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### 2011 PUBLIC OFFICIALS OF THE YEAR

#### The Eco-Emissary

Joanie Mahoney

County Executive, Onondaga County, N.Y.



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**T**here is a long and discouraging political tradition in upstate New York. Put bluntly, it says counties surrounding places like Rochester, Schenectady and Buffalo should leave those cities to struggle on their own with severe job losses, eroding tax bases, failing school systems, brownfield sites and polluted waterways.

So when someone like Onondaga County Executive Joanie Mahoney says, "Our region will thrive only if Syracuse thrives," it deserves attention.

Since taking over as county executive in January 2008, Mahoney, a Republican, has pursued a remarkable and sustained effort to partner with Syracuse officials on getting a wide variety of big and important jobs done. Her goal is a healthier Syracuse, creating a thriving city at the heart of what is a mostly rural county.

"Most people will say that it's important to our region to have a healthy and vibrant city, but too often that's just lip service," says Syracuse Mayor Stephanie Miner, a Democrat. "Joanie makes decisions that reflect that."

Probably the most prominent of Mahoney's Syracuse-friendly decisions, though, was to push back on a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) consent order aimed at cleaning up Syracuse's Onondaga Lake, considered to be one of the most polluted in the country.

The initial deal worked out with the EPA had been to build three sewage treatment plants downtown. "I just didn't feel that building those three plants in three different downtown neighborhoods was being respectful of the city," says Mahoney.

One of her first initiatives as county executive was successfully renegotiating the consent order so that the city and county could work together on a much greener approach to preventing sewage and runoff from spilling into the lake.

Called Save the Rain, the effort has involved dozens of projects from planting green roofs

on municipal buildings, to ambitious and wide-scale landscaping plans, to numerous other efforts to reduce impervious surfaces citywide.

Besides Save the Rain, which has become a national model for a green approach to dealing with overloaded sewer systems and toxic runoff, she has helped craft the county's first long-range sustainability plan. She also pushed for and won a new fiscal arrangement whereby all local sales taxes go to the county's coffers, not only to shore up county finances, but also as a way to directly share that revenue with Syracuse.

Looking at the breadth and depth of Mahoney's accomplishments and the partnerships she has forged begs the obvious question: What makes her so effective? "Joanie will always tell you what she plans to do and why, and then you can take it to the bank and trust her," says Miner. "And even when she has to make difficult decisions that she knows are going to be subject to backlash, she does what she believes is right."

— Jonathan Walters

Photo by David Kidd

Watch Joanie Mahoney explain her proposed 2012 budget to The Post-Standard in this clip.






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