

HOT AIR

Top Green

By Barbara Currier Bell

Drumroll, please. CT, meet your new Commissioner of the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). Gina McCarthy, meet CT.

On December 1, shortly after shaking hands with DEP staff for the first time, Gina McCarthy drove to Riverfront Park Boathouse in Hartford and made her first public appearance in the state—before about 150 grassroots greens. Gathering under the guidance of the CT League of Conservation Voters to plan their 2005 state legislative agenda, these activists were the people in CT most eager to meet McCarthy, and the ones with the highest expectations.

McCarthy is too new to offer an agenda. Instead, she spoke about how she would approach her job, and led off by characterizing herself as a people person. “A little Irish kid with no money”, she got into the environmental arena through majoring in social anthropology at UMass-Boston, and working at her hometown’s Board of Health. McCarthy is a petite woman whose white hair and receptivity belie her 50 years; what she means by “people person”, however, is anything but grandmotherly. “I don’t worry about differences of opinion: I love them. I value public input. I don’t run from controversy, because that’s where the energy is. What I like doing is plugging into that energy and figuring out how to connect different people’s messages.” Asking her audience to “talk to one another”, she said that the way to make connections, despite differences, is always to look at the Big Picture.

Secondly, McCarthy said she sees environmental issues in terms of people. For instance, she sees pollution abatement as improving health; and, just as importantly, she sees environmental progress as creating jobs. Her mantra is, "Don't talk to me about the environment unless you're willing to talk about jobs. And I want everyone who thinks jobs to think environment."

Because of her emphasis on people, McCarthy especially values her beginning environmental work at the local level. "CT and MA are similar in that they both have strong local government. Locally, everything's personal", she said. "Most good things happen there, because of the energy there. It's true the state can't just give money out to every locality, but we want to give it out where local governments get the Big Picture. Where we have buy-in: where we can align everyone's interests."

Acknowledging her department has gone through a period of scandal, budget cuts, and personnel losses, McCarthy reiterated a commitment to public service. "I'm a public servant, and I connected with Governor Rell on that. The greatest challenge now is to establish DEP as valuable and credible. People need to see that what we do is make life better."

When McCarthy finished, applause nearly lifted the Boathouse roof. Environmentalists in CT have had reason to be discouraged, of late, but, in McCarthy, they see a spark. They came away not only eager to work with her, but feeling as if she'd given them a new lease on life.