
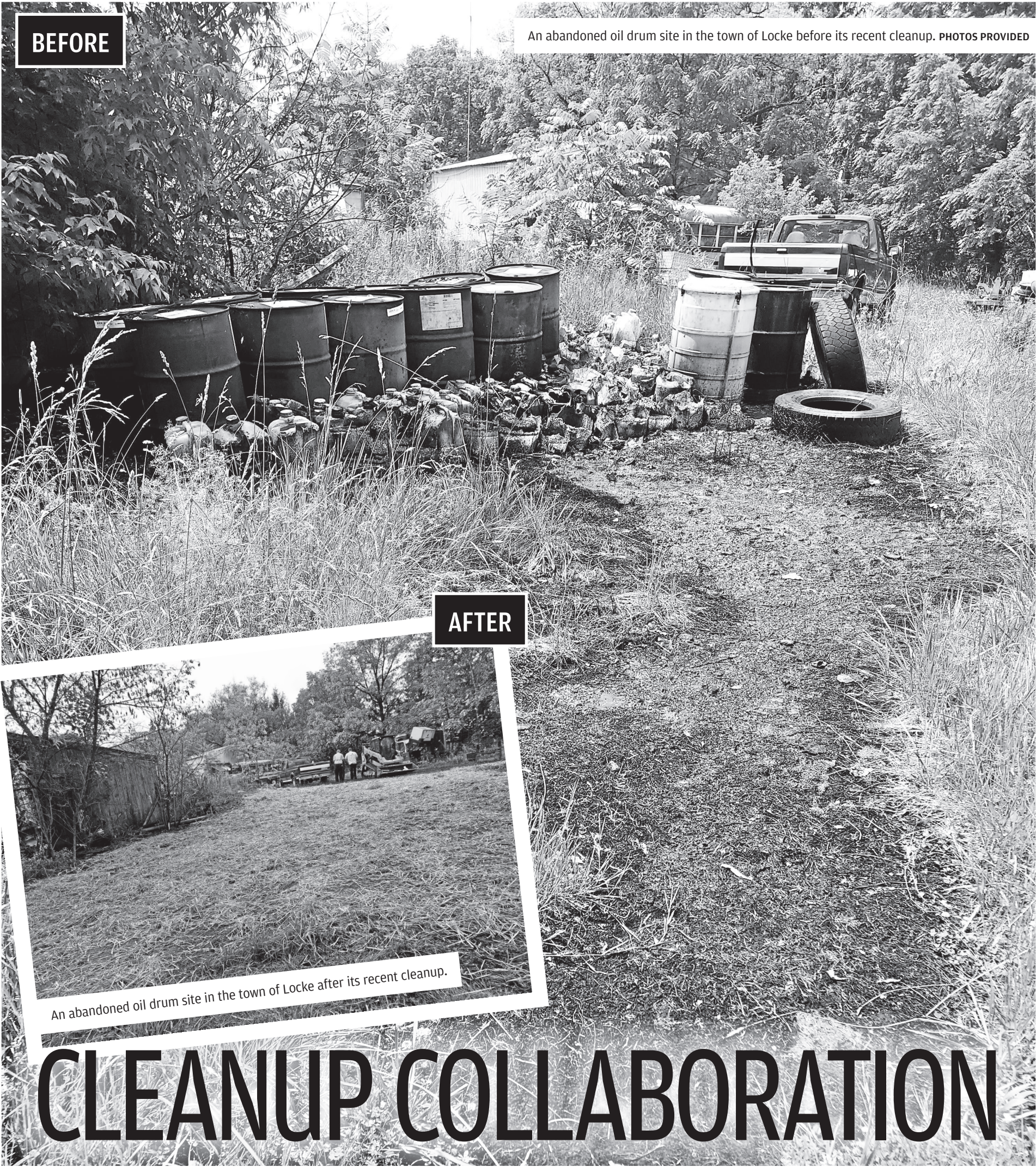


LAKE LIFE

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WATERSHED WATCH



CLEANUP COLLABORATION

How Owasco Lake groups teamed up to remove abandoned oil drums from near inlet

At the end of September, the Owasco Lake Watershed Management Council and the Owasco Watershed Lake Association celebrated the long-awaited cleanup of abandoned oil drums at a site near the Owasco Inlet. The site remediation and stabilization marked the end of more than a year of project investigation, coordination and persistence by local and state partners.

The story began in July 2024, when a local resident reported a concerning scene to the town of Locke town board: an area near the Owasco Inlet was littered with burned and melted containers, some leaking oil. The town supervisor quickly notified the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, which launched an investigation.

When DEC inspectors arrived, they found roughly 18 55-gallon drums, seven 15-gallon plastic containers and more than 100 2-gallon jugs — many damaged by fire and spilling unknown oil onto the ground merely 100 feet from the Owasco



JESSE LLOYD

Inlet. Fortunately, subsequent to the fire having burned out, there was no immediate threat of further leakage into the waterway, allowing the DEC to proceed methodically rather than under an emergency response protocol.

