

## BOX 5.1.

## A CASE STUDY OF THE COMMUNITY IMPACTS OF COMBINED SEWER OVERFLOW ABATEMENT PROJECTS IN SYRACUSE, NEW YORK

The siting of combined sewer wastewater treatment plants in minority neighborhoods of Syracuse, New York, has ignited a community movement advocating for better alternatives, including the use of green infrastructure to reduce stormwater volumes. The community has argued that low-income communities of color bear disproportionate environmental and health impacts associated with wastewater treatment plants. The dispute has centered around a large, chlorine-based sewage treatment facility in the Southside neighborhood, known as the Midland Plant.

Combined sewer systems collect stormwater runoff, domestic sewage, and industrial wastewater into one system where it is treated before being discharged into the environment. During wet weather, these systems can be overwhelmed by the volume of stormwater, in which case they may overflow at predesignated locations. These overflow events are called combined sewer overflows, or CSOs. Because CSOs release raw sewage into the environment, they pose environmental and public health risks (EPA 2004). Combined sewer overflows are regulated under the CWA, and communities must take actions to prevent them.

In the late 1980s, Onondaga County was sued over water pollution caused by CSOs. Original plans to mitigate these overflows called for nine treatment facilities throughout the city to store and treat CSO pollution. A decade later, these proposals were altered to instead feature smaller treatment centers that did not use chlorine in the predominantly white and affluent Northside community while constructing large, chlorine-based plants in the low-income, predominantly African American Southside neighborhood (POC 2006). Dozens of families were evicted in order to construct the Midland plant, and the plant raised concerns about potential environmental and health impacts associated with the plant's chlorinated discharge (Lane and Heath 2007). In addition, the local community feels that having a wastewater treatment plant in their neighborhood is stigmatizing (POC 2009).

In response to these concerns, Southside community members and other concerned citizens organized themselves as the Partnership for Onondaga Creek (POC). Since its establishment, POC has advocated for more equitable and safer CSO abatement projects—namely, the use of green infrastructure to promote stormwater infiltration combined with storage infrastructure.

Despite POC's work, Onondaga County continued with its plans for the Midland plant, while cancelling \$3 million earmarked for Southside community development. However, POC did successfully get the county to modify its design plans to be less harmful to nearby communities. Additionally, POC was able to stop three additional wastewater treatment plants from being built; instead, the county is implementing a combination of storage and green infrastructure, such as installation of rain gardens and permeable pavement, and green roofs (POC 2009). Although costs are uncertain, the county has calculated that this will cost 10–20 percent less than construction of the previously planned treatment plants.