

## Parks Place

Contributed by Molly English

As assistant commissioner at the Jamesville Correctional Facility, Bill Lansley had to pass the pepper spray test. To work in a prison, where the repellent can get used against unruly inmates, you have to be able to tolerate two blasts to the face, with your eyes closed, fortunately. We're sure Lansley won't have to walk a similar gauntlet in his new post, unless the elephants at the zoo stop working for peanuts.

New Onondaga County Parks Commissioner Bill Lansley along the Onondaga Lake shoreline: "We have several friends groups that do a tremendous job taking up a lot of volunteer hours, doing fund-raising and assisting where we could never do that with paid staff." MICHAEL DAVIS PHOTO

Lansley, 47, started his new job as commissioner at Onondaga County Parks on Sept. 28, succeeding the popular, respected and dynamic Bob Geraci, through whose leadership Lights on the Lake grew into the highly regarded holiday show it is today and a successful Parks for Tomorrow renovation plan saw impressive upgrades to the greenspaces. While the official Aug. 14 press release announcing his appointment didn't mention it, Lansley is Onondaga County Executive Joanie Mahoney's first cousin—their mothers are sisters. Some eyebrows raised after word of the family tie leaked, but the 24-hour media cycle quickly moved onto other hard-hitting issues of the day.

It's not that Lansley isn't experienced; it's just that his experience isn't in parks administration. He notched 27 years in businesses management with a focus on family and youth recreation before he took the position at Jamesville Pen in January 2008, his first with the county. His new job pays \$82,152 annually.

Lansley grew up and still lives in Camillus with his wife, Mary Lansley. He attended Onondaga Community College, studying communications. While there he began working at Bally's Aladdin's Castle, eventually becoming general manager, before moving on to Odyssey Fun World, an entertainment center in Illinois, working there until 2001. He moved back to Syracuse where he worked at the Hamilton Street Boys and Girls Club from 2002 to 2008.

In his spare time, he enjoys golfing and taking walks with his wife, quite often at the parks he now oversees. He also enjoys the great American pastime, and spends many a summer evening at Alliance Bank Stadium, watching the Syracuse Chiefs play ball on their lush grass field.

Otherwise, Lansley spends his time learning what it takes to be commissioner of a parks system that is as diverse as it is special, from an urban zoo to a nearly wild forest in Spafford, and picking up the pieces of a difficult budget process that left Parks staff laid-off or reassigned, or fed up and retired. He also takes over as the second phase of the Parks for Tomorrow rehabilitation plan gets under way, so he's learning about each of the 14 parks as those projects get going.

He sat down with The New Times on a spectacular October day to talk about his new job.

Q: How did you come to be named Parks commissioner?

A: When Mr. Geraci announced his retirement I was asked if I was interested in looking into the position. As my past has worked me toward this position, it seemed like a natural fit. When I talked to the county executive, she was interested as well.

Q: How so about your past?

A: I've always had what I call fun jobs. I've worked in the entertainment industry. I've worked at the Boys and Girls Club. A lot of these were extensive managerial positions. With the Boys and Girls Club, it was

construction and youth development, working with sports leagues, a lot of things you would typically do in a recreational venue.

Q: You've only been on the job for less than a month. What do you see as the big challenges here?

A: There are some aspects that are just different. There are a lot of properties here but from an aspect of being different from the correctional facility, everything is in a compact area up there. Though you still have different departments on site here, you also have properties that are spread all over the county. It's a little more time consuming to get around to all of those, and it's a pretty extensive department.

Q: How about the challenges that the newly passed budget is presenting?

A: I think the budget creates opportunities as well as challenges. You look at the department and see what you really can do with less. I know that the staff at Parks has been very welcoming to me but also very understanding of the situation that the county is faced with and they're committed to being positive and to work toward keeping the parks at the level they're at right now.

Q: What do you see as the strengths here?

A: The experience that's already here. A lot of people have been here in excess of 20 years that have done the programs, the events day in and day out. It's almost an automated program when it comes to the people that are here being able to do what's required.

Q: What about the facilities themselves?

A: They're actually in pretty good shape. I think the maintenance is something we need to address. The structures are getting older and with our Parks for Tomorrow initiative some of that was addressed, some of our major issues, but some of our smaller parks need some attention at this point as well.

Q: What are some of your short-term goals for the parks?