Typically, the DEC can identify a property owner through tax records and begin enforcement and cleanup actions quickly. However, this case was far from typical. A review of Cayuga County tax maps revealed that the listed property owner had died in 2018. Historic satellite images confirmed that the containers were placed there sometime between 2019 and 2021. With no living owner to contact, the DEC sent certified letters to potential parties and brought in its real property division and legal staff to determine who could authorize cleanup.

As the OLWMC's lead watershed inspector and a local resident, I was well-positioned to investigate among community residents and gained contact information for the deceased property owners' family to share with the DEC. The family claimed the bank had foreclosed on the property in 2018 and they had no affiliation with oil drums stored

on site. They heard that someone believed they were going to buy the property through auction and started staging the oil drums on the property.

Investigators found that a bank had been paying taxes and performing minimal upkeep on the parcel. The bank claimed the family still owned it. Being that no one officially owned this property, the DEC got permission from both the bank and the family to satisfy their legal requirements to gain access to the site. The DEC agreed to pay for the cleanup because there was no one to accept property liability. DEC said this was one of the oddest situations they had come across concerning the ownership of a property.

The first step was to have the oil in the drums and adjacent soils sampled and tested. This step was taken to determine whether site contamination met the DEC's requirements for them to cover the costs of the cleanup effort, as well as to inform the process for appropriate remediation procedures and contaminant disposal.

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IN BRIEF

Auburn High School to host college night

Auburn High School will host almost representatives from about 90 colleges and universities to talk to local students about the opportunities they offer.

The school, in cooperation with the Cayuga Counselors Association, will host a fall Cayuga Area College Night from 5:30 to 7 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 23, at the school, 250 Lake Ave., Auburn.

The representatives will be available

to discuss programs of study, financial aid, campus life and other topics with parents and students. Along with colleges, there will be military branches, vocational schools and specialty and preparatory schools represented. Workshops on financial aid, college disability services and NCAA eligibility will also take place.

The event is free and open to the public.

For more information, call Skaneateles High School counselor Mary Lou Ingram at (315) 291-2282.

Cayuga County destination earns Michelin recognition

The Inns of Aurora Resort & Spa has been ranked a One Key hotel by the Michelin Guide, the only hotel in the Finger Lakes Region to earn the prestigious recognition.

"Like the Michelin Stars for restaurants, the Michelin Keys distinguish the most outstanding hotels in our selection," the guide said. Its list of one-, two- and three-key hotels was revealed Oct. 8.

On Facebook, the resort and spa said it is "deeply grateful" for the recognition, and thanked Michelin and its guests.

The 21,000-square-foot resort and spa, which opened in 2020 in Ledyard, has received rave reviews that include a write-up in Vogue. Along with wellness treatments and accommodations it features hiking trails and a selection of art from the personal collection of Inns of Aurora founder Pleasant Rowland.

For more information, visit innssofarora.com.



OLWMC and OWLA Team Up to Clean Up Abandoned Drum Site Near Owasco Inlet

At the end of September 2025, the Owasco Lake Watershed Management Council (OLWMC) and the Owasco Watershed Lake Association (OWLA) celebrated the long-awaited cleanup and stabilization of an abandoned drum site near the Owasco Inlet. The project marked the end of more than a year of investigation, coordination, and persistence by local and state partners—including the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC). The story began in July 2024, when a local resident reported a concerning scene to the town board: an area near the Owasco Inlet littered with burned and melted containers, some still leaking oil. The Town Supervisor quickly notified the DEC, which launched an investigation. When DEC inspectors arrived, they found roughly 18 fifty-five-gallon drums, seven fifteen-gallon plastic containers, and more than 100 two-gallon jugs—many damaged by fire and

spilling unknown oil onto the ground just 100 feet from the Owasco Inlet. Fortunately, the fire had already burned out, and there was no immediate threat of further leakage into the waterway, allowing the DEC to proceed methodically rather than as an emergency response. Typically, the DEC can identify a property owner through tax records and begin enforcement and cleanup actions quickly. But this case was far from typical. A review of Cayuga County tax maps revealed that the listed property owner had died in 2018. Historic satellite images confirmed that the containers were placed there sometime between 2019 and 2021. With no living owner to contact, DEC sent certified letters to potential parties and brought in its real property division and legal staff to determine who could authorize cleanup.

Being that the OLWMC lead inspector is a local from this area, he was able to ask around and get contacts of the deceased property owners' family and pass it along to the DEC. The family claimed they had foreclosed on the property in 2018 and had no affiliation with drums stored on site. They heard that someone believed they were going to buy the property through auction and started staging the oil drums on the property.

