

Diary of an Air Addict, or Where's the Crisis?

An Update on the Fight to Stop 3 Power Plants Proposed for the Williamsburg Waterfront

by Carol Schwarzman

Forgive me, but I like to breathe. I'm terminally attached to glutting myself with that particular mixture of nitrogen, oxygen, hydrogen, argon, neon and other gases – all in certain prescribed amounts – that clearly make or break one's daily grind here on this earthly plane of existence. I also dearly cherish my childhood memories of playing outdoors throughout four regularly changing seasons with their accompanying activities, outerwear, and emotions. You might think that Williamsburg is a poor choice of living situation for a sentimental health nut, what with its third-highest asthma rate in the City and weather patterns dictated more by Megalopolis than by Nature. Perhaps. The truth is, I'm also addicted to the neighborhood and the great sense of community I've enjoyed while living and working here for the past twelve years.

Because I believe I can save my lungs and continue to live here, I've been trying to support neighborhood efforts to fight the State's plans to build at least three new electric power generating facilities in Williamsburg on the East River. I'm no fulltime activist, but I have been attending public hearings, rallies and talking to lots of people about what they're doing to educate folks and stand up and fight for good, clean air, and for protecting access to open, green space along the river. What follows are notes and background information on the people involved and interests at stake in this struggle.

Lobbying Trip to Albany, January 23

An invitation to join members of Williamsburg Watch¹ (WW) and Stop the Barge (STB – both neighborhood environmental groups) on a train trip to the State capitol to meet with politicians has me salivating. Eleven of us meet at Penn Station at 7:45 a.m. During the train ride, everybody is hard at work, polishing up presentations and strategizing. WW and STB are preparing to meet first with Vito Lopez, one of the State Assemblymen who represents the neighborhood. He's set up subsequent meetings with Richard Brodsky (D-Assemblyman), chairman of the State's Environmental Committee, and Paul Tanko (D-Assemblyman) who chairs the Energy Committee. Assemblyman Joe Lentol, from Williamsburg, will also join us during the day.

10:30 a.m.

We are cordially greeted by staff members and Lopez himself, a staunchly jocular guy who clearly has previously established a good, honest rapport with many members of the group. Around a huge conference room table, Lopez immediately takes control, has us introduce ourselves, and describes the day's schedule. Obviously, we are the little people who are being shown the way things work with the big boys. After general chatting, shortened versions of presentations and pizza for lunch, Lopez warms us up to our next meetings and profiles our targets for us. WW and STB are here to shake hands, connect and show how on the ball they are, as much as anything else. Some of the group are feeling frustrated that what's going on here may be all for show.

12:15 p.m.

Richard Brodsky's office, all of us stuffed into the room, including Vito. Brodsky is a horse of a different color – he wears cowboy boots and early sixties jazz plays in the background.

This and more online at www.wburg.com.

Assuring us he's up to speed on all the issues, he graciously accepts the hunk of briefing information handed to him, promising to read it all. He launches into his take on the situation: an environmental justice review should be part of all Environmental Impact Statements; Pataki is politically vulnerable right now regarding electricity because of California, and is consciously attempting to tie New York City Power shortages to that state's crisis; the Governor also undid all conservation supports and efforts as part of his deregulation plan. Sounds like this guy Brodsky is on our side. He says we have to begin a persuasive discussion with people who *aren't* on our side and prepare alternatives to the inevitable accusations that our stance is sure to cause brownouts. He says, "Hopefully, today's meetings will be the beginning of a relationship." I leave the room feeling that politicians sure know how to talk.

1:00 p.m.

We are ushered in to Paul Tanko's office and are joined by Joe Lentol. Another shift in communication styles here – Tanko is matter-of-fact, a bit dry, very serious. He feels that the City and State's haphazard approach to avoiding a crisis in New York City is simply a "symptomatic response to a failed energy policy." Before deregulation, he says, the State's energy office had a staff of over two hundred: it now has a staff of eight people. Joe Lentol says, "Because everyone's acting like we're already in a crisis – and we're not – agencies have placed themselves above scrutiny."

In this meeting, the group finally gets a chance to make its views known. Some salient points are:

- The Public Service Commission and ConEd have themselves admitted that 1999 brownouts were caused by transmission problems, and not by power shortages.
- Sitings of all proposed plants throughout the City are being targeted in poor neighborhoods less likely to fight back (supposedly), in which the infrastructure for transmission already exists.
- An NYU-sponsored energy dialogue among activists, power companies and City and State agencies has shown that no one knows exactly how much energy New York City currently has planned to add, or actually needs. Power companies are themselves frustrated with the lack of State leadership and structural guidelines.

