When DEP’s Functions Moved to Junction

The year was 1991 and the New York Giants became Super Bowl XXV winners; “Unforgettable,” the Natalie Cole duet with her dad Nat King Cole, was Album of the Year; and Hollywood crowned “The Silence of the Lambs” best picture at the Oscars. It was also the year that DEP consolidated nearly a dozen of the agency’s offices by moving to one location, Lefrak City in Queens—office space formerly occupied by the Social Security Administration.

When the move happened 20 years ago, in January 1991, Director for Executive/Budget Administration Unit Frankie Camardella recalls that there was a large welcome banner hanging on the wall of past DEP commissioners. Until a search has been completed and the Mayor appoints a permanent Commissioner, Mayor Bloomberg has appointed Steven Lawitts, Acting Commissioner of Environmental Protection, effective yesterday.

This past Monday, Deputy Commissioner Paul Rush and Assistant Commissioner Dave Warne attended the 125th annual Delaware County Fair. Each year, DEP and the Watershed Agricultural Council (WAC) have a joint booth to showcase some of the work they jointly perform in the watershed. DEP contracts with WAC to implement the Watershed Agricultural Program, which works with farmers to prevent or eliminate potential sources of water quality contamination from farm activities in the watershed. This successful partnership is nearing 20 years, and has helped both protect water quality and support the economic viability of farming in the watershed.

In other watershed protection news, DEP just announced the purchase of an additional 1,655 acres up-state. A total of 19 easements and parcels of land were acquired, ranging in size from 5.3 to 288 acres and located in Delaware, Greene, Schoharie, and Ulster counties. With this purchase, the Land Acquisition Program has now protected more than 120,000 acres from potential development that could degrade water quality. When combined with 44,600 acres that the city owned from the time the reservoirs were created and 200,000 acres of state-owned property, a total of 364,000 acres in the watershed is now protected—roughly 36% of the total acreage in the Delaware and Catskill watersheds.

Last week we said farewell to more than 60 interns in all divisions of the agency. Thirteen groups prepared final presentations to share what they learned in the 10 weeks since completing their orientation at the Newtown Creek Wastewater Treatment Plant. The topics ranged from an analysis of solar energy potential at NYC landfills to the condition of road culverts in the watershed to the optimization of the sewer system to reduce combined sewer overflows, but all showed an excellent understanding of how their individual projects contributed to the larger picture of how DEP will fulfill its strategic plan. The interns also visited the Red Hook Wastewater Treatment Plant to take the wastewater treatment course for non-operators from Walter Dobkowski, heard about PlaNYC from David Bragdon at Governors Island, and visited Gracie Mansion for a barbecue with Mayor Bloomberg. Closer to home, they attended brown bag lunches with DEP senior staff to hear about each division more in depth and learn what makes DEP such a great place to launch a career.
When we talk about the different stages DEP has gone through in the last few decades, one person we need to have a conversation with is Peggy Henderson, Director of the Asbestos Task Force unit (ATF). Peggy has been at DEP for 27 years and has vivid memories of the moving process into Lefrak City 20 years ago, the implementation of the new technology that has transformed and simplified how bureaucrats work, and the implementation of new policies that brought this agency into the 21st century.

Moving into Lefrak was a real challenge for DEP. In accommodating thousands of employees from different DEP locations around the city into the new Queens headquarters in 1991, the agency needed the help of employees like Peggy, who was always ready to be part of the transition process and a helping hand to make sure the new workplace was inviting for everyone. “Coming together at Lefrak gave us a sense of awareness and a sense of working together for the same goal,” said Peggy.

Peggy has managed the unit since 1996. ATF, which is a Mayoral Directive unit, was responsible for assisting with the completion of the Federal Monitor’s mandates. Her responsibilities include managing a unique team of industrial hygienists, constant improvement of contract specifications and the challenge of resolving multifaceted conditions within the facilities, while managing asbestos and lead abatement contractors.

ATF is responsible for responding to complaints relating to asbestos issues throughout the many DEP facilities in the five boroughs and Westchester County. The various bureaus within DEP depend on them for solutions and guidance regarding any possible condition or situation that relates to the uncertainty of the danger of asbestos and for the safety of employees. Knowing that one of the key responsibilities is to keep employees informed and safe is a job she takes seriously. One recent example is the role ATF played in assisting with the emergency fire at the North River Wastewater Treatment Plant. She constantly stresses to her team the importance of safety first, good communication and good teamwork. Peggy diligently accepts these challenges and responsibility with the same tenacity that requires moving this agency into the new century. Peggy says her tenure here at DEP has been a challenge, “but serving in this position has been both inspiring as well as rewarding.”

Peggy enjoys spending time with her husband and family. She likes outdoor activities and is a big fan of supporting educational and sporting activities, starting with her university alma maters (Alabama State University and Queens College).

Focus on the Field

When DEP’s Functions Moved to Junction… continued

Kudos Corner

On July 29th, the National Association of Clean Water Agencies released its 2010 Peak Performance Awards for wastewater treatment plants. The awards honor plants that demonstrated high levels of regulatory compliance throughout the year. Nine DEP plants received awards: Red Hook, Oakwood Beach, Wards Island, 26th Ward, Hunts Point, Rockaway, Tallman Island, Jamaica, and Port Richmond.

On July 9, 1991 Commissioner Al Appleton held an official opening ceremony with many elected officials and dignitaries including Mayor David Dinkins, Queens Borough President Claire Schulman, the site’s owners Sam and Richard Lefrak, and Stanley Hill, the head of DC 37, New York City’s largest municipal union. Dinkins’ remarks that day underscored several key reasons for the move including cost-savings, improved working conditions, the efficiency of consolidating multiple offices into one area, and the positive contribution of 2,700 employees “patronizing local businesses and shops in the area.”

The move had been planned by Commissioner Harvey Schultz during the previous administration under Mayor Ed Koch. In 1989, Schultz discussed the agency’s anticipated move to a new headquarters in Lefrak City Plaza in Environments, a previous DEP newsletter. “The consolidation of DEP will improve our productivity and give us all a modern home under ‘one roof’.” Consolidating in Manhattan was deemed too costly as it was being planned. The new headquarters would take up over 500,000 square feet and occupy all the floors of the six-floor building and 14 floors of the tower building. At the time of DEP’s relocation it was the only mayoral agency, besides the Fire Department, to have its central offices outside Manhattan.

Here is to another 20 years of continued success!

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Word of the Week

Flocculation – Clumping of bacteria and solids and other impurities which form clusters, or “floc.” This action enhances solids settling in final tanks.

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