

Dearie: Are Police Delaying Clean Up?

Assemblyman John C. Dearie, chairman of the Pelham Bay Landfill Task Force, released a letter uncovered by Task Force member Jorge Santiago showing that the city Police Department wanted to delay the clean up of the Rodman's Neck firing range in Pelham Bay Park for at least a year despite lead concentrations that were found to have "a severe potential impact to human health and the environment."

"This is not a new issue for the Task Force or its members," said Dearie. "We have consulted with the Police Department in the past and our members have been active in exposing the dangers that the firing range poses, not only to the law enforcement officers who train there but to the surrounding community as well. It's very much a part of our battle to make Pelham Bay Park an environmentally sound ecosystem."

The letter, which was written on June 20 by Deputy Commissioner Richard Mendes of the city Department of Environmental Protection to the city Office of Management and Budget protested the NYPD assertion that the DEP had agreed to delay a clean up of the lead hazard at the firing range until fiscal 1993, which runs from July 1993 to June 1994.

Mendes wrote OMB: "This letter is in response to the May 22 letter from Joseph P. Wuensch, Deputy Commissioner NYPD. The letter states that DEP staff agrees with the decision to delay funding of the (Rodman's Neck) study to FY 1993. However, this is not the case.

"Sometime in the past couple of months, Cyprian Cox, director of DEP's Division of Hazardous Materials (DOHM) received a phone call from OMB concerning the site. Cox was asked his opinion concerning possible consequences resulting from a delay. Cox has

stated to me that he specifically advised OMB that the City has been proceeding in good faith with the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) and the DEC had specifically stated in the meeting of 5/24/90, that they had the authority to declare the site a hazardous waste site and 'order' the City to do a clean up.

"From a technical standpoint, we have no reason to recommend a delay in the assessment. The initial samples collected from the site showed very high levels of contamination. Therefore DEP's position on this issue has not changed, i.e., the site poses a severe potential impact to human health and the environment. Consequently, a remedial investigation and feasibility study is needed to determine the nature and extent of all impacts, and develop remedial alternatives. Furthermore, any delay in conducting the assessment could result in legal actions by the DEC."

Dearie pointed out that Rodman's Neck had been a question before the Landfill Task Force since its inception. As Task Force Chairman, Dearie protested to then-Police Commissioner Benjamin Ward in 1988 about the number of seized illegal fireworks that were detonated at the firing range, shaking windows in City Island and sending plumes of

smoke that hovered over for days over the East Bronx.

Later that year he asked Ward to respond to reports of officers from the Bomb Squad found to have high blood concentrations of lead as well as the high lead levels found in the soil at the range.

"Both times," Dearie said, "department brass contended that nothing was wrong or that nothing could be done, as in the case of the fireworks detonations. We don't buy those answers and neither does the Task Force.

Dearie praised Santiago, of Co-op City, as a "committed environmental activist who serves not only on the Task Force but on several other environmental groups." He added that other Task Force members such as Susan Bellinson and David Sexton of Soundwatch on City Island had also been active in exposing the hazards of Rodman's Neck.

"We're not going to let this one go, and as this letter shows the Police Department will not be able to sidestep a clean up any longer the exposure risk is just too great," Dearie said.

He noted that upwards of 40,000 law enforcement officers use the Rodman's Neck firing range every year and that over the past 30 years hundreds of thousands of rounds of ammunition and explosives have been used at the site.