

Fiscal Woes Drowning Clearwater: Iconic Festival may be Doomed



By Roger Witherspoon

Clearwater, the groundbreaking environmental organization founded by Pete Seeger which spearheaded the drive for the national 1972 Clean Water Act (<http://bit.ly/1ZLkGgp>), is in such dire financial straits that it intends to cancel or relocate its famed Hudson River Revival Festival and its historic sloop may not be repaired in time for this year's sailing season.

The Clearwater (<http://www.clearwater.org/>) board of directors will announce today, in advance of their scheduled public meeting in Beacon, NY, their decision on the fate of the annual Revival, which has been held Fathers' Day weekend for more than a decade at Croton Point Park. The board decision, without any input from members, is based on

recommendations from Clearwater's Executive Director, Peter Gross, and senior staff.

Of even more long-term significance is the fact that in addition to the festival, Clearwater's board is reconsidering the organization's ongoing involvement in several high-profile issues, including fracking upstate along the Marcellus Shale, the expansion of the Algonquin gas pipelines in the Lower Hudson Valley, and the continued operation of the Indian Point Nuclear power plant some 25 miles north of New York City. Clearwater and Riverkeeper have been the two key non-profit organizations with the financial ability to hire lawyers and experts to challenge the relicensing of the twin reactors. Their efforts, along with the organizational reach of the volunteer Indian Point Safe Energy Coalition, brought the State of New York into the fight on their side. As a result the relicensing battle, now in its seventh year, is the most expensive and protracted in the nation. And it was a coalition led by Clearwater that pushed the EPA to order the dredging of some 2.65 million cubic yards of muck at the bottom of the Hudson River that was laden with PCBs



Seeger founded Clearwater at a time when the Hudson was an industrial sewer, and dedicated the organization to fighting river pollution and restoring it to environmental health. Scaling back that level of involvement is causing friction among members.

Gross' assessment of the financial health of the organization and his views on the 50-year-old festival and the future of Clearwater activism triggered such a bitter dispute among core staff that all 46 volunteer members of the Revival Planning Committee, the Festival Director, the assistant director, the financial director, and the development

director resigned en masse at a contention meeting.

This in-house brawl did not become public until this week, when Roy Volpe, who has coordinated the “Activist” area of the festival for more than a decade, sent out an email to former participants explaining the dissidents’ view of the dispute. Volpe, who declined to elaborate on his letter, wrote that “the Executive Director, along with the board, has planned a festival in Beacon and is calling it the Great Hudson River Revival. He also told us that we would never go back to Croton again. This is NOT Revival and we think that not going back to Croton is ridiculous and that using the same name for this event turns its back on nearly 50 years of tradition.

“All this is being done with no input from the membership. In addition to this, the Director has voiced his opinion that Clearwater should not spend its time on issues, including Indian Point, fracking, global warming, and the Algonquin Pipeline, all of which Toshi and Pete Seeger opposed....”

Among those surprised that the Festival may be cancelled is Croton on Hudson Mayor Dr. Greg Schmidt, who said “it’s a great event in our local community. It’s like an institution in our back yard that has been here for many, many years.”

Schmidt, who did not know of the loss until informed by a reporter, said there is a significant monetary impact on the town since there are more than 1,000 volunteers involved setting up the festival who are spending money on food and supplies in Croton. More importantly, he said, “it is an institution. An event like that doesn’t happen all the time, and it creates a community of its own. Residents have been volunteering at the Festival for years.”

Gross said in an interview that the ire against him is misplaced. The final decision as to the fate of the Festival rests with the board of directors, which has been discussing the issue and conducting an email vote on Clearwater’s future direction. One option is to move the Festival to Beacon, and have a smaller, one-day fest similar to the Strawberry, Pumpkin, and Corn Festivals held there each summer by the Beacon Sloop Club, a Clearwater affiliate (<http://www.beaconsloopclub.org/Festivals.html>).

The problem, said Gross, stems from the unpredictability of relying on a fundraising event that is dependent on the weather. The Festival costs about \$900,000 to produce, he said. "Our best year, in terms of profit, was 2014 when the profit was over \$200,000" Gross explained. "On an investment of that size, that was OK.

"But last year we had the very serious problem of rain. And the problem was more the forecast early in the week than the actuality that weekend. If people think it is going to rain then ticket sales fall off pretty rapidly. Last year's profit was about \$35,000.

"There are still bills unpaid. We are going through other expenses, including the restoration of the boat. If I look at the profit & loss statement for the Festival itself, it shows a net profit. But when money comes in we may have to apply it to other urgent things. The Festival was profitable by a little bit, but our needs are greater."

He estimated that the crowd in 2014, when the weather was sunny, was about 17,000. Last year it was estimated at under 10,000.

Gross said the biggest fiscal hurdle involves repairing the Sloop Clearwater, a replica of the sailing ships that plied the Hudson River for more than a century.. The Sloop is now a floating classroom which has carried more than a half million students up and down the river.

"It is so different from what they get in a classroom," said Gross. "We get a lifelong commitment to the river from those kids. They want to be stewards of the Hudson River. It's a magical thing that they do with that floating classroom that no organization does. That's the glory of Clearwater, I think."

But those glory days are threatened.

Gross said the mass defection of the planning committee, which oversees all the work of some 1,000 volunteers and professionals, stems from a "very deep misunderstanding." Gross said it was not his or the board of directors' intention to abandon Clearwater's activist mission.

“One view on the board,” he explained, “is that we should really focus on Hudson River issues and river community issues. When we talk about broader things like Indian Point we should connect it to river issues.

“We have to go through our portfolio of things we care about and look at them in terms of our prime mission, which involves the river and river community.”

Indian Point is the largest water user in the state of New York. It siphons 2.5 billion gallons daily from the Hudson to cool its power generating system and returns it up to 30 degrees hotter. The 9 million residents of NYC and neighboring Westchester County, where the plant sits, use 1.2 billion gallons daily. In the process of sucking in so much water, the plants kill some 2 billion fish annually which has devastated spawning grounds for many species, according to state and federal analysis.

As for the construction of the Algonquin Pipeline, Gross said the fact that the pipeline goes underneath the Hudson River doesn't necessarily mean there is a valid issue Clearwater should get involved with.

“We need to figure out if the fact that it goes under the river is a strong enough connection to our mission to be involved. The same with fracking. I've been in Pennsylvania and talked to families that had their water destroyed by fracking. But can Clearwater establish enough of a nexus to the river that we can say this is an issue where we need to be out front?”

Gross said Volpe and others who led the charge to resign “never really asked me what I really think. We never had that dialogue, and it's unfortunate.”

The biggest bone of contention, however, was over the Festival. Gross acknowledged that during the discussion “at first I did say I don't think we should ever go back to Croton Point Park because the fixed costs are too high. It would not be a wise decision this year, given our financial situation. I don't know what can be done for next year.

“But within 10 minutes I said I took that back because I don't know what the board will choose to do. The decision to have the Festival is the board's, not mine.”

The board will announce today if there will be a Festival this year, where it will be held, and its duration. The meeting will be held at 6:30 PM in The Red Barn, at 8 Long Dock Rd., Beacon.