

Watershed news is an update of Riverkeeper's efforts to protect New York City's water supply.



Brewster Village

STEWARD OF THE CROTON WATERSHED

These are exciting times for Brewster. For the first time in several decades, observers are witnessing dramatic changes. Unfortunately, the first and largest of these changes, i.e. updating the water and sewer infrastructure, is very disruptive to traffic and store patronage. However, in the long run, the rewards for the half-square-mile Village will be immensely beneficial and enduring.

BY DENIS CASTELLI, GUEST WRITER

The Early Years

To gain perspective on Brewster today, one must look to its history. When the Town of Southeast incorporated in 1788, it established headquarters at “Southeast Center” on the banks of the East Branch River on Sodom Road. In the 1840s, when the New York Central was advancing northward from New York City, an enterprising local businessman made the railroad company an

offer it could not refuse.

Walter Brewster would provide the land and structure for a station in Southeast if the railroad made his depot a scheduled stop on its line. The railroad appropriately named the depot “Brewster’s Station” and the Village of Brewster incorporated in 1848.

Brewster quickly became the center of local commerce and the new Town center for Southeast. Soon after, Gail

Borden chose Brewster for the site of one of his first successful condensed milk factories. The Borden’s Condensery, Tilly Foster Iron Mine and New York Central Railroad became major employers in the region and Brewster began to boom. Both the Town and the Village located their municipal offices in Brewster. Sewers were first installed in the 1890s, and most Brewster homes and businesses began

receiving Village water at about the same time.

By the turn of the century, the land purchases made to build the Croton water supply changed lifestyles in every watershed community. To assure clean drinking water, New York City purchased additional land surrounding the reservoirs and became the Town's largest landholder and real estate taxpayer. As the decades passed, the early plumbing system could not sustain Brewster's growth and the sewer and water pipes began deteriorating. The shortcomings were apparent as early as the 1970s. Illegal hookups, failing septic, leaking sewer pipes and brown tap water became commonplace by the 1980s. The problems compounded throughout the 1970s and '80s as many local businesses, frustrated by the lack of effort to improve the infrastructure, relocated to new sites along Route 6 and Route 22 in the Town of Southeast. Tax rev-

enues sorely needed to remedy the Village's problems declined as local businesses were closing their doors one by one. The addition of big strip malls located directly off of highway exits further exacerbated problems for local businesses. With minimal tax income and no solution in sight, empty storefronts altered the appearance of Brewster Village. With an obsolete Master Plan and zoning code, as well as failing sewer and water infrastructure, few investors were motivated to make financial commitments within the Village. Moreover, with a revenue stream comparable to a small business, low paid, part-time Village officials were reluctant to commit to the multi-million-dollar funding needed to reverse the situation.

The Memorandum of Agreement

Until the historic "Memorandum of Agreement" (MOA) to improve the New York water supply was signed in 1997, it

was difficult to envision anything that could reverse Brewster's downward spiral. With the MOA came money to remedy problems throughout the Croton watershed and in the mid-1990s, when Village officials witnessed the Department of Environmental Protection's (DEP) commitment, they invited negotiations to fund sewer repairs in Brewster Village. Estimates indicated that more than 40% of Village homes might have had failing septic systems. The obsolete sewage treatment plant near Brewster Station combined with runoff and these failing septic to make Brewster one of the worst offending municipalities polluting the East-of-Hudson watershed.

Local residents who felt that polluting New York City drinking water was "DEP's problem" were unaware of the agency's enforcement alternatives. Gratefully, DEP chose to help Brewster rather than con-

demn it. In 1999, the Village signed contracts with DEP to rebuild the Village sewer system and to construct a wastewater treatment plant to return purified water into the watershed instead of continuing a decades-old tradition of polluting it.

It was at this point that the Village engineering firm, J. Robert Folchetti Associates (JRFA), approached the Village with a plan to rebuild Brewster's water supply at a greatly reduced cost to the residents. If the Village could raise the money needed to install new water lines in the same pit as the new sewer lines, Brewster would save millions of taxpayers' dollars. Funding for the sewage lines would provide much of the money needed to excavate and re-pave for installment of the water lines. Once again, DEP officials showed genuine concern for the welfare of Brewster residents by breaking tradition

(continued on page 6)



(continued from page 5)

and permitting the water and sewer projects to be combined.