Investigators found that a bank had been paying taxes and performing minimal upkeep on the parcel. The bank claimed the family had never properly foreclosed on the property, so they still owned it. Being that no one officially owned this property, the DEC got permission from both the bank and the family to satisfy their legal needs to gain access to the site. Being the site was basically orphaned and there was no one to accept the liability, the DEC agreed to pay for the clean-up.

The first step was to have the oil in the drums and contaminated soil sampled and tested. This needs to be done so they are properly disposed of and to make sure contaminate meets the DEC's requirements to pay for the clean-up.

The results of the test identified the oil as Unknown Hydrocarbons (C9-C36). Through various interviews, the assumed story of how the drums got there was an unknown person, possibly thinking he/she could purchase the property at auction, staged drums of used cooking oil with the intention of having the oil processed into bio fuel. These test results were consistent with

being used cooking oil. Used cooking oil is considered non-hazardous and does not meet the requirements for the DEC to pay to clean it up. These results were the end of the DEC's involvement with this site. With the DEC not funding the project, the OLWMC reached out to the Cayuga County Department of Health. In certain circumstances they are able to fund cleanup project, however, this project did not the criteria.

By this time, many people were aware of this site and were becoming impatient with how long it took to get to this point. Many people did not expect that this eyesore of a site was just going to sit idle. Overtime the drums and containers would fail, or vandals could dump or damage the drums releasing large amounts of cooking oil towards the Owasco Inlet, just a 100 ft away. The cause of the original fire may have been intentional. This clean up would cost quite a bit of money and manpower to organize. The Town Supervisor said "This site is no one's problem but its everyone's problem", a statement that stuck with me. One of the primary risks of dumping cooking oil on the ground is it creates a barrier that blocks the flow of oxygen and nutrients essential for plant growth. Cooking oil can coat plant roots, inhibiting their ability to absorb water and essential nutrients. This can be seen in the site pictures, the grass died and did not come back where the oil spilled. With larger amounts of oil, the damage can be extensive enough to kill entire trees. If 100's of gallons of cooking oil were to reach the creek, it would have devastating effects. Just a quarter-gallon can coat an acre of calm water—the size of a football field—in minutes. Birds landing on that slick lose insulation and buoyancy, while smaller aquatic creatures suffocate in the oxygen-starved layer below (www.elmens.com). Oil coating the ground and stream bottom would harshly effect the food chain from the bottom up.

OWLA had been aware of the abandoned drum site for some time and closely followed the situation as it developed. As an organization dedicated to improving and protecting water quality, OWLA saw the cleanup as an ideal opportunity to put its fundraising efforts to meaningful use.

They asked me to take the lead in figuring out what it would take to get the project started and how much the cleanup might cost. Having spent over 13 years working in the environmental

field on projects similar to this one, I was familiar with the process and the challenges ahead. The first step was securing access permission from both the bank that held the property and the next of kin. I reached out to both parties, but each gave the same answer—no. Their

hesitation was understandable; they were concerned that granting access might expose them to financial liability. From their perspective, it seemed safer to simply leave the site as it was. When I reported the setback to OWLA, one of its lead members, Carl Weber, decided to give it a try himself. It seemed like a long shot, but Carl was determined. Initially, he received the same refusals I had—but he didn't give up. Through persistent, thoughtful conversations, Carl was able to reassure both parties that our only goal was to remove the drums and prevent any further oil leakage. Thanks to his efforts, both finally agreed to allow the cleanup to proceed. With access secured, I began collecting quotes from licensed environmental contractors who could remove and properly dispose of the waste. Meanwhile, OWLA launched a fundraising campaign to cover the costs. Momentum Environmental, based in Bath, NY, provided the best proposal: approximately \$10,000 for the full cleanup, transportation, and disposal. That number gave OWLA a clear fundraising target.

OWLA quickly mobilized local support, reaching out to businesses and community members to help cover the cost. (See the list of donors at the end of this article.) This effort became the first project funded through OWLA's Joe Wasileski Memorial Challenge Program, established in honor of Joe Wasileski. His brother, John Wasileski, pledged to match local business donations dollar-for-dollar to support projects benefiting Owasco Lake's water quality.

With the funds raised and a signed contract in place, Momentum Environmental completed the cleanup on September 25, 2025. Momentum's final invoice was \$1800 less than quoted, for that we thank them. Fourteen months after the site was first reported to the NYS

DEC, the abandoned drums were finally removed, and the area was stabilized.

This project stands as a strong example of what can be accomplished when community members, local organizations, and environmental professionals work together.

If you know of a site that could threaten our watershed or local environment, please contact the Owasco Lake Watershed Management Council or OWLA. Together, we may be able to make

a difference—just like we did at the Owasco Inlet.

Local Donor's List for this Project; ALNYE Trucking, First National Bank of Groton, Wiillis E.

Kilborne Agency Inc. in Moravia, Lepak's Docks, Owasco Marine, Pennell's Auto LLC, of Moravia,
and Prison City Brewing.