

## **The Story Behind the Formation of the Clean Water/Jobs Coalition**

### **By David J. Miller, Listen to the Sound Creator and a Founder of the Historic Clean Water Jobs Coalition in 1992**

*(David J. Miller, then the Northeast Regional Vice President of the National Audubon Society, created the Listen to the Sound campaign in 1990 and was a founder of the Clean Water Jobs coalition in 1992. He was also Co-Chair of the LISS CAC for thirteen years and on the Management Conference. Together with Jane Kerin-Moffat and a coalition of groups, the Listen to the Sound program was designed and organized to bring together all the groups and interests from around the Long Island Sound to create a common vision like no other program had ever done before. The description below written in the first person by David J. Miller tells the story of how the Clean Water Jobs coalition was formed a year after the Listen to the Sound Agenda was released and the then Long Island Sound Watershed Alliance (LISWA) was created. LISWA was the first host of the annual Long Island Sound Citizens Summit.)*

In 1990, the National Audubon Society launched ***Listen to the Sound***, a citizens hearing project that involved groups around the Sound to create a common agenda for the restoration of the Sound. After 15 citizen hearings and more than 500 testimonies, an agenda was created that was the voice of the people and all who cared about the future of the Sound. In contrast to the then Draft Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan (CCMP) of the Long Island Sound Study, it was bold and visionary. Hundreds of groups came together in 1991 at the first Long Island Sound Citizens Summit to form the Long Island Sound Watershed Alliance. The Alliance pushed forward these ideas and solutions during the process of creating Long Island Sound's first CCMP.

The Listen to the Sound agenda became the playbook for every group to use when commenting on the USEPA Long Island Sound Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan. The draft plan was being review through the CAC of the Long Island Sound Study as well as its inter-agency Management Conference and Policy Committee of EPA Regional Administrators and Commissioners from New York State and Connecticut. As the second annual ***Listen to the Sound*** Conference (now known as the Long Island Sound Citizens Summit) was approaching in 1992, the draft plan by USEPA was out in the public arena for comment. One of the key provisions was to hold nitrogen pollution levels at 1990 levels. They were calling for a *no-net increase* policy of nitrogen pollution into the Sound while pollution reduction retrofits at sewers plants could be financed and implemented. The number one problem facing the Sound was the overload of nitrogen pollution which in turned robbed the Sound waters of oxygen. The end result was Hypoxic events in the summer months killing marine life and disrupting the ecological balance of the Sound.

The 1992 LIS conference was at the Stouffer Hotel in White Plains, New York in the county of Westchester. As chair of Alliance and Conference organizer, I arrived Thursday night prior to the conference starting at 9am on Saturday. There was a lot of preliminary work to be done and I wanted to make sure everything was going according to plan. It was only when I arrived at the hotel that Thursday night that I learned that there were many things unfolding not in the plan. As it turned out, I had made a very good decision to arrive in town when I did.

My friend Bob Funicello, then with the Westchester Federated Conservationists, called me in my hotel room at about 8pm that night. He said: “Dave, you are not going to believe this, but the teamsters; the unions; they are going to protest your conference on Saturday. I just heard and it is going to be big.” After twenty minutes or so on the phone with Bob, I got the full context of what he was saying. I learned that the construction industry already had high unemployment and if sewer hook bans were used to enforce the no net increase of nitrogen policy, they would even have bigger problems. Already, the building and trades unions were at a 35% unemployment rate. This was something I never anticipated. I asked Bob who was behind this, who I could meet with and what could I do to help mitigate the situation. Bob knew the folks involved and gave me one of the leaders’ phone numbers.

I immediately called the construction industry leader at his home that night. I told him who I was and that I would like to meet with his leaders on Friday so we could understand each other’s position. From my Great Lakes United background and work with the United Auto Workers’ unions, I knew that I was in no position to make any demands, but rather I needed to get a conversation started in any way possible. He said he would talk to his principles and see what he could do. He called me around 9:30am on Friday morning and said he arranged for a meeting at the Construction Industry Council of Westchester and the Hudson Valley office at 1pm. I thank him and said I would be there. I immediately called Bob and asked him to join me as well as Soundkeeper Terry Backer.

When I arrived at the office, I was introduced to a number of gentleman including Ross Pepe and George Drapeau and George Franks. We sat at a large table and I tried to explain to them that our intent was not to put anyone out of work but rather clean-up the Sound. I told them of the *Listen to the Sound* project and that there must be some areas of common ground. They spoke directly about their economic situation and told me that now was not the time for environmental regulations. With insight provided by Bob Funicello before the meeting, I introduced the topic of sewer upgrades and infrastructure improvements and how that would create jobs. Bob had also planted this seed with some of their leaders but they were clearly waiting to see if I would bring it up. During the next hour we focused on the topic of Clean Water funding and jobs. If there was funding, there would be more construction for infrastructure and thus more jobs for their members.