A: As we continue the Parks for Tomorrow 2 project—those are some very high level projects—there are two at the zoo that we're about to undertake: a new elephant barn so that we can expand the breeding program and we have a primate exhibit that's going to be built out into the existing courtyard.

At Oneida Shores, we have some issues regarding the campground flooding that we're working on. There's a dock up there with a boat launch undergoing extensive repair, and there are road repairs. We also will be installing some additional playground equipment.

At Pratt's Falls, the Camp Brockway facility, there is a slate wall that's actually a major function of the foundation for that building, and it's falling apart and bowed in some areas. It's going to be taken out and rebuilt so there's no potential for damage in the future.

Spafford Forest would be a long-term development project. We have several parcels that at this point are not connected; we got them through donations and we're using them to help piece that park together. We're actually working on one additional piece of property right now that would give us better access at Spafford.

The marina project at Onondaga Lake Park is gearing up. We have some aged docks out there that are going to be replaced in conjunction with a grant from the New York State Canal Corporation. We're going to have floating docks. Last spring there were some ice jams that came in and damaged some of the wooden docks, so we're putting in floating docks so if the ice comes in, they'll be elevated on the ice and they won't be damaged.

They will also give much better access to the sailboats that sit pretty low on the water.

Also at Onondaga Lake Park, in the Griffin Field area, all the columns that were part of the original structure for the baseball field that was there&mdash;there is a lot of deterioration. We are going to refurbish all of those columns, some will be reduced in size, some will be eliminated but the original outline of that field will be kept intact.

Q: How come?

A: There&rsquo;s a lot of history there and people came for years and years, playing ball, and they come here to see the original structure. It&rsquo;s part of the original fabric of the Parkway. Just to rip them out, I don&rsquo;t think would be the right thing to do.

Q: What&rsquo;s going on with Carpenter&rsquo;s Brook Fish Hatchery? Wasn&rsquo;t it considered for closure during the latest budget talks?

A: We&rsquo;re actually working with SUNY-ESF (College of Environmental Science and Forestry) and the Friends of Carpenter&rsquo;s Brook Fish Hatchery and the Sportsmen&rsquo;s Federation, and everyone has come to the table and been very positive about doing what they can to make that project work. We did take a pretty good cut in our budget there and that&rsquo;s where the community rallies and really works hard to save a park like that. In fact, we have several friends groups that do a tremendous job taking up a lot of volunteer hours, doing fund-raising and assisting where we could never do that with paid staff.

Q: The parks seem to be attracting more special events: Bass Masters, triathlons. Do you pursue a certain marketing plan for the parks and would you like to see more of these events?

A: The staff really loves to get involved with these special events. They showcase the parks and get a lot of additional people there, and then they see how nice the parks are. Each individual organization has employees that handle the logistics and do all the planning. We work closely with them to make sure everything is as they need it to be.

If you&rsquo;ve seen the Corporate Challenge, that is a precision-run event where, in a very short amount of time after the last runner comes through, the staging is down, Onondaga Lake Parkway is back to normal, the park is overnight transformed back into a local park. The event staff is very proficient at doing the major cleanups. The next day you&rsquo;d see what you&rsquo;d see the rest of the year; you&rsquo;d never know a large race had just taken place.

We accept these special programs when they&rsquo;re appropriate for us to do so. Part of our responsibility is to make sure all the access is still available for county residents. We don&rsquo;t ever want to shut a park down to our residents.

Q: How are the budget cuts going to affect your department?

A: We are hoping they will be minimal. Obviously, losing anybody is difficult. We would not choose that route but as I said the staff that is here is ready to pick up where they have to do to make sure the parks run as expected by the public.

Q: Do you have a favorite park?

A: {Hesitates} I would say no. I really like the parks with trails because that&rsquo;s a passion of mine. My wife and I spend time at Onondaga Lake Park and Highland Forest and Beaver Lake walking the trails there. I&rsquo;m also a huge fan of baseball so Alliance Bank Stadium has always been a favorite of mine. Beaver Lake is one of those special little places that&rsquo;s out of the way and has a great friends group and is a very well-visited park.

Q: What are your long-range goals as you take over the Onondaga County Parks Department?

A: We're really looking for stability. We want to make sure that everything that our park visitors have been accustomed to still matches up to their expectations. We're really looking to keep things rolling as is, and as our Parks for Tomorrow 2 projects come forth it'll be a lot of new and exciting things for people to see and that's what we're looking for, to keep things rolling.