

Gowanus Canal Community Advisory Group – Archeology Committee

May 24, 2011 – Meeting Summary

Attending: Joseph Alexiou, Katia Kelly, Dan Wiley, Buddy Scotto, Melissa Felter, April Dubison, Natalie Loney, Eymund Diegel, Marlene Donnelly, Angela Murphy, John Vetter, Lynn Rakos, Maria Pagano, Linda Mariano, Victoria Hagman, Ludger Balan, Miriam Coleman (Patch reporter)

Facilitator: Jeff Edelstein

Notetaker: Beth Bingham

Committee Updates & Related Events

At this time, pending the ratification of the CAG Charter, all committees are open to new members wanting to join. Several committee members mentioned local events that may be of interest to the group and the larger CAG.

- The Brooklyn School for Collaborative Studies (BCS) has emailed Jeff and other CAG members seeking to involve students and parents in the SF process. For example, on Thursday, May 26 the school hosted a charette of student work and asked for CAG participation.
- The EnviroMedia Mobile Museum has planned a 4-part festival for Summer 2011. The first event, Solar Fest, takes place on Sat. June, 25th at the Ikea/Erie Basin Park. More info: www.urbandivers.org
- The Historic Districts Council has scheduled a bike tour of the Gowanus Community, lead by Dan Wiley, on Saturday, June 4th. After the tour there will be a community discussion. More info: www.hdc.org
- The 5th Avenue Committee and partners Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP) & Gowanus Houses and Wyckoff Gardens have planned 2 public programs on the future of the Gowanus. The first on Tuesday, May, 31st from 3:00 to 5:00 and the second on Thursday, June 2, 2011 from 6:00 to 8:00. The event is billed as “A Community Conversation About Flooding, Health, Community & Business Impacts Around the Gowanus Canal.” More info contact:
- On June 2nd there is a scheduled public hearing on the Whole Foods site

Cultural Resources and EPA

John Vetter spoke to the group about the work that EPA is currently undertaking, now that the RI is complete and the Feasibility Study is underway. The Feasibility study will be completed by the end of 2011, which is a very quick turnaround for both the study and the cleanup design proposals. The final selection of the remedy will drive the concerns

(recordation or mitigation) of the historic properties or resources concerned and the design of the remedy will incorporate historic features. He is still interested in scheduling a walking tour with EPA staff, the contractors completing the cultural resources investigation and members of the Archeology Committee.

As part of the RI, underwater scanning has been completed, though the underwater portions of the shoreline will need further study. The EPA is looking to other sites in the US that have dealt with historic shorelines and historically significant bulkheads. With regards to the Gowanus Canal edges, the EPA will be looking at the character and nature of the existing features. The agency also expects to handle the historic bulkheads as extant examples of the evolution of the shoreline form.

EPA & Feasibility Study (FS)

At this time, the agency intends to:

1. Identify historic properties
2. Determine the significance (Is it eligible for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places or not? Example: The Canal itself is NR-eligible.)
3. Avoid, or minimize, or mitigate any adverse effects to historic and significant features or properties.

The FS study will investigate the significance and possible adverse effects to the following known features:

- Bulkheads & whether remedies such as dewatering may cause their collapse. Recordation of the bulkheads is underway and will consider the existing literature, the construction records and observation. Sonar scans reveal a lot of deterioration beneath the water. Recent dredging by USACE maintained a distance of 10 ft. from the degraded bulkheads.
- Bottom features including barges, ship hulls, and other intact objects in the canal will need to be documented and removed. These objects may be in need of restoration, but may also be contaminated.
- National Register eligible structures and features

EPA & Documentation

The documentation of the canal will likely be done to Historic American Engineering Record (HAER) standards. Bulkheads will be recorded by examining extant materials, known structural techniques, the evolution of the existing conditions and other observable characteristics. The many decades of the changing bulkhead design and construction will be translated into a narrative that contextualizes the forms and considers many periods of significance. The collected data will contribute to the community's understanding of the canal's cultural heritage. Though the canal will not likely be touched for at least 4 years, the recordation can begin now.

The archeology of the filled areas—like the 1st Street Basin— will be considered by the FS. In anticipation of this, the soil can be examined now to see if any native soils,

historic periods or any other preserved strata may be observed. Some coring has been done by EPA already and the soil in most filled areas is likely to be highly disturbed. One CAG member pointed out the possibility that the 1st Street Basin may contain evidence of a historic burned mill.

Questions that came up:

Q: How does the archeology affect the ecological environment of the canal? Will harmful bulkheads be preserved here?

A: Ecological concerns, not preservation, will drive the EPA cleanup. The agency will not be required to keep historic bulkheads. The goal is to maintain the water quality post-cleanup.

Q: Will EPA be looking at the historic hydrology, some evidence of which may exist behind the bulkheads?

A: Yes.

Q: Is this undertaking part of EPA's Section 106 obligation under the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA)?

A: Yes. Earlier documentation by the USACE gave EPA a leg up by providing a great deal of existing data and detailed studies under the same obligation. The design of the remedy can precede the full Section 106 review, though the agency plans to monitor preservation concerns throughout the process.

Q: Is there a Programmatic Agreement (PA)?

A: There is a draft PA before the NYS SHPO and the ACHP, though it was not adopted. The agency is operating under CERCLA with regards to historic resources at this time.

Q: Who owns the bulkheads?

A: The city has a pattern of ownership and the waterway is owned by the city.

Work Plan

John Vetter believes that EPA will be meeting with the project contractors by mid-June, and ready for CAG materials and a tour shortly after that.

A subcommittee was formed to compile and share existing resources, like historic maps and photographs. Joseph, Katia, Lynn Rakos and Dan Wiley are interested in developing the tour that EPA has requested of the community. One member brought up the possibility of self-facilitation by creating a yahoo group for CAG members to use for communication. Jeff reminded the group that there was earlier resistance to this idea when the CAG was formed. Another member suggested a website for the CAG so that all emails, notifications, etc. would be gathered in one place.

Ludger volunteered access to a 32 ft. canoe, should the group want a tour on the waterway. Most agreed that the CAG tour for the EPA should be a land-based tour.

The group will also work on a historic slideshow to share with the EPA and larger CAG. Proteus Gowanus has a map that shows historic features and is willing to share. The slideshow would use resources available at the Brooklyn Public Library, the Brooklyn Historical Society, the Brooklyn Museum and National Grid. Eymund has requested that the group send historic images to him at Proteus Gowanus.

Operating Procedures Issues

There was discussion about whether the walking tour requires full CAG approval, under the charter.

Some members suggested that the tour could be the next meeting of the committee – a meeting in the field. Another brought up that this would be problematic as the meetings are open to the public, while the tour might not be.

It was decided that the subcommittee would come up with a map, then circulate the map to the rest of the committee and then with the larger CAG. The tour could be open to the public, but folks would need to RSVP as space is limited.

There was general agreement that this issue is time-critical for the SF activities and the contractors brought in will need to meet with the CAG members soon. The group took a vote on whether to approve developing the slideshow, with 100% approval. The next meeting of this committee will be dependent on the availability of the EPA contractors.

Committee Mission Statement

Everyone approved the earlier draft of the committee mission statement, as follows:

- To protect, preserve, and document the cultural and natural history of the Gowanus Canal.
- To restore the community memory of the working canal and make this unique heritage publicly accessible.
- To raise awareness of the historic landscape without hindering the canal cleanup

The group also approved the following goals or tasks:

- Linking existing resources
- Sharing the history of the canal with the larger community
- Making the historic investigation and research public and accessible