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# Finding a path from toxics to victory



At a news conference announcing a Community Victory Garden planned for a portion of the former Tonawanda Coke Corp. site on River Road in the Town of Tonawanda are, from left, Jackie James, director of Citizen Science Community Resources; Town of Tonawanda Supervisor Joseph Emminger; John Yensan of Riverview Innovation and Technology Campus and Ontario Specialty Contracting; and John Black of Inventum Engineering, who led a tour of the former coke manufacturing site.

**ARTICLE AND PHOTO  
BY KAREN CARR KEEFE**  
Senior Contributing Writer

An environmental group plans a Community Victory Garden near where toxics from Tonawanda Coke's smokestacks once violated federal clean air standards and sickened those who lived nearby. The plant was forced to shut down in 2018, the smokestacks were demolished in 2021, and a massive, multiyear cleanup is underway with federal Superfund and state brownfield cleanup funds.

Citizen Science Community Resources (CSCR) held a news conference Aug. 24 to announce its intent to reclaim part of the area with a garden planned to bring recreation, education and beauty, and help heal the scars the coke facility left in its wake.

CSCR Director Jackie James invited the press to tour the Tonawanda Coke property to see the transformation that has brought cleaner air to the community and a new beginning.

"We fought long and hard, but we finally won," James said of the group's 16-year effort to beat Tonawanda Coke.

"We have a vision to create something polar opposite to what Tonawanda Coke signified in our community. It's time for nature to take back industry, and greenery and gardens to replace polluted air, soil and water," James said. "This will be accomplished by planting one garden at a time, starting with our Community Victory Garden."

Town of Tonawanda Supervisor Joseph Emminger said, "I want to thank Jackie for the many, many years of her dedicated service to our environment. He noted Victory Garden is an appropriate name for the planned reuse of a portion of the site.

"This corridor that we're in now is transforming," he said, from a stretch along River Road that included Tonawanda Coke and the Huntley Plant. "This is just the beginning ... of what you're going to see in the next five to 10 years along this corridor."

"It was just a little over two years ago that Jackie and I pushed the plunger and brought down the stacks in June of 2021," he said. "Our landscape has been

transformed forever in our town." Emminger said one can no longer see a plume of smoke coming up from the stacks of Tonawanda Coke when going over the Grand Island bridges: "You see healthy air. Our community is healthier because of the work Jackie and her brigade did to get us to this point."

James offered the press what she called "a sneak peek" at what reclaiming nature will look like once the community garden is finished. She outlined what has been done so far to lay the groundwork for the group's vision.

"I think you'll find it pretty amazing at the achievements and the work that has been done," James said.

Brush has already been cleared to connect the garden to the bike path that runs along River Road right across the highway from where the coke plant operated.

Closer to the Niagara River, many large structures that transported coal from ships to the plant have been removed, as well as structures on the eastern portion of the site that were involved in manufacturing coke. High-tech and light, clean industry is sought to replace a century-long chokehold of coke manufacturing on the waterfront.

Tonawanda Coke operated its plant since 1978, and the property had been used to make coke since 1917.

The cleanup began by shutting down 60 coke ovens on the east side of the 129-acre site and purging them of the gases contained within. The site was then monitored for benzene, sulfur dioxide and particulates. Emergency cleanup included removing contaminated soil and disposing of more than a million gallons of waste ammonia.

Tonawanda Coke Corp. was sold to Riverview Innovation and Technology Campus Inc. (RITC) for the redevelopment of the property as a data center.

John Yensan of RITC and Ontario Specialty Contracting, said, "I'm really happy to be a part of Jackie James' and her group's vision to memorialize the success of the years-long efforts to improve this community and the environment. Their Victory Garden is a great first development step

and also a prelude to a considerable development plan, which will transform this storage property into a productive reuse benefiting the community and providing employment to local residents for years to come.

"Much progress has made on this and the main site to date. All the former above-ground storage tanks, piping and their contents have been removed and a majority of the former manufacturing structures have, as well."

James said collaboration is needed from corporate sources to acquire the funding needed for the garden.

"So far, we have raised \$130,000 from the Ontario Specialty Contracting (OSC) Foundation, Honeywell and the Town of Tonawanda," she said. "However, we have a ways to go to reach our target of \$300,000."

James asked other local companies and the public to help support the garden. The website is <https://www.csresources.org/>.

The \$300,000 phase 1 cost of the garden project will include: an arbor, stone dust walkway, an observation platform, wooden footbridge, site furniture and art interpretation and artifacts, plantings and water source.

Phase 2, with an estimated cost of \$750,000, adds in an amphitheater, a large observation deck and stair, a boulder wall, observation platform and pathway lighting, as well as additional furniture and plantings.

Landscape architect Joy Keubler formed a committee of residents, artists, young people, business owners and environmental activists to help her as she drew up "a vision that celebrates the regeneration of native habitats with overlooks and observation areas, and celebrates the industry story through art and artifacts."

The native plantings will bring back native insects, birds and mammals, she said. Bicyclers and walkers are welcome to take the journey.

There's a designated Victory Tree that's a gateway to the site, where more plantings will enhance the experience.

Groundbreaking for the Victory Garden is planned for spring of 2024.