

Taking the Pulse of Communities

From December 2004 through February 2005, EPA, the Army Corps, and the NJDOT-Office of Maritime Resources conducted a series of community interviews at various locations in New Jersey, from Keyport to Clifton. The community interview process has proven itself to be of great value in “taking the pulse” of the communities – those residents, community leaders, organizations, and interests in and around the Lower Passaic River and Newark Bay. It also functions as an introductory dialogue between the partner agencies and the public.

The community interviews serve as a jumping off point in which communications networks are formed between the public and governmental agencies. The networks are critical to sharing information about the project with, and receiving input from the public. The creation of networking partnerships fosters meaningful dialogue and participation in the decision-making process. This community networking came into play during the interview process itself. On January 22, 2005, an informal community interview “drop-in” session was held at the Rutherford Public Library. EPA generated a flyer announcing the session, and was assisted in its distribution by a number of organizations who posted it on their Web sites, and handed them out at community meetings and gathering places. Thanks to the efforts of these community partners, over 25 people showed up for the session, even though a blizzard was bearing down on the area. Now, that’s effective communication!

Interview Results to Guide Development of Community Involvement Plan

All totaled, over 50 stakeholders were interviewed. Their comments, concerns, and suggestions will form the foundation of the Community Involvement Plan (CIP) that is being developed for the Lower Passaic River project and Newark Bay Study. The CIP will reflect the community’s viewpoints, interests, and concerns, and provides a blueprint for conducting public outreach and involvement over the course of the site cleanup and restoration work. The CP will be released for public comment in the summer of 2005.

Many of those interviewed are representatives of various organizations with an interest in the environment, land use, sustainable development, health issues, and environmental justice. Some of those interviewed include:

ANJEC (Association of New Jersey Environmental Commissions)
Clean Ocean Action
Greater Newark Conservancy
NY/NJ Baykeeper
Green Faith
Hackensack Riverkeeper
Hudson River Foundation
IACO (Immigration & American Citizenship Organization)

Ironbound Community Corporation
Natural Resources Defense Council
Passaic River Coalition
Passaic River Institute at Montclair State University
Passaic River Rowing Association
Passaic Valley Sewerage Commissioners
Third River Bank Association
WMA4 Watershed Ambassador

A number of residents without organizational affiliations participated in the process as well. It is important to note that the community interview process does not end with the publication of the CIP. Public dialogue continues throughout the process and is an important component to project decision-making. The partner agencies will be active in communicating with the public, ensuring that their concerns, issues, and input are always “up front and center” as work progresses and decisions are made. If you have any questions about this process or wish to offer additional input, please contact David Kluesner, EPA Community Involvement Coordinator at (212) 637-3653, or email at: kluesner.dave@epa.gov