



Fiscal Woes May Sink Clearwater

By Roger Witherspoon

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Clearwater, the venerable environmental organization that was a driving force behind the passage of the 1972 Clean Water Act and the dominant force behind converting the Hudson River from an open sewer to a recreational and scenic attraction is in such dire fiscal straits that it may have to shut its doors permanently this month.

If the organization folds, the iconic Hudson River Sloop Clearwater, a replica of the tall masted sloops that carried commerce and residents up and down the river for over a century and were the floating lifeline for the budding river towns, (<http://www.panoramables.com/clearwater/>) may end up scrapped or sold to commercial interests.

The possible demise of Clearwater would culminate five years of declining economic fortunes and dwindling revenues stemming from misjudgments, bad luck, expensive but mandatory ageing and maintenance programs, and an unforeseen pandemic that killed the sloop's popular and financially solvent sailing season. This is the time of year the Clearwater would be carrying thousands of schoolchildren on educational daytrips that start when they line up and hoist the sails. But with schools closed, those funds earmarked by school systems up and down the Hudson for Clearwater's unique learning experiences will not be available, and the organization does not have any replacement income.

Two weeks ago Clearwater's executive director, Greg Williams, sent an email blast to affiliated Sloop Clubs and other supporters stating that the organization was in serious financial jeopardy. That plea, said Williams, produced a cash infusion of less than \$100,000, but allowed the organization to push back its "drop dead date" to May 1. In addition, after a three-day board of directors' meeting that concluded Saturday, April 11, it was decided to "furlough" seven of the 12 staff – thus paring the bi-monthly payroll in half – and drop the spring sailing season and the crews. Salaries of the remaining five staff will be cut 39%.

“The money that came in allowed us to pay the entire staff for all the work they have done through Friday,” said Williams, “And it allows continuing operations with the reduced staff through the end of the month. We believe that will give us time to benefit from government programs.

“But if we don’t raise funds through those programs or other means, we will be forced to cease operations by May 1. We will need to raise an average of \$30,000 each month in order to remain in operation. We do not have an endowment or a reserve to tap into.”

The fiscal package passed by Congress last month to aid businesses and employers affected by the economic shutdown caused by the Coronavirus may buy the organization some time.

“We completed our application for an SBA Economic Impact Disaster Loan,” said Williams. “Conceivably, that would allow us to hire back everyone who has been laid off. And we are applying for the Payroll Protection Program that was part of the coronavirus aid package. We hope those applications will be approved.”

But those payroll grants, approved this week, serve only to move the “Drop Dead Date” a little further down the May calendar since their only recurring major sources of revenue – the annual Hudson River Revival music fest and the Clearwater sails – are no longer possible. The loss of these two revenue generators goes to the heart of what Clearwater is.

In the 1960s the Hudson River, like most of the nation’s waterways, was an open sewer. The wide river was long viewed as a passageway for commerce, a free place to dump human and industrial waste, a convenient place to locate heavy industry and, along its banks, room to dump poor people with no political clout who wouldn’t complain about the foul-smelling water or industrial-strength polluted air.

Clearwater got its start in 1966 when Pete Seeger began holding impromptu concerts on the banks of the river to raise money to have a river sloop built. Seeger had been active in the civil rights movement and then the anti-Vietnam War movement but began to see the degradation of the environment as an all-encompassing cause. The sloop became emblematic of the need to clean up the nation’s waterways, an effort embodied in the passage of the 1972 Clean Water Act.

“Some people saw it as a step in a different direction,” said his daughter, Tinya Seeger. “He was criticized for leaving the movement and taking off and building a sailboat.

“But he wasn’t leaving the movement. He just saw the relevance of the environment to the world as a whole, and the need to keep it sustainable for all of us. I never thought the sole mission was just about cleaning up the water, but the Clearwater was part of the whole idea of community and the people living on the shores.

“The river towns were very segregated along the river, racially and economically segregated. When the river got cleaner and people started wanting to live along the river it would be a broader, healthier community. When I was younger, it was just black people living along the river and the trains, which were a way to travel if you didn’t have a car. The river was just a highway for commerce.



“But it started changing as people came down to the river and began to appreciate it more. Then urban renewal came and ripped apart whole neighborhoods. In promoting the Hudson, Clearwater could promote issues in other communities. It could be a platform for people to talk from and campaign from. It could be a place where we could learn about each other and, when there is a crisis, it wouldn’t matter if it’s in Beacon or in the prisons or on the Mexico border.”

And financing the boat, were the concerts that grew into the Great Hudson River Revival, held each Father’s Day Weekend in Croton Point Park that underwrote the construction of the 105-foot sloop that was launched May 17, 1969.

