



# UnderCurrents

editorundercurrents@primelink1.net

www.undercurrents.webs.com

News from the Grassroots

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## Oil Pipelines On Wheels

by Tracy Frisch

**While** environmental groups have made opposition to the Keystone XL pipeline in the Midwest, a cause célèbre over the past five years, rolling pipelines of oil have quietly been established in a lot of communities closer to home.

Across eastern New York and western New England, mile-long freight trains now carry a veritable ocean of highly flammable crude oil from the Bakken shale region of North Dakota through local towns and cities, as the fuel makes its way to refineries along the East Coast. A typical "unit train" of 100 tank cars carries about 3 million gallons of crude oil. Many of the trains – the number of which has increased dramatically in just the past two years – snake their way along the western shore of Lake Champlain, then through Fort Edward and Saratoga Springs, on their way south from Montreal. Others slam past Amtrak trains on the busy line from Buffalo to Albany.

Some oil trains continue south along the west shore of the Hudson River, en route to a refinery in New Jersey. Others roll east into New England – through Mechanicsville, Hoosick Falls, Pownal, Williamstown and North Adams – on their way to a refinery in New Brunswick.

Much of the oil-by-rail traffic in the region is bound for the Port of Albany, where local opponents have launched a campaign in recent months to demand tougher scrutiny of the trains' safety and to block further expansion of oil shipments and processing at the Hudson River port.

At rallies and public forums, the opponents carry signs with an incendiary slogan to match the trains' cargo: "Ban the bomb trains."

Although standard crude oil is heavy and not particularly flammable, crude from the Bakken shale region is much lighter and may contain gases, such as propane, that make it highly volatile. The explosive nature of the Bakken crude – and the risks of transporting it by rail – were revealed dramatically and tragically in July, when a runaway train careened into the town of Lac-Mégantic, Quebec, 20 miles from the Maine border. Some of the train's tank cars ruptured and exploded, setting off an inferno that killed 47 people and leveled much of the historic downtown in the community of 6,000. The blaze, which took firefighters more than 30 hours to contain, burned so hot that investigators believe the bodies of five missing people were volatilized.

Before the Lac-Mégantic disaster, most people were unaware of the sharp increase in crude-oil rail shipments in recent years. And since then, the railroad industry and its regulators in the United States and Canada have been slow to pursue changes that could make the trains safer. "It's shocking to me that we've had this big change in energy transportation in such a short time – basically without any public discussion until trains started blowing up and people dying," said Mollie Matteson, a senior scientist at the Center for Biological Diversity in Vermont. Her organization recently sued the U.S. Coast Guard and the Environmental Protection Agency over what it contends are inadequate oilspill response plans for the Hudson River and New York Harbor.

### New hub for oil: Albany

Beginning as a trickle in late 2011, the flow of oil-by-rail shipments through the region has transformed the

### In Albany ...

*Bomb Train on its way to meet a barge on the Hudson River*



sleepy inland Port of Albany into one of the most important North American crude-oil rail and shipping hubs. At the port, much of the crude is unloaded into storage tanks and then transferred to barges and ocean-going tanker ships. Critics say the cargo transfers add to the risk of a spill or explosion.

The two companies that ship crude oil through their terminals at the Albany port -- Global Partners of Waltham, Mass., and Buckeye Partners of Houston, Texas -- have state permits allowing them to handle up to 2.8 billion gallons (or about 67 million barrels) annually. Within the past 18 months, the state Department of Environmental Conservation allowed both companies to more than double the upper limit in their permits without requiring a full environmental impact statement or any public scrutiny. Instead, DEC staff relied on assurances from the companies that the expansion posed no added risk.

But a coalition of Albany-area residents and elected officials and state and national environmental groups is now pushing the DEC to rescind its approval of the new permit limits and undertake a full environmental review of that issue, as well as Global Partners' request to install several boilers that could be used to heat heavier forms of crude oil at its Albany terminal. In late March, the DEC informed Global Partners that it is reviewing the case and that it considers its finding that the project doesn't ...

... require a full review to be an "interim" determination. The department also asked the company for a host of additional information about its operations.

Opponents are concerned that if Global Partners' plans go forward, oil shipping through Albany could expand to include risks beyond those of the Bakken-crude trains because the heaters would allow the port to begin handling crude oil from the tar sands of western Canada – a source widely condemned as one of the world's dirtiest energy sources and one with the biggest climate-change footprint.

The Albany area already is on the receiving end of nearly one-fifth of all the crude oil being produced in the Bakken shale region. That's a large and growing figure: The Bakken oil boom has catapulted North Dakota to No. 2 in the nation, behind only Texas, in oil output. As of December, the Bakken region of North Dakota and eastern Montana was producing more than 1 million barrels of oil a day, or better than 10 percent of all domestic oil production, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration. (The Bakken oil deposits also extend north into the Canadian provinces of Saskatchewan and Manitoba.) (Editor's note: Estimates are that by 2020, production of Bakken crude will increase 70%, most of it traveling by rail.)