The result of this meeting was to agree that both of our events would go forward, but we would leave the door open to work together. I promised, as the opening speaker at our conference, to call for a marriage of ideas between the environment and labor. I said I would tell the folks inside that you were possible allies in the clean-up of the Sound. Ross Pepe skeptically agreed not to attack us directly, but they wanted to see what I was going to say and do. I told them I would have a draft ready by early evening to show them. George Drapeau said he would come pick it up. He added: “Just meet me at the bar at 7pm at Stouffers and I will get it to Ross”.

I rushed back to the hotel and went to work on my marriage of ideas speech. It needed to be short and to the point. It was only going to be about two pages long and was going to be designed to show how the unions and construction industry could be and more importantly needed to be our allies if we were to clean-up the Long Island Sound.

When I came into the bar, George Franks, the most vocal and cynical of the group, was there with Drapeau and a few more friends. I gave George Drapeau the speech as I told him a verbal summary. He put it in his pocket and again said he would get it to Ross. Then, George Franks proceed to talk to me about the Spotted Owl and how us environmentalists were against jobs. I deflected those points the best I could and tried to get us back to talking about the Sound. I knew we would never agree on the Spotted Owls issues of the Old Growth Forest of the Pacific Northwest nor would our discussion on that topic generate a meaningful breakthrough. I thought it was best to focus on where there may be common ground. After a while, George Drapeau changed the subject and gave me a smile.

We called it a night and he again said would get my speech to Ross. I told him that I would be out in the Parking Lot to talk with them an hour before the conference started. He said that would be a good idea, because most of their folks would be there by then. As they left I saw George Franks mumbling something to the others and then letting out a loud laugh. We still had a long road to go.

When I got out of bed on that Saturday morning it was clear skies and 7 degrees outside. If I thought the cold weather would deter the Teamsters and their demonstration, I could not be more wrong. By 8am the picket line completely blocked the entrance to the Hotel and Conference Center. By 8:30am, there was a giant balloon with their logo and close to a thousand union members and supporters. They had signs that said: "Fix our Sewers; Not Kuwait's; 35% employment/1% nitrogen; Jobs First; No Sewer Hook-Up Bans; and Money for Sewage Treatment is Money for Jobs". As I read the last one, I saw that they indeed were offering an olive branch. Some of their signs could be linked to my marriage of ideas speech. I thought there could be possible ways to work together after all.

Before the demonstration started, Soundkeeper Terry Backer arrived and we had agreed he would become our spokesperson to the crowd outside. I had spoken with him the day before as this was unfolding and this was a calculated move on our part. Terry was seen as a working man. He was an icon of the Sound and many of his family members were union workers. We knew he would connect immediately to the crowd. When I gave him a copy of my notes for my speech inside, he simply said he had it under control.

As I entered the conference, I went over to the Region I and Region II EPA Regional Administrators who were speaking to the group that morning along with the environmental Commissioners of each state. Region I Administrator Julia Belaga commented on the crowd we attracted. We walked through a break in the union demonstrators that was now estimated at 1200 strong. Region II Administrator Connie Sidamon-Eristoff noted that there were a few elected officials in the crowd too carrying signs. One such individual was Assemblyman George Pataki. Pataki, who had been Mayor of Peekskill, would become a State Senator later that year and in 1994 defeated Mario Cuomo to become Governor.

I told them about my opening remarks and that Terry Backer would speak to the crowd. We hoped this outreach to the crowd and the message inside would start a process to bring the groups together. They agreed and said when they spoke that they too would emphasized the need

to find common ground. Later that morning Congressional leaders Nita Lowey, Chris Shays and Rosa DeLauro all attend to participate on a panel. They too saw the possibilities of working together with labor and the construction industry. They pledged to fight for more federal dollars towards clean water infrastructure for a cleaner environment and a boost to the economy.

By 11am, the union crowd speeches were over, the crowd started to disperse. The signs and public address system were packed up and the media was on its way to their next event. My speech was received well inside the conference and Terry Backer got cheers from the crowd when he yelled: "My brother is a plumber and I am a working man trying to make a living! ; We are on the same side and need to fight for government funds and support so we can all get back to work!" Everything was coming together and then I just realized that we still had a full day left to go with our own conference.

What could have been a disaster turned out to be the birth of a new coalition; a coalition between the construction industry, labor and the environment groups. It was an unheard of partnership, but one that had great promise. Ross and I talked in the parking lot before he left and we agreed to meet in the next several weeks to go over the next steps needed. As I went back to the *Listen to the Sound* second annual citizens' summit, I made a note to call Ross when I got back to my office on Monday. I believed then that we could make this work.

