Gowanus Canal Community Advisory Group – Technical Committee

June 23, 2011 – Meeting Summary

Attending: Natalie Loney, Eymund Diegel, Bryan Quinn, Marlene Donnelly, Eric McClure, Josh Verleun, Jill Raymond, Steven Miller

Facilitator: Jeff Edelstein
Notetaker: Beth Bingham

General Discussion

The agenda circulated earlier was altered due to new developments and a desire expressed for more general discussion about the following items:

- The need for more open dialogue at the committee level and at meetings of the full-CAG.

- The need for web-based interface amongst CAG members to enable committees and the full group to make agendas, schedule meetings, etc.

- Currently the Administrative Committee is reaching out to CAG members to determine membership status.

Future Facilitation

Natalie Loney will be bringing the facilitation issue before the full-CAG at the meeting on June 28th. At this time, EPA has determined that there are 130 hours that remain for facilitation by Jeff. The CAG will be responsible for determining how or where they want Jeff's assistance moving forward.

The group discussed the need for capacity building that will assist the CAG should facilitation be terminated. There will be a need to determine who would take notes and summarize meetings for the committees. One member suggested revising the Charter to require that each committee chooses a secretary and that the committees become more process oriented. Several in the group were concerned that the horizontal nature of the CAG will make the delegation of these responsibilities difficult, though there was no interest in introducing a hierarchical structure or an Executive Committee.

Technical Assistance Services for Communities (TASC)

At an earlier meeting, the Water Quality Committee passed a motion to request that the full-CAG request TASC Assistance from the EPA. The WQ Committee motion was based on the expectation that the EPA will finalize the Feasibility Study (FS) by the end of the year and the fact that the budget of the agency will be changing in the near future.

According to Natalie the technical assistance of the TASC can be used for a wide variety of purposes, from capacity-building to interpreting technical data. Typically, the turnaround for TASC requests is 30-60 days and the TASC assistance can be requested more than once. Other CAGs have used the TASC to help communities understand the FS or the design remedy proposed by EPA. The TASC request will need to be ratified by the full CAG. Each committee will need to identify priority questions or issues for the TASC, but one committee will need to assemble the scope, to write the document and to direct the TASC.

Some limitations of the TASC include:

- EPA, not the CAG, will choose the entity
- The TASC entity cannot generate data or conduct research
- The TASC can only be used to digest data that already exists

Though the date for the TAG assistance is not known, Natalie cautioned that having dueling technical advisors has been a complication for other CAGs. One committee member suggested that the CAG use the TASC assistance to generate comments that would be submitted to EPA after the Feasibility Study is released. He stated a precedent exists for EPA to accept comments during phases of the SF process that are outside of the CERCLA-required public comment period.

Natalie will be providing a TASC primer to describe what the TASC can and cannot do for the CAG, as well as the limits of the budget. At the July meeting of the full CAG, there may be time to for the CAG to set priorities for the TASC.

Questions:

Is defining the work of the TASC a task that this committee will take on?

Can the TASC tackle technical issues that are also data gaps (not included in the RI) such as the collapsed Bond-Lorraine sewer?

Can the TASC assistance be used to facilitate communication amongst the CAG; through hosting a website or purchasing networking software?

Function of the Technical Committee

Functions identified in the last meeting and discussed again include:

1. Translate technical data for average community member. This may include identifying relative risk benchmarks or comparisons.
2. Serve as a bridge, linking human/community concerns to technical and regulatory concerns.
3. Identify data gaps
4. Integrate the technical aspects of the Superfund process with other technical issues of concern to the community in upland areas.

5. Identify and articulate questions to be posed to EPA and other agencies that could include, but not be limited, to interpretation of data.

All in the group agreed that the primary role of the Technical Committee will be to read and digest technical data and to function as the technical resource for the CAG. The committee will interact with the other CAG committees, both by taking referrals relating to technical questions, and identifying technical issues for other committees. There will need to be some organization within the committee, to determine whether a point person will be needed to communicate with the EPA and the other committees.
There was some discussion about the group researching another FS generated by EPA in order to better prepare the CAG for the type of analysis to expect. Natalie will look into finding an FS for the committee to review.

Risk Communication and Relative Risk

The committee again discussed a desire for EPA to frame risk in relative terms, in order to help the community understand the risks to health from the canal. A more digestible way to communicate risk to community members would be to establish benchmarks against which to measure risk, such as comparing the risk of using paint thinner to the risk of canoeing on the waterway. There was some discussion about cumulative risk as well. The EPA does provide risk communication training within the agency and each SF site has an assigned risk assessor. Natalie will check to see if he is available to the Technical Committee.

Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) Study

Some environmental health concerns of the group may be addressed by the ATSDR, the federal agency that is conducting a public health assessment at the Gowanus Canal Superfund site along with NYS Department of Health. Like the EPA, this agency is investigating exposure pathways including sediment, water, air, etc. The ATSDR study and related fact sheet are expected in the very near future.

EPA and Upland Sites
The group discussed upland sites and whether EPA may be responsible for some mitigation in the future. The group would like to see a more holistic approach by EPA. Many expressed frustration with the seemingly arbitrary boundary, created by the edge of the canal, that determines what is EPA's responsibility. One committee member suggested that there may be a legal issue that prevents EPA from working with upland sites. There was some discussion as to whether the technical committee should support a motion to request that EPA take over the MGP sites.

Technical Questions and Other Data

Is there data available that speaks to how much of the contamination present in the sediment is a result of historic discharges versus current street runoff?

Are the cracks in the Bond Lorraine sewer line contributing to the SF contaminants?

How much do the variables in the air quality samples taken change from the surface of the canal in different sections (near the BQE for example) to higher elevations? Does this affect Air Quality Standards?

DEP surveyors were recently seen on the canal planning future dredging; is DEP planning to proceed with its dredging in the vicinity of the flushing tunnel? What is the purpose of this planned dredging?