Given that there's only one north-south pipeline with limited capacity serving the Bakken area, three-quarters of the oil produced there is shipped out by rail. The crude oil is destined for refineries on the East and West coasts, where it's displacing more expensive foreign imports. (Since the oil crisis of the early 1970s, domestic oil producers have not been allowed to export, except to Canada.)

### Public safety at issue

A spike in accidents has accompanied the remarkable national increase of crude oil shipments by rail. In 2013, a record 1.15 million gallons of crude oil leaked and spilled from railroad tank cars in the United States, according to federal statistics. That's considerably more than the total spilled in the nearly 40 previous years since the federal government began collecting data.

The frequency of derailments has also picked up. An oil train derailed in November in western Alabama, setting off an explosion and fire and contaminating a wetlands area. And on December 30, a 106-car oil train collided with a derailed grain train near Casselton, North Dakota, and 18 tank cars exploded; the surrounding area was evacuated as the resulting fire burned for two days. Since December, CSX, one of two railroads that carry crude oil through Albany, has had four derailments involving oil trains in New York. Although none of these resulted in a spill or fire, critics say the incidents should serve as wake-up calls. (Editor's note: April 30, 2014, 13 cars carrying Bakken crude derailed in Lynchburg, Virginia, spilling oil and flames into the James River and forcing evacuation of the town. On May 11, 2014, at 4:30 am, several tank cars carrying Bakken crude derailed in Albany's Kenwood yard. No explosion or spill occurred, but the company was fined \$5,000, the highest fine available, for failing to report this hazardous incident within the required one hour. The derailment was reported at 9:30 am, five hours later.)

Tim Truscott, a retired anatomy instructor from a local medical college, was one of the first people in Albany to begin raising questions about the safety of crude-oil trains moving through the city – and to begin pressing for stronger safeguards.

As the trains approach the Port of Albany, they pass within 50 feet of a day care center and the Ezra Prentice Homes where 180 low-income families live. Long lines of tank cars can often be seen sitting parked along a rail line that runs down the median of Interstate 787 in downtown Albany as they wait to get access to the port.

But some state and local officials have been slow to acknowledge the potential hazards. To find out about the public safety risks, Truscott said he drew on the expertise of Fred Millar, a Virginia-based hazardous materials transportation safety consultant. In October, he said, Millar called Harry Merriman, the chairman of the

Albany County Local Emergency Planning Committee. Asked about the emergency plans for an oil train accident, Merriman indicated he was unaware of the trains' existence, Truscott said. Later, after Merriman's committee met with officials from Global Partners, he assured a Times Union reporter that the oil trains are "safer than your car in your driveway."

Last summer, Truscott found an early ally in Albany Common Council member Dominick Calsolaro. With Calsolaro bringing the issue to the attention of his fellow council members, by the end of last year the council had passed two resolutions of concern about oil trains. Truscott and other critics of the oil trains banded together in January to form People of Albany United for Safe Energy, or PAUSE, to slow down or stop the flow of oil through Albany. The group has pointed to accidents involving Bakken oil trains while also warning of the hazards that would set in motion if the port starts handling tar-sands crude. PAUSE, environmental organizations, citizens and elected officials from low-income and minority neighborhoods near the path of the trains demanded that the DEC require an environmental impact statement and an environmental justice outreach plan regarding crude-oil transportation through Albany.

**NEXT ISSUE:** Public outcry taken up by elected officials, where does responsibility lie, and will Alberta tar-sands oil be next?

This article was originally published in the April edition of the Hill Country Observer. Read the entire article here: <http://www.hillcountryobserver.com/2014/April2014news1.htm>. It is reprinted here in series by the kind permission of the author, Tracy Frisch.

### In Quebec ...



*In July of 2013 an oil train exploded in Lac-Mégantic, Quebec killing 47 people and consuming the town in a river of flames. Plattsburgh is marking this tragic event with a vigil on July 5th. Contact: editorundercurrents@primelink1.net*



*View of moving Bomb Train from a neighbor's backyard in Lake Forest Community*

# The Curse of Educational Reform

by Magarita Garcia-Notario



# Book Review:

## Why

do parents oppose the New York State exams? Have the standards been lowered to make it too easy for the kids? Doesn't everybody know that life is tough, and the sooner we get trained for hardship the better?

The civil disobedience movement across the U.S. triggered by those exams is not attacking teachers, or public schools, or trying to go easy on children. Parents realize that public schools and democracy are in jeopardy.