But music festivals – especially two-day extravaganzas with scores of performers drawing up to 20,000 visitors – are expensive to produce and dependent on the weather. The annual Revival cost about \$900,000 to produce, based on an anticipated audience of at least 10,000. The 2014 Revival, on a warm, sunny weekend, attracted 17,000 visitors and earned Clearwater a profit of \$200,000. But 2015 was rainy. The crowd dropped to less than 10,000 and the festival earned just \$35,000.

The 2019 Revival, said Williams, the executive director, “was not a financial success. We took a long time to decide to have a festival, and that meant all of our planning started late and had to be done quickly. We paid for the infrastructure to accommodate a large audience of about 10,000, and we got a modest audience of about 4,500.

“We didn’t have good weather and didn’t sell as many tickets, and at the end of the day we lost \$200,000.”

And then, there is the Sloop Clearwater.



Over the years, said Williams, who grew up in Croton, the Sloop has carried more than a half million school children on educational trips up and down the Hudson River, “including me.” The Sloop has on the water classes with curricula based on the aquatic environment, the land the Hudson flows through and the tributaries feeding it. In 2019 some 13,000 students participated in the floating classrooms under contract with various school systems.

But that revenue stream was abruptly interrupted when the coronavirus pandemic forced school systems to shut and social distancing made crowded sails impossible. And it couldn't have come at a worse time. For without massive repairs to the tall ship, the Coast Guard would not permit it to sail.

“When you build a ship,” Williams explained, “you build it in the most efficient order. But when you maintain it you need to partially dismantle it – including parts that are in perfectly good condition. Those two things together means the cost of keeping it up exceeds the cost of the original construction.

“We enjoyed a very good relationship with the Coast Guard. They determine whether the sloop is maintained well enough to safely take passengers in the river. Part of that relationship is working with them to estimate whether the hundreds of timbers in the hull and in the spars are strong enough to maintain the structural integrity of the sloop. That is not an exact science.”

Essentially that means carefully taking the 106-foot-long wooden boat apart and examining each piece.



“The work we planned to do through this coming winter we anticipated costing \$800,000,” continued Williams. “We have secured a grant over \$400,000 but it is a reimbursement grant and in order to spend it, we need to raise and spend money independently first. That \$800,000 without inflation adjustment was more than was spent on the original construction in ‘69.

“The Sloop hasn't been maintained consistently over its lifetime. Its maintenance has gone in fits and spurts. The work we intended to do will be the last major project in order to establish what we hope will be a routine maintenance baseline.”

In the absence of a massive influx of money, there is no obvious path forward for Clearwater. If so, that would end decades of coalition building aimed at energizing citizens and civic groups in efforts to tackle specific environmental problems facing the river.



Manna Jo Greene, an Ulster County Legislator and Environmental Action Director of Clearwater, organized a coalition of organizations in the early 2000s to push the US Environmental Protection Agency to order GE to dredge more than 4 million tons of PCBs from the upper Hudson River. The carcinogenic PCBs came from the GE plant near Troy.

Greene, a nurse by training, got her environmental education at Clearwater.

“I volunteered as a ‘litter picker’ at the festival,” she recalled, “and that led to my job as Ulster County Recycling Coordinator from 1990 – 2000. Toshi Seeger had the vision that people should be recycling, and had little stations at the festival with a flagpole and recycling sign on it. At each side you could put glass, metal, paper and plastic in separate containers. We had gloves on and went around picking up paper and keeping the park really, really clean. We reduced the volume of garbage at the festival by 30%”

“She showed that recycling worked, and that helped create the environment for recycling up and down New York State.”

For the last decade Clearwater, the environmental group Riverkeeper, and the state Attorney General’s office were the three entities challenging Entergy’s license renewal request for the Indian Point nuclear power plants. Indian Point 2 shut down April 30, and Indian Point 3 will shut down next year.

“We are now part of a national coalition of communities and organizations across the country where nuclear reactors have been decommissioned or are facing decommissioning in the not too distant future,” Greene said. “I coordinate biweekly of a national decommissioning working group. We have held regional forums educating the community and congressional groups.”

Clearwater is also coordinating the regional renewable energy plan for the Mid-Hudson region comprised of Westchester, Putnam, Rockland, Orange, Dutchess, Ulster, and Sullivan counties. Among other issues, she said, the regional group looks at where it is best to site large solar power installations “without compromising our farms and our forests and other ecologically sensitive areas.”

But without a massive influx of funds, those projects will cease and the historic sloop that has sailed the Hudson for the last half century could become nothing more than scrap lumber and a memory.