advocate for alternative strategies. That fight became a new occupation for Lane, who lives two blocks from the plant.

"It was a full-time job," she said.

Mahoney first heard Lane speak out when Mahoney was a city councilor in the early 2000s. Mahoney was persuaded that the Midland plant was a bad idea. She said she sympathized with neighborhood residents who complained that the county would never build a similar facility in a wealthy, white community.

Lane, who keeps boxes of records and sewer maps at home, impressed Mahoney with her knowledge.

As the election approached, Mahoney told Lane that if she won the county executive job, she would be interested in changing the sewer policies of the outgoing executive, Pirro. She asked Lane to organize a meeting of environmental and neighborhood activists who could bring Mahoney up to speed.

The meeting took place Oct. 29, eight days before the election. Mahoney and her campaign manager, Ben Dublin, met with Lane, Heath and several others who would become key suppliers of information and advice.

As soon as Mahoney took office, she turned to them for help. In January 2008, she faced a critical decision.

Plans for a second regional treatment facility — in Armory Square, similar to the Midland plant — had been started months before Mahoney took office. Site work had begun. Bids had been submitted for the construction.

Most of the staff from the county Department of Water Environment Conservation recommended that Mahoney award a contract and move ahead with the project, she said.

When she told department employees she wanted to abandon the project and look at other alternatives, she was met with incredulous looks, Mahoney recalled.

"I don't believe anybody in those initial meetings thought we were going to do anything other than build a sewage treatment plant," she said.

During those first weeks, Mahoney met and traded e-mail with Heath and Lane — both to seek their opinions and to check the facts her staff was giving her.

"I could trust, I could bounce things off (Joe) and Aggie," Mahoney said.

She decided to postpone the construction bids, and later to abandon the sewage plant project.

Meanwhile, Sage, of Atlantic States, and Heath teamed to persuade the state Department of Environmental Conservation that it was time for a change in Onondaga County's plan.

Sage can take credit for spurring much of Onondaga County's progress in cleaning local waterways. His organization, a small nonprofit, sued the county in 1988 to force it to comply with federal clean water laws.

In the past decade, Onondaga County has spent \$350 million to fix wastewater problems. Scientists agree that Onondaga Lake is much healthier because of it. But that doesn't mean Sage is happy with all the projects undertaken by the county. He has consistently opposed regional treatment facilities like the one at Midland Avenue.

Sage and Heath met twice in late 2007 and early 2008 with Alexander "Pete" Grannis, the DEC commissioner, to enlist his support for a new strategy.

During at least one of those meetings, they were accompanied by water scientist Ed Michalenko, of Onondaga Environmental Institute. Michalenko presented data showing that bacteria levels in Onondaga Creek are heavily affected by leaks in the sanitary sewers — a problem that would not be solved by building regional treatment

facilities. Michalenko argued that Onondaga County should devote its resources to repairing sanitary sewers and separating them from storm sewers.

Heath said he also persuaded representatives of the DEC's environmental justice staff to Syracuse to visit the neighborhood near the Midland plant and to walk the route of the planned pipeline. Their visits helped convince DEC officials that the South Side had borne an unfair burden and should not get a pipeline, as well, Heath said.

To sell a green solution, Heath and Sage helped coordinate visits by experts in green infrastructure.

They brought in Nancy Stoner, a former EPA official who co-directs water programs for the Natural Resources Defense Council. Stoner, co-author of "Rooftops to Rivers," the council's influential guide to green infrastructure, gave a lecture attended by county officials.

They also brought in Franco Montalto, a Drexel University hydrologist and engineer who runs a company specializing in green infrastructure. Montalto toured local sites and met with county officials.

When the county finally had to hire an engineering company to evaluate and refine its new program, Mahoney put out a request for proposals but refused to hire any local company, because most had invested many years of work on the old programs. She wanted a fresh set of eyes, she said, and selected CH2M Hill Cos. Ltd., an international company based in Englewood, Colo.

"You can't get that from people who have been immersed in it for 15 years,"

Mahoney said. "You can't get that fresh look."

DEC officials have said they hope to make Onondaga County's green infrastructure program a model for other cities to follow. Mahoney said the county's groundbreaking approach would not have been possible without the help of activists from the community.

"A lot of the reason I knew what I was talking about was because I had listened to people like Aggie Lane and Joe Heath and the neighbors," she said.

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