

HOT AIR

The Real DEP

By Barbara Currier Bell

For all the complaining lobbyists do about environmental regulations, you'd think the state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) had a lot of clout. But if it does, why are open spaces scarce, beaches trashed, the air fouled? And if it doesn't, someone may be bluffing—but who? Environmentalists could benefit by acting tougher than they are. On the other hand, anti-environmentalists could gain by acting weak. Will the real DEP stand up?

Many have tried to assess the DEP's budget for its strengths and weaknesses, and many have failed. The DEP isn't secretive: its budget is just extraordinarily fragmented. At last—success! The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ), an independent group that reports annually to the governor on the status of Connecticut's environment, had promised a good look at the real DEP, and on March 6 they delivered. The 26-page report is brief, but clear and straight-talking, with a few surprises.

The biggest surprise is that DEP “spends no more state tax dollars (adjusted for inflation) in a day of operation [now] than it did when it was created in 1972”, and has not added personnel since 1988. Not only that, but state taxes pay for only 26 percent of DEP's overall funding. The other three-quarters comes from the federal government, through block grants (about a quarter), and from the industries or individuals regulated, through permit fees (about a half). Thus, Connecticut residents pay only \$15 annually for services that are worth many times more. This sounds like good news until we consider that the small amount we do pay for DEP doesn't actually help protect the environment. Instead,

\$6.50 of the \$15 goes for maintaining state parks, while the remainder pays for managing other “captive” resources (dams, fisheries, forests) at a profit. None of the \$15 keeps basic resources (air, soil, water) safe from harm.

Another surprise is that the CEQ report doesn’t recommend business as usual. Instead, it states: “The demands of environmental protection are changing....Traditional regulatory programs will not get Connecticut to its goals.” The DEP and the legislature have already done the hard work to decide on management goals for the state’s natural resources in the future. Now the job is to stop the diversion of environmental protection dollars to parks that should be self-supporting, and to let routine federally-funded regulatory programs take care of themselves. Meanwhile, state tax dollars should be tied to achieving the broader management goals: CEQ lists specific benchmarks, target dates, bonding amounts, and the state share of annual capital investment needed to reach each goal.

CEQ has entitled its report “Dreams Deferred.” Although the real DEP apparently isn’t the heavyweight that citizens might have expected or wanted, it’s nevertheless an agency that has established where it wants to go; and if Governor Rell, Commissioner McCarthy and a strong environmental community have talked a good game, their success hasn’t been at bluffing, but at defining a dream worth making real.