STB's and WW's Demands:

1. The State must make a statement of energy needs.
2. A guarantee that power plants are temporary must be granted to the community.
3. A City Plan for electricity must be drafted.
4. The City's obsolete transmission system must be updated.
5. Communities must be part of the committee that creates the City Electricity Plan.
6. No siting of power plants in residential communities.
7. A system for renovating old plants must be implemented.
8. A City Council hearing to address the planning of energy needs should be scheduled.

Press Conference and Rally, February 12

Amidst the lengthening shadows of a sub-freezing midwinter afternoon, a crowd comprised of over three hundred intrepid Williamsburgers, activists, and community leaders turns out to fight much more than the construction of three electric power plants along a ten-block stretch of neighborhood waterfront. Sure, these members of C.U.R.E. (Communities United for Responsible Energy), WW and STB have spearheaded the effort to organize this and other borough neighborhoods to kick out the ill-conceived, pollution-belching New York Power Authority (NYPA) and New York City Electric, LLC facilities on-line for this summer (as of June 1st!). These groups have also taken on the Governor, the City, the State, environmental regulatory agencies and big businesses that want to manipulate pricing. Not to mention "cognitive dissonance²," and panicking consumers who fear the possibility of a really hot summer without air conditioning.

Fantastic props like a cardboard NYPA plant spewing smoke, a jack-in-the-box labeled with skulls-and-crossbones and "Surprise!", giant skulls on poles, a hospital gurney wheeling a dead dummy decorated with awful statistics, and a huge cauldron filled with body parts labelled, "Williamsburg - A Cauldron of Environmental Horrors," surround the scene. The Hungry Marching Band galvanizes morale with its raggedy, bad-assed brand of jazz music. Kids from nearby schools crowd the sidewalk - there's a lot of excitement in the air. These guys have truly prepared an awesome event.

Politicians and their representatives line up to speak before cameras from all the New York City television stations. Congresswoman Nydia Velazquez sends a message to the Governor and the utilities, "Fighting is our specialty! The health of our communities is as important as any other community and our districts are not for sale!" STB and WW announce their lawsuits in conjunction with C.U.R.E. , New York Lawyers for the Public Interest and the New York Public Interest Research Group against NYPA, the State Board on Electric Generating Siting and the Environment and the Department of Environmental Conservation. The crowd stays on for hours, despite the falling temperature.

Latest Developments

Since the rally, related television coverage and the filing of the lawsuits, STB and WW report that NYPA has shown signs of shakiness. The agency has made overtures to community groups to offer amenities in exchange for the plants going on line. An STB spokesperson has conjectured that perhaps guarantees of temporary operation will be offered, but it's too early to say.

Mary Ziegler of WW informs me that an Asthma Inhaler Drive is in the works. Communities will be asked for donations of used inhalers that will in turn be sent up to the Governor's office in Albany. This neighborhood should have no problem coming up with hundreds of the things.

This Just In

NISA has contacted STB to say that NISA will not pursue installation of the power barge at Division Street and Kent Avenue for this summer. They will wait until summer 2002! A small, but meaningful victory!

The "Don't You Look Dumb" Award

NYPA, The Public Service Commission, and the Department of Environmental Conservation recently refused to show up for a public hearing scheduled to address the issue of siting

power plants in poor neighborhoods. This occurred on the same day that *The New York Times* leaked a story regarding NYPA's own internal report admitting failure to maintain environmental justice siting standards. Local officials have subpoenaed the three state agencies – which will now be forced to attend the rescheduled hearing.

Historical Note

The first person to identify the greenhouse effect (or global warming, as we call it these days) was the natural philosopher Jean-Baptiste Fourier, who came within an inch of being executed during the French Revolution³. Just an interesting tidbit information of how long it takes to adjust to reality. Air addicts obsess about such things.

Notes

¹ My sincerest apologies and respect to the members of Williamsburg Watch. This formidable group was formed in direct response to the New York Power Authority plant planned for North 1st Street and Kent Avenue. WW is the initiating and lead organization in this fight. Omitting them from my previous article (Fight the Power, WBURG Vol. 1, No. 2) was a drastic oversight on my part. The Williamsburg Watch website can be found online at www.WilliamsburgWatch.org.

² A term coined by the psychologist Leon Festinger "to describe the discomfort or conflict that ensues when existing beliefs or assumptions are challenged or contradicted by hard evidence." See *It's a Matter of Survival*, by Anita Gordon and David Suzuki, 1990.

³ The history of the concept of the greenhouse effect is told on epic scale in Gale E. Christianson's 1999 book, *Greenhouse: The 200-Year Story of Global Warming*.

Carol Schwarzman is an artist and writer living in Williamsburg.