

Lien Sale Ensures Bill Payers Won't Bear Burden

Most New Yorkers who flush their toilet or turn on their shower each morning never think twice about the effort required to bring clean water to their home each day. But these essential services don't come without a cost. Next fiscal year, DEP will collect close to \$3 billion in water and sewer fees from our 835,000 rate paying customers. These fees are used to fund the operation of New York's massive and complex water distribution and wastewater treatment systems. And while most property owners pay their charges on time, there remains a small but persistent segment of customers who can afford to pay but don't.

If DEP simply ignored these customers and let their debt build up, other customers would be forced to make up the difference. To ensure that all of our customers bear an equal financial responsibility, DEP uses a lien sale to collect money owed from delinquent



homeowners. A lien is a legal claim against real property for unpaid property taxes, water, sewer, or other property charges. When outstanding amounts have been delinquent for a legally-specified period of time, the city is allowed to sell the liens to a trust, which becomes the lien holder. The new lien holder then has the authority to collect the money that was previously owed to the city plus other fees and interest.

Overseen by the Department of Finance (DOF), the annual lien sale acts as an enforcement tool

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Spotlight on Safety

Driving Defensively Includes Parking Lots Too!

It may be hard to believe, but one of the more hazardous places to drive is in a parking lot—which may include rooftop parking. There are a variety of distractions that don't usually exist in standard driving: drivers are looking for places to park or trying to back out of parking spaces with limited visibility; pedestrians are heading towards or away from their own vehicles; there may be poor lighting and stray debris.

Most of us have more than just our driving skills on our mind

when we enter a parking lot. We are planning out our workday and this may involve thinking about equipment or PPE we need to bring into the field. Remaining fully alert and paying close attention to detail and to the drivers and pedestrians around you is crucial everyone's safety.

Safe driving in parking lots is doing everything you always do while driving, only with a little more attention and a lot less speed! Click here for the complete article [↗](#).

At DEP, everyone is responsible for safety. If you or anyone on your team is concerned about your working conditions, it's okay to ask your supervisor or your bureau's EHS liaison how they can help. If you've still got questions, you can call the EHS Employee Concerns Hotline. It's DEP's responsibility to acknowledge and fix unsafe situations, procedures, and practices. With your help, we'll not only get the job done, we'll make it safer for ourselves, our coworkers, our families, and our city.

CALL (800) 897-9677 OR SEND A MESSAGE THROUGH PIPELINE. HELP IS ON THE WAY. [↗](#)

Commissioner's Corner

Last week, I presented the Fiscal Year 2012 Preliminary Budget to the City Council Committee on Environmental Protection. Under the framework of our recently released strategic plan, I discussed DEP's goals to deliver high quality drinking water, make New York Harbor as clean as possible, improve air quality, and protect New Yorkers' quality of life—all at the lowest possible cost. Water rate increases—largely necessitated by unfunded state and federal mandates—have been unsustainably steep, and I committed that we're doing everything we can at DEP to keep future increases as low as possible.

Even with our 8% budget reduction last year and more cuts this year, running DEP is expensive: our expense budget is roughly \$987 million, which includes substantial recurring costs like \$140 million for property taxes on watershed lands that protect New York City's water supply. We spend nearly \$100 million on energy, most of it on the wastewater treatment process. And on the capital side, over the next five years we plan to invest \$6.6 billion to maintain and upgrade water and wastewater infrastructure. Some projects, like the NYC Green Infrastructure Plan that Mayor Bloomberg launched last year, can reduce our long-term capital costs by more than \$2 billion over the next 20 years; others, like fixing the leaks in the Delaware Aqueduct, will require significant new capital investment. And we're up to the challenge.

But long term relief from future water rate hikes is tied directly to regulatory reform. We have to eliminate unnecessary and burdensome regulations with little or no public health benefit, and the cycle of unfunded, unpredictable mandates in favor of a partnership-based approach with our state and federal regulators. President Obama's Executive Order 13563, which initiated a comprehensive review of federal rules and regulations, is a once-in-a-



generation opportunity to do that. On March 18, DEP sent suggestions on this initiative to EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson, and we hope the agency will use this opportunity to get rid of unnecessary regulations, fix rules that mandate bad investments, and change the way many rules are enforced. You can read DEP's entire submission here [↗](#).

Last week we began the 2011 round of customer outreach meetings with Council Member James Gennaro in Kew Gardens Hills, Queens. After a brief presentation on the water system and DEP's new strategic plan, I took great questions from the audience, and our dedicated BCS team was on hand to help customers with billing questions and other issues. We also did events last week with Council Member Lew Fidler in Canarsie, and Council Member James Vacca in the Bronx. This week we'll be in Staten Island and then next in Manhattan.

On a final note, one of the initiatives in our strategic plan (#2) commits DEP to be innovative by working with our partner cities and utilities to share technology and best practices. Last week, Deputy Commissioner James Roberts, Assistant Commissioner John Petito, and Chris Hawkins on the sustainability team went to South Bend, Indiana to check out CSOnet, a potentially groundbreaking technology that monitors and helps control combined sewer overflows. We'll see if this technology can be effective in New York City; you can read about their trip and the program here [↗](#).

