

# Roosevelt Water Action Report/Manifesto

"Why'd ya wanna go and do that for?"

Indeed, what has been the purpose behind the "Water Action" activities over the summer? What have they accomplished? The concerts have certainly been nice and the "publicity stunts" were sort of fun, but how can these things possibly help Roosevelt in grappling with the DEP/water/sewer problem?

First some history: At the beginning of June this past summer—after there had been some time for the incredible monthly water/sewer bills to really sink in—a group of us got together to try to articulate some ideas which might help alleviate the sewage treatment plant financial problems. Out of this informal gathering, a general invitation to all Roosevelt residents was issued to attend a "brainstorming" meeting held at Borough Hall. We were hoping that at least a few storms forming in the brains of our neighbors might point the way to some positive steps we could take to deal with the monster growing in our sewers. A number of terrific ideas did come out of the meeting. What I remember most about the meeting, however, was the structure of the discourse that day, and the overarching philosophy of the "Water Action" group which was shaped by that structure. The meeting sort of went like this—

## **Recognition that the sewer problem is larger than the town.**

This is what brought us together for the meeting in the first place. I don't know anyone who can afford to throw away the money we are being required to pay by the State for our sewage treatment plant problem. We simply cannot pay the price. Roosevelt was built using outside funding, and the community was never designed to undertake major overhauls of the infrastructure without some assistance. Many of us also felt that the money we are spending on our relatively benign problem was completely out-of-line given the much more difficult and terrible environmental problems facing New Jersey. Who set the priorities in

such a manner that small communities were being hit so hard? Why is so much of our paychecks going towards a problem with such little environmental return?

## **Realization that we have no recourse through "normal" channels.**

Most of the traditional funding sources for our situation have vanished. Among the programs remaining (and indeed for many of the past grant programs), Roosevelt probably doesn't qualify or would be placed low on the priority list. Many of these grants also require significant expenditures just to apply. We also have none of that mysterious commodity known as *clout*. We have few votes, we have fewer Big Money operations which could make a nice PAC contribution to the appropriate politico, and we have no high-level State or Federal policy-makers currently living in town.

## **Formulation of positive actions. This is where the meeting really started to take off.**

Yes, we have no *clout*, no money, no hope, but we still have our ability to make the world aware of what is happening here in Roosevelt. Perhaps we could band together with other small communities (Roosevelt is certainly not alone in this predicament). Perhaps we can work through the New Jersey League of Municipalities to get some legislation passed at the Statehouse to help us. We can write letters to our local area legislators screaming that we can't be forced to comply with these ridiculous mandates. From this idea springs the recognition that we can attract State lawmakers' attention through the news media...publicity stunts. And so the initial "Water Action" activities were born.

But there is more to it than this. The feeling permeating the environment of the meeting was one of moving forward, actually getting out to do something for the town. Positive action.

(I must digress from the report on the "Water Action" activities a bit here, for I have a few things to get off my chest; especially when I contrast "negative" actions with the "positive action" feeling of the meeting. I cannot understand the logic which makes it important to seek constantly to fix past blame for our town's contemporary problems. At best, this negative, non-productive activity causes ill-will between neighbors who should be working in concert to solve a serious problem. At worst, it provides fuel for the DEP's claim that Roosevelt should be forced into paying an unconscionable amount of money. It's easy to speculate about what should or should not have been done—we should have stopped the escalation of the Viet Nam conflict, we should not have dropped the bomb on Japan—but what is the point? How can this help us with our current situation? How does tearing down a thermometer (three times) placed on the common bulletin board showing how many letters have been sent to legislators assist the town? What good does it do for the community to underline and highlight only the negative aspects of articles about the town hung on the bulletin board?)

## **Keeping It Politically Neutral**

Because of the overheated political atmosphere existing in Roosevelt, we all agreed that it was imperative to keep the "Water Action" activities as politically neutral (in the local sense) as possible. Of course this is impossible, but the approach we decided to take was one of individual initiative. Rather than organize the group to death, we felt that the impetus for any "Water Action" activity should come from individuals. If any political motivation could be gleaned from the "Water Action" events, then the responsibility for this would be upon the individual who organized and promoted the particular event. One of the gratifying aspects of the "Water Action" meetings is that people from across the local political boundaries (and yes these do exist here in

*continued on page 15*



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# Water Action Manifesto

*(continued from page 9)*

Roosevelt) are working together to help bring aid to the town. In actuality, I feel that the responsibility for charges of local political favoritism in the "Water Action" activities lies with the people who choose not to get involved. If you don't agree with the way certain individuals represent the town, then the challenge is to create your own noise.

## Having an Effect

This challenge is meant in all seriousness, because the "Water Action" activities and stunts are having a positive effect. Ten articles (several on the front page) featuring the Roosevelt problem have appeared in five area newspapers during the past several months. Nearly all have been sympathetic to our plight. Several Philadelphia-area television stations have expressed interest in our developing story, and the New Jersey Network is considering an in-depth look at our situation. We are creating media momentum with our on-going series of weekend concerts, plus the money from these concerts can be used to provide funding for more actions in the coming months. Politicians pay atten-

tion to the media, especially when the story can work to their own political advantage. There now exists the possibility that legislation will be introduced in the next legislative session to provide relief for Roosevelt. Our "clout" is our big mouths.

What about the coming months? Pointing to the concept of individual initiative, I will say that the future is really in your hands. I have some ideas for things I might try to organize, but I certainly hope (and I doubt) that I am alone. We are making a difference, and we are making it in a positive way. I invite each and every one of the townspeople of Roosevelt to join in the battle to resist the steamrolling of small towns—doing whatever you can, however you can do it. Roosevelt has never been a town of the "silent majority", let's use our vocal cords now!

—Brad Garton

—August, 1990