

Gowanus Canal Community Advisory Group – Outreach Committee

June 29, 2011 – DRAFT Meeting Summary

Attending: Anthony Deen, Jerry Armer, Natalie Loney (EPA), Ray Howell, Bette Stoltz, John Heyer, Maria Pagano, Steven Miller, Robert Goulding (EPA)

Facilitator: Jeff Edelstein

Jeff opened the meeting by asking the group to identify some near-term priorities.

Committee members identified the following:

- Create a presence, a brand or identity, in the community
- Create an internal web network
- Work on an information dissemination plan

General Outreach Discussion

There was some discussion regarding the need to follow-up with CAG organizational members to ensure outreach is happening on that level. One member noted that as the CAG has no single voice, it is critical that organizational members reach out to their constituencies and bring feedback back to the CAG. Another pointed out that it is not the role of the Outreach Committee to police what these organizations do, but that the group should be able to refer folks to the committee meetings, the meeting notes, etc. The group agreed that meetings alone do not provide enough time for needed discussion, and that there is a need for larger public dialogue — to exchange information between the EPA and the community. There was general agreement that the CAG does have the responsibility to process information, to disseminate information and even to correct misinformation that is circulating. One member suggested a blog, wherein public responses could be posted, and a larger audience may be reached.

All agreed that there is a role for the CAG Outreach Committee to reach a broader spectrum than the CAG membership, but many voiced the opinion that reaching agreement on issues may be challenging. Jeff asked the group to consider what is possible, and not what is impossible. One strategy for reaching the greater community that was discussed was outreach to the local schools. GCC, CUP, & Gowanus by Design have all worked with local schools recently.

Natalie Loney pointed out the need to manage what information is being shared—from internal information generated by the CAG, to items like DEC's presentation on Manufactured Gas Plants. There may be a need for quality control, to ensure that the information going out is accurate prior to distribution.

Some questions that came up:

- Would EPA need to read or edit outgoing content, particularly if the information is technical?

- Would the CAG have different value-based interpretations of new information or issues?

Next steps:

The committee would like to find someone to write things up in a neutral manner, to inform the community and make information available to a greater number of people. The goal is to provide information and to let the community members or organizations process and respond to the data.

Administrative Issues

The Administrative Committee is currently reaching out to the full-CAG membership to determine status and update contact information, to get a more accurate profile of the group. Since October, the CAG has picked up 4 or 5 new members, but has also lost 4 or 5 members. Some members have not been to a general CAG meeting in a few months. Additionally, the group has not reached quorum at the last 2 meetings of the full-CAG. One member suggested that the Charter may be reaching too high with the quorum requirement for voting.

Internal Communications Plan (Back End Operations)

There was some discussion about the back end operations of the committee and the CAG, i.e. the internal communications. All in the group think that the internal communication issue is critical to the success of the committee and the CAG. Natalie pointed out that the EPA defines a CAG as an information-sharing entity, and that meeting monthly does not allow enough time to foster the level of communication necessary for larger outreach. She recommended that the Outreach Committee really champion the need and the chosen vehicle for internal communication.

Some suggestions for internal communication:

- Software that allows inter-committee discussion & dialogue that allows the committees some degree of autonomy
- An online place for a discussion forum to allow committee work to proceed when the group is not meeting

Some goals for internal communication:

- To allow the CAG to overcome time constraints, and to keep pace with EPA activities
- To enable the CAG to hear the differing positions of members, allowing for a full hearing of the issues unfolding
- To reach out to and inform those members missing meetings
- To be able to plan and schedule more meetings internally, if necessary
- To provide a place for posting questions that linger after meetings or presentations

One Outreach Committee member researched a site that may fit the bill for internal communication. The proposal is to create a discussion forum, not a blog. The site would be a place to share links, upload documents and post information.

Some features:

- The platform is free, though the CAG may be able to go with an interface that is advertisement-free in the future
- Administrators of the site would have the ability to moderate discussion in forums
- Each committee would have a discussion thread that could be moderated
- The site is private and only for CAG members, though members of different committees may interact, read, digest and comment on the activities of any committee

Some questions:

- Without a hierarchical structure or Executive Committee, who will be the moderators?
- What type of communication will be appropriate for the group to use online?
- How do CAG members want to speak to other?
- What role would the local, state and federal agencies play in this?
- Should there be a webinar or other forum that would allow DEC or EPA to participate or to answer some of the identified questions? Could a webinar be open to the full community?

There was some discussion about whether the CAG needs to be providing the interface between the agencies. One member asked, why not have the Outreach Committee communicate with DEC, to build capacity in this way? Jeff recommended that this type of communication be done with a point person, and not by committee. He also pointed to the issue of time and the challenge of contacting agencies and getting issues on the agendas in a timely manner.

The Outreach Committee voted unanimously to take this platform and the internal communications tool live.

Public Outreach (Front End Communications)

If the goal is to engage the broader community, the hope is that the outreach will create more interest in the activities of the CAG and generate more support for the health of the community and the canal. Some organizations have had great success in building stewardship for the canal, and engaging a larger community in the future of the canal and the neighborhood. It was agreed that members of the community are more likely be interested in the future of the canal, rather than the success of the CAG. The group agreed that there is enough positive change in the community concerning the canal that the CAG will be able to focus on a positive message to build community involvement.

The group began to discuss the plan for outreach beyond the internet. A need for a newsletter or other printed media was proposed. The group would like to have something

printed to leave in building lobbies and other public places that would announce meetings, updates or other information. One member suggested creating a Marketing or PR Committee to handle this type of communication as well as being able to communicate with the press. The group will need to find someone to generate the content for any future newsletter or online platform. There may be grants available for education or other outreach, particularly if the group is able to build a science curriculum around the canal and cleanup. One member suggested a volunteer recommended by Mike Weiss to help with the web content. Another member cautioned that the differing voices and agendas of the various CAG members may complicate the ability to agree on an outward voice.

The group has already generated a list (via googledocs) of community groups and members that may be future outreach targets, but the committee needs a mission statement. The Charter calls for the CAG Outreach Committee to develop a “Communications and External Relations Plan which . . . will include, but not be limited to, methods for 1) responding to press inquiries, 2) disseminating information, 3) responding to speaker/presenter requests, 4) developing and updating printed and on-line materials.” It was not clear whether this plan includes all internal communications as well as all external communications. It was agreed that the group has an obligation to advance ideas without perfection or even consensus. Until this point, all announcements and sharing of information have been open and inclusive. Jeff recommends that this committee take the same approach to external communications and cautions against weighing positions or interpretations to allow for a holistic and open dialogue moving forward.

Next steps:

Bette and Ray agreed to read the meeting notes of all Outreach Committee meetings in order to pull out the salient points, and draft a mission statement for the committee.

The school outreach idea, including grant-seeking, will be explored in the next meeting of the committee.

The group will discuss the front-end communications piece including: What will be the voice of the CAG? What information is appropriate to disseminate or share? What events or documents will go on a public website?