

How Catskill Watershed Corporation Works to Protect Water Environment

by Diane Galusha

The Catskill Watershed Corporation (CWC) is a nonprofit, local development corporation formed to establish and manage several programs in partnership with New York City and other agencies in the City's Catskill-Delaware watershed west of the Hudson River.

Ninety percent of some 1.2 billion gallons of water used daily by nine million people – half of New York State's population – comes from six reservoirs in this 1,600-square-mile area encompassing much of the Catskill Mountains. This crucial resource sustains not only eight million residents of the City, but a million people who live in three counties north of the City, as municipalities and water districts along the gravity-fed, underground aqueducts are allowed to tap into them and purchase water from the City.

The CWC's aim is to protect the environment, particularly water quality, while improving the economic well being and the quality of life for residents and businesses in the rural region.

The New York City Watershed Memorandum of Agreement (MOA), signed in 1997, created the CWC. Driven by the US Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) mandate that all surface water supplies be filtered, the City, loathe to pass along to water consumers the multi-billion-dollar cost of building and operating a huge filtration plant, first tried to prove it could protect its source waters by proposing strict land use requirements in the watershed.

Working Together

The upstate communities banded together as the Coalition of Watershed Towns and dug in their heels, refusing to bear the burdens of water protection mechanisms including land acquisition by the City through the use of eminent domain, a system that had doomed 24 communities and displaced more than 5,500 people when the reservoirs were built between 1905 and 1965.

After six years of debate, dispute and intense negotiations among the Coalition, city, state and federal entities and environmental groups over whether the City should be allowed to avoid filtering its vast Catskill and Delaware supplies, the MOA was born, and with it a new model of cooperation among former foes.



Photo courtesy of CWC

Catskill Watershed Corporation Board members inspect waste collection tanks and sand filtration at a building under construction in the hamlet of Bloomville, NY under the CWC's Community Wastewater Management Program. The Bloomville system, serving 108 customers, will be operational in late 2009. It is one of nine small scale wastewater handling systems completed or under development through the CWMP program.

The city was given a five-year filtration waiver, while the New York City Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and many other parties to the MOA worked to prove that environmental protection and community benefit programs can preserve water quality without filtration. The filtration waiver has been renewed twice; the current one is effective through 2017. New York's Catskill-Delaware supply is the largest unfiltered water supply in the world. Its Croton Supply – a series of reservoirs and lakes in highly developed Westchester and Putnam Counties east of the Hudson River, is under a federal filtration mandate, and a filter plant is currently under construction at Van Cortlandt Park in the Bronx.

The landmark MOA allowed the City to purchase vacant watershed lands from willing sellers based on water quality criteria (eminent domain may not be used); update Watershed Rules and Regulations governing land use and activities in the region; and establish a number of City-funded water and community preservation programs in partnership with several agencies and organizations, including the Catskill Watershed Corporation.

The CWC has developed and continues to administer a number of those programs, and has added others over the years.

- Residential septic system repair, replacement and maintenance (*see article on page 34*).
- Construction of 39 sand and salt storage facilities for counties, towns and villages in the region. A program to fund salt sheds for large institutions is under development.
- Reimbursement of eligible costs of stormwater pollution prevention plans required of businesses, municipalities and individuals planning new construction, and funding improvements to existing stormwater controls.
- Development of Community Wastewater Management systems for up to 14 hamlets not served by City-built wastewater treatment projects required under the MOA. These projects will allow hundreds of onsite septic systems to be decommissioned.
- A Stream Corridor Protection Program which funds projects in response to and anticipation of flood events.



Photo courtesy of CWC

Distribution lines were installed in absorption beds to treat effluent from 82 homes and businesses in the hamlet of Hamden, NY. The community wastewater treatment system will allow the decommissioning of onsite septic systems whose failure threatens the nearby West Branch of the Delaware River.



Photo courtesy of CWC

A test pit is dug in the yard of a resident of Delancey, NY, where the CWC's Community Wastewater Management Program, in concert with the town and a coordinating engineering firm, established a Septic Maintenance District. Failing septic systems were replaced and will be regularly maintained at no cost to the homeowners.



Photo courtesy of CWC

The building housing sand filter beds for the Bloomville Community Septic System blends in with surrounding farm lands shown here in Bloomville, Delaware County, NY.



Photo courtesy of CWC

This project to armor ditches, install culverts and plant roadside vegetation to control problematic run off from a steep dirt road onto a state highway and adjoining waterways in the Town of Walton, NY, is one of many Stormwater Retrofit projects funded by the Catskill Watershed Corporation.

- A grant program to encourage municipal planning initiatives and infrastructure assessments.
- The Catskill Fund for the Future, an economic development program to provide low-interest loans and other support to businesses and institutions. More than \$35 million has been distributed to 165 business ventures, creating or retaining nearly 1,000 jobs in this economically depressed region.
- The Watershed education grant program to encourage schools and non-profit organizations in the West of Hudson Watershed and in New York City to explore water issues (*see article on page 36*).

CWC as Consultant and Catalyst

The CWC acts in a consulting role on a variety of programs and issues, including recreational use of New York City lands, and city land tax matters. It has also taken on special projects such as installation of commemorative exhibits and road signs at the six West of Hudson reservoirs, watershed-wide stream cleanups, and the annual Catskills Local Government Day which offers training and discussion opportunities for municipal officials and civic leaders.

The 15-person CWC Board of Directors includes elected officials from parts of five counties in the Catskill and Delaware Watersheds, as well as representatives of New York City, New York State and the environmental community.

The CWC's executive director and a staff of 18 professionals and technical support people in the fields of engineering, infrastructure, finance, economic development and the law coordinate the Corporation's many programs and projects.

For more information on how the CWC is fulfilling its dual mission of protecting water quality and preserving communities, go to www.cwconline.org, or call toll-free, 1-877-WAT-SHED (928-7433).

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