Focus on the Field



One of the most challenging responsibilities that the Bureau of Customer Services faces each day is balancing the need to collect revenue with the need to provide protection and assistance to DEP's most vulnerable customers. As the recently appointed Director of Collections, **Patrick Hendricks** understands these competing priorities and works hard each day to ensure that our customers are treated fairly and are given the opportunity to pay off their water debt with the tools and programs that BCS has available. At the same time, Patrick knows from his years of experience as a supervisor in the Collections Unit that there are some customers that have the means to pay but simply refuse to do so unless faced with enforcement action.

To ensure that these customers pay their fair share, Patrick is responsible for managing and coordi-

inating the annual lien sale. In this role, Patrick analyzes and manages a list of all accounts eligible for the lien sale and reviews accounts that may be removed from the lien sale list due to certain statutory exemptions. Patrick is also responsible for coordinating regular community outreach meetings to inform customers about the lien sale and the many benefits that are available to financially vulnerable customers, including the Water Debt Assistance Program and other payment agreement plans. For Patrick, providing this type of personalized first-hand assistance to our customers is some of his most rewarding work at DEP. Patrick notes that "our job is not only to collect from our customers, but to connect to our customers as well."

Prior to working at DEP, Patrick lived in Georgetown, Guyana where he worked at the Caricom Secretariat headquarters. After moving to New York City, Patrick obtained a bachelor's degree from Baruch College and a master's degree in information systems from the New Jersey Institute of Technology. When not at work, Patrick enjoys spending time with his family and friends, especially his wife **Tricia** and his two children: eight year old **Christian**, and **Gabrielle**, who will turn four in April.

Blood Drive Results – Thank You!

DEP employees donated a total of 495 pints of blood during the March drive. Thanks to Director of Employee Benefits **Arlene Siegel-Fishman**, Supervisor of Workers' Compensation **Malini Strickland**, Human Resources Analyst **Danielle Cantwell**, the blood captains, the Facilities Management staff that made sure the rooms were cleaned and set up before and after the drive, and, most of all, the donors.

Event Calendar

March 30 – 31. DEP will be at **Buildings NY Show** (Booth #1151), where we will be providing information about a number of issues, including water conservation, and air and noise issues. For more information, please click here [🔗](#).

The Young Professionals Committee of the NYWEA Metropolitan Chapter will be participating in the annual **NYCARES "Hands On New York" Volunteer Day** on Saturday, April 16. Please click here [🔗](#) for more information.

Mayor's Office MillionTreesNYC Planting Event on Saturday, April 30 (Rain or Shine!) Please click here [🔗](#) to register. For more information, click here [🔗](#).

Press Box



"They're the patron saints of lost items - as long as the item was dropped down a sewer grate. The Department of Environmental Protection has a squad of city workers on call, ready to fish dropped valuables out of Gotham's catch basins....All it takes to summon these municipal Saint Anthonys is a phone call to 311." – New York Daily News story [🔗](#) on the work of the DEP catch basin cleaners, including featured DEP employee **Radhames Soto**, who are the rescuers of items lost in the city's catch basins

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by encouraging homeowners to pay off their outstanding municipal tax and water debt or risk having that debt sold as a lien. Each year, the Bureau of Customer Services (BCS) works in conjunction with the DOF to develop a list of properties that qualify for the lien sale. Notices are sent to each property owner on this list a full 90 days before the actual lien sale. This 90-day period gives our customers the time they need to either pay off their debt in full or enter into a payment agreement to pay off their debt gradually over time. The 90-day warning period is so effective that 87% of the properties that receive the notice are never sold in the lien sale, because the threat of a lien sale alone is enough to motivate them to pay off their debt in full or enter a payment agreement.

For customers who are in true financial distress, DEP provides a range of financial assistance, including multi-year payment agreements, and the Water Debt Assistance program [🔗](#). BCS also has a dedicated ombudsman who provides specialized assistance to customers subject to the lien sale pro-

cess. BCS Ombudsman **Patrick Giagnacova** says, "We strive to provide customers with personalized one-on-one service so that they can more easily understand the lien sale and the steps they need to take to remove their property from the lien sale list."

Since the City's lien sale authority was expanded in 2007 to include stand-alone water debt, the lien sale has generated \$285 million in total revenue for DEP. Without that revenue, water rates would have been increased by an additional 2.2% each year (for a total of \$51 per customer). That's a tremendous burden for conscientious, bill-paying customers to bear on behalf of those who can afford to pay but refuse to do so. And just four weeks ago, after extensive and thoughtful negotiations with the City Council, **Mayor Bloomberg** signed a new bill into law that expands DEP's lien sale authority through the end of 2014. This renewed enforcement authority will allow DEP to collect the money it's owed while continuing to keep water rate increases as low as possible.

Kudos Corner

Thanks to the quick response by BWSO staff members **Janet Morales**, **Rebon Brathwaite**, and **Mike Haynes**, a very appreciative citizen wrote the Commissioner, "I had the unfortunate incident of dropping my keys into a sewer catch basin. Gratefully my keys were retrieved. Due to the timely manner from all the above mentioned DEP employees...I felt compelled to bring this to your attention." This was a very happy conclusion to a very stressful situation. Good job all!

We welcome your feedback! To submit an announcement or suggestion, please email us at: newsletter@dep.nyc.gov. [🔗](#)