I often look at this day as a watershed movement. It was a time where the right people had the right conversations at the right time. It could have turned out to be very ugly and instead the promise of a powerful coalition emerged. A second Alliance was now being created to build upon the work of the *Listen to the Sound* campaign.

Two and a half weeks later, I was driving down the Taconic Parkway to meet with Ross Pepe on next steps. Ross has selected a small Italian restaurant in North White Plains. While I was thinking about the agenda of a potential Clean Water/Jobs coalition for the Sound, my mind would wander to the dynamic of the meeting itself. The fact we were meeting about the aftermath of a teamster demonstration in a small Italian restaurant created movie like images. I guess had seen the Godfather too many times. My friend Chris Ballantyne thought it was funny and told me to keep my back to the door. After a terrific veal parmesan, desert and coffee, my fears of Jimmy Hoffa coming back from the dead evaporated.

The next several weeks were extremely important. We were drafting our platform and getting groups to sign onto it. It was time for both sides to deliver their constituencies. If we did not respond quickly and get wide spread support from key environmental leaders, it was be viewed that we were all talk. We were able to respond and by early March the unions had produced a compelling color four page piece that outlined our agenda for more federal dollars to clean up sewage treatment plants. We had great figures on how many jobs would be created and how the Sound would become cleaner. We had pictures from the demonstration and conference along with an American flag logo. It was now time to take this four page advocacy brochure and agenda to Washington DC with a delegation from the coalition.

The Construction Industry Councils and Unions were lobbying machines. They had access to basically anyone we wanted to see. When you combine the fact that this was a new

coalition that was formed, most members of Congress became eager and curious to see it for themselves. I was joined on this first trip with Soundkeeper Terry Backer, Nancy Seligson of Save the Sound, Bob Funicello of Westchester Conservationists as well as Ross Pepe, George Drapeau and several more industry/union leaders from New York City and Long Island.

We had meetings with House Committee chairs like Robert Roe and Henry Novak. Everywhere we met the common message was that they had not seen this type of coalition before. In the US Senate, both Senators Chris Dodd and Joe Lieberman met with us and agreed to work with New York Senators Moynihan and D'Amato to introduced legislation to increase federal funds for clean water projects. When we went to D'Amato's office without an appointment, a staffer was assigned to us and said the Senator was tied up. Our construction leader from Long Island said: "Tell him Bob Carlino is here and I am sure he will make time."

The staff person tried to persuade him otherwise and the head of the New York City Contractors Association said: "no, you do not understand, tell the Senator who is here." The staffer reluctantly left and five minutes later Senator Alfonse D'Amato burst into the conference room. The first two to three minutes with him was entertaining to say the least. He was colorful and kept asking Bob if he ever got tired of busting his chops. They continue to go back and forth as old crusty colleagues would and finally the Senator said "what is so damn important". He agreed to support our efforts with Moynihan, Dodd and Lieberman and then raced off supposedly to the Senate floor.

When we went back over the House of Representatives, we meet with Representatives Nita Lowey from Westchester, Christopher Shays from Stamford and Rosa DeLauro from New Haven. They had promised to work with us to craft legislation to increase funding. Chris and Nita were founders and co-chairs of the House Long Island Sound Caucus and Rosa DeLauro was a member of House Water Resources Committee where the legislation would be introduced.

It was an incredibly successful trip to Washington and the work around Long Island Sound would create stronger ties with Congressional leaders such as Chris Shays, Nita Lowey, Joe Lieberman, Christopher Dodd, Sherry Boehlert and Rosa DeLauro. In future years, strong partners like Congressmen Jim Walsh, Rick Lazio, Bob Simmons, Steve Israel and others joined and led the campaign. The coalition also brought support later from Senator Chuck Schumer and Senator Hillary Clinton. Time and time again, the Clean Water Jobs Coalition agenda became a centerpiece for collaborative conservation work and alliances with Members of Congress.

In the 1990's, the coalition paved the way for 200 million dollars in the New York State 1996 Environmental Bond Act dedicated to Long Island Sound nitrogen removal projects and record support from the Clean Water Fund in Connecticut. By the early 2000's, the coalition was responsible for the passage of both the Long Island Sound Restoration Act and the Long Island Sound Stewardship Acts in the United States Congress. The Coalition is still active and a vital voice for funding and what is need for both the environment and economy of Long Island Sound.

(Compiled and Copy written by David J. Miller in April of 2014 and for use in conjunction with the 2014 Long Island Sound Citizens Summit Conference)