Recent Developments

In late 2004 another crisis was averted when it looked like funding would run out before the water and sewer tasks were completed. Representatives from Brewster and officials from DEP were in tense negotiations throughout the closing months of 2004. Deputy Commissioner Michael Principe, First Deputy Director Kurt Rieke and other DEP officials met with Village Trustees John Degnan and Michael Santos and with Village Engineer John Folchetti to resolve amounts and sources of funding in order to complete Brewster's sewer and water infrastructure. As a result of these negotiations, DEP signed a landmark agreement on November 30, 2004 that would fund the entire balance of more than \$13 million needed to complete the sewer construction, wastewater treatment plant and DEP laboratory. In all, DEP has committed to about \$35 million to restore Brewster's sewer infrastructure.

The Cadre

While Brewster officials, state agencies and bid contractors have been resolving infrastructure issues, residents, community groups and local businesses have not been idle. K.C. Anderson, founder and President of the Coalition for a Better Brewster (CBB), applied for a grant in 1999 to sponsor a study to determine the future of Brewster. The consulting firm, Saccardi and Schiff, conducted the study and issued a report, but because all

improvements were associated with prohibitively high costs, officials did little to advance the Village for years to come.

Then in 2003, Village Trustee John Degnan enlisted a team of graduate students from Columbia University's School of Urban Planning to provide advice and to fast-track revitalization of Brewster Village. The study utilized the CBB report of 1999 as well as interviews with scores of residents, business owners and officials. Published in the spring of 2003, The Columbia Plan addressed demographics,

economic development, the environment and zoning and provided the impetus for Village officials to organize committees to draft a new comprehensive Master Plan. Three such committees (Zoning, Economic Development and Governance) met weekly for a full year using the Columbia Plan as a foundation for their efforts. Each committee included Village and Town residents and Village officials, and each invited specialists and consultants to meetings to resolve important matters. The committees did not always agree with the conclusions of the Columbia Report; however they did give full consideration to all points of view before submitting their own findings to Village officials. The committee reports became the foundation for the new Comprehensive Master Plan identifying Brewster's new role

as a Steward of the Croton Watershed. Brewster formed a new task force to rewrite, implement and enforce the zoning code. That committee has been meeting for more than a year now and is on the verge of submitting its conclusions to the Village Board.

Earlier this year, the Coalition for a Better Brewster, the Putnam County EDC, Putnam County Planning and JRFA joined forces to submit a NY State "Main Street Grant" application. That grant will provide \$200,000 to improve building façades and street-

scapes as well as contribute to the reopening of Bob Morini's Cameo Theater on Main Street. Soon afterward, Alex Matthiessen from the Hudson Riverkeeper chose Brewster to unveil the Riverkeeper's new "Pave It... or Save It?" anti-sprawl initiative. The flurry of activity in Brewster drew the attention of Putnam County Executive Bob Bondi, who then offered County assistance to Village officials. Furthermore, Deputy County Executive Frank DelCampo offered to co-chair a Village committee called TeamBrewster with Village Trustee John Degnan to accelerate improvements in the Village. They invited other officials, businesses, utilities and local residents to join TeamBrewster and the result is an extraordinary group of dedicated participants.

At the time of this writing, TeamBrewster includes repre-

sentatives from the offices of Senators Clinton and Schumer, Congresswoman Kelly, State Senator Leibell, State Assemblyman Stephens, Putnam County Under-Sheriff Convery, Putnam Legislator Birmingham, Michelle Powers and Elizabeth Duffy Rau of Putnam County Planning, Village Justice Richard O'Rourke, Joe Girven of Putnam's EDC, KC Anderson of CBB as well as Brewster's mayor, trustees, engineer, several planning and zoning board members and a representative from the Town of Southeast. Michael Meyer of DEP, Marc Yaggi and Chris Wilde of Riverkeeper, Putnam County Historian Alan Warnecke, and Barbara Bates and Clare Kropkowski of Landmarks Preservation recently joined to add the commitment of their offices to the effort. Committee members also include representatives from Metro North Railroad, NYSEG and local non-profits such as the Putnam Smart Growth Alliance, Concerned Residents of Southeast, Brewster's Institute for Environmental Stewardship and several residents of the Village and Town.

TeamBrewster has submitted more than \$2 million in grant applications on behalf of the Village with about half of them already approved. It seems clear that the Village of Brewster is well on its way to fulfilling its mission to becoming a Steward of the Croton Watershed. ■

(Denis Castelli is Executive Director of Brewster's Institute for Environmental Stewardship and co-founder of Concerned Residents of Southeast.)