For-profit corporations are trying to take over public education. With the promise of high profits and the risks shifted to taxpayers, investors are happily lapping up the public dollars. Because space here limits the complete argument, just do your own research—then join millions of taxpayers in the fight to prevent the privatization of public education.

This crisis has a history: The 2008 financial collapse landed hard on state budgets. In New York, Governor Paterson compensated by robbing Peter to pay Paul. The schools were Peter. The program—Paul—is called the Gap Elimination Adjustment, and it has robbed the schools in Clinton, Essex, St. Lawrence, Warren, and Franklin counties of \$205 million since 2008. Public schools were already imperiled by the impossible demands of the federal program “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB), which required all children in the U.S. to be proficient in reading and math by 2014, or schools would lose funding. They were facing failure on two fronts: financial and administrative. Public schools needed help.

Along came “Race To The Top” (RTTT), which turned out to be a Trojan Horse. RTTT offered waivers from NCLB and money if schools would accept an untested, one-size-fits-all-states-and-children Common Core, and would link teacher evaluations to student test scores and accept more charter schools.

Charter schools are private schools sustained with public funds. Many of them are now for-profit, private schools that receive public financing, and the rest are run solely by for-profit corporations. Charter schools hire nonunion and uncertified teachers to reduce costs and increase profits to management and investors. Their incentive to those who teach there comes through as the most divisive and destructive tool for any work atmosphere: merit pay. Charter schools also can pick the students that they want to keep, so special-needs kids (who rarely make good grades in standardized tests) are excluded. Many inner-city public schools have been closed down and replaced by charter schools by mayors beholden to charter school money (Emanuel in Chicago and Bloomberg in NYC). The charters have not performed better, but there is no longer a public alternative.

Teachers are more demoralized than ever, and many are leaving the profession. They don't want to be told how to teach through scripted modules, and they feel unfairly evaluated by standardized tests results. Teachers with integrity don't want to “teach to the test,” and they know that each child is unique and learns differently.

Refusing the state exams this year is the loudest way parents have to complain about the shameful attack on public education. It is not ideological, since parents from all sides of the political spectrum are united by this. It is a movement crying out for the pain inflicted on our children, teachers, and communities. It is a movement that reclaims Federalism and the power of local school boards to decide what is best for their children. It is a movement that seeks to stop the defunding of our schools and the outrageous, unfunded mandates to pay for technology, new materials, and the testing required by Common Core.

Please dig into these claims yourself; I have only touched the surface. Our children, our communities, and our democracy are at stake.

## What Then Must We Do?: Straight Talk About the next American Revolution by Gar Alperovitz

Gar Alperovitz outlines in a “Note” at the beginning why this 205-page book is written in an “informal, conversational” style. First, he says, it is the easiest way to discuss “our crumbling American System.” Second, the “big issues” can't be addressed, except as “informed speculation.” And third, we all tend to “remember the future,” a phrase he quotes from historian Louis Namier. Most of us “unconsciously project forward assumptions about what is possible based on our experience of the past.”

In six very brief parts, Alperovitz outlines why our national problems are systemic rather than political, and what has been, and is being done, to “reconstruct” both old and new systems. One part – #3 – outlines the “checkerboard” of local and state attempts to develop change, and another – #4 – suggests that banking and health care are current hot spots of change.

Writing more than a year ago Alperovitz pointed out in Part 5 that there is no “clear and explicit vision of where we want to go and no commonly accepted strategy.” He notes, for example, that most of his fellow economists, still view debatable questions of “efficiency” as between two companies, rather than between an enterprise and society as a whole.

Nonetheless, according to Alperovitz there are today at least four institutional processes creating various forms of important change: 1) traditional cooperatives, 2) worker-owned firms,

3) land trusts, and 4) a category the author calls “social enterprises.” All of these are creating new institutions that are not “corporate dominated.”

Though Alperovitz, currently a professor of political economy at the University of Maryland, is more cautious than Paul Krugman and other current political commentators, his experience as a congressional legislative director and as a special assistant at the State Department give his views substance and weight. The thirty-five pages of notes at the end of the book testify eloquently to his decades-long concerns.

Alperovitz ends with three “critical matters” which deserve to be quoted here in detail:

- 1) “American policy in its largest dimensions cannot be separated from the ways in which different corporate and other institutions help shape the fundamentals of policy.”
- 2) “The history of American policy ... cannot be understood without considering the systemic sources of expansionism that have set the terms of reference ...for more than a century.”
- 3) “American policy cannot be understood without considering the nature of American culture, and the weakness of its capacity to generate a larger sense of commonality and community.”

This is an important book whose arguments this reviewer believes will be relevant for years, possibly a decade or more. Readers are urged to find a copy, read it, and reflect on its several messages.



## Part 2 When Trade Turns Toxic

by Mary-Alice Shemo



## In

the previous edition of this community