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**ENVIRONMENT / POLITICS**

## **From the editor: The odor from Oak Point Avenue**

**By Bernard L. Stein on April 6, 2010 at 3:03 pm**

It's not just sewage that stinks at the New York Organic Fertilizer Company plant on Oak Point Avenue. From the very beginning, the plant has been bathed in the stench of corruption.

Cronyism marked the Dinkins administration's award of the contract to NYOFCo in 1992. The deal smelled bad enough for the Manhattan DA to issue subpoenas to an interwoven web of high-ranking officials and prominent political insiders, many of whom have tight-rope-walked on the line between the unethical and the illegal for a generation.

Chief among them was First Deputy Mayor Norman Steisel, who was, to put it charitably, up to his ears in the stuff flushed from millions of toilets.

Before his friend the mayor named him to his post at City Hall, Steisel was part of a consulting firm that was NYOFCo's partner in seeking the \$468 million contract. He was also a senior vice president of the investment bank that financed NYOFCo.

As deputy mayor, Steisel's job included oversight of the city's negotiations with NYOFCo and its subcontractors. He said he had nothing to do with choosing them.

A year before the NYOFCo contract was signed, Steisel got into trouble for accepting the use of the Florida condo belonging to another friend and tennis partner—both of Steisel's and the mayor's—Sidney Davidoff. Davidoff was the number one lobbyist in the city, earning large fees to influence government decision-making. He represented the company that won a \$166 million contract to spread the fertilizer produced by NYOFCo on farmland in Texas.

Then there was Armand D'Amato, who brought Steisel into the venture originally, who negotiated NYOFCo's contract and lease, and who, a year later, would be convicted of mail fraud in a case involving peddling the influence of his ethically-challenged and much-investigated brother, Senator Alfonse D'Amato.

NYOFCo's parent company Synagro is no stranger to scandal. In 2004, the chair of Community Board 2 and the chair of the board's economic development committee resigned after Majora Carter of Sustainable South Bronx revealed that they had accepted an all-expenses-paid trip to Hawaii from Synagro to tell the Honolulu City Council how terrific the NYOFCo plant was.

Last year Synagro's Michigan vice president pleaded guilty to offering bribes, along with campaign contributions, free air travel and other goodies, to win political support for Synagro

projects worth \$1.2 billion. The president of the Detroit City Council, who cast the deciding vote to award a contract to Synagro, pleaded guilty to bribery conspiracy and resigned.

Elected officials and city commissioners come and go, but the city's permanent government of lawyers, financiers and fixers is forever. These power-brokers will never base decisions on Hunts Point residents' health, their right to enjoy their homes, or the claims of justice and equity. And in fact, City Hall didn't base its decision to drop NYOFCo on the terrible burden inflicted on the community for nearly 20 years; it based it on money, saying it would now be cheaper to dispose of the sludge in landfills.

The Department of Environmental Protection showed its continuing contempt for neighborhood concerns in the way it announced its decision to end the NYOFCo contract. Residents had to learn about it second-hand, from the commissioner's testimony at a city council committee's budget hearing.

The fight is far from over. NYOFCo has even arrogantly threatened to continue to pollute the air, saying the city's withdrawal will leave it short of funds to improve its equipment. So residents will have to continue to battle as they have done for 18 years—by keeping relentless pressure on the politicians and the regulators. Without it, they will never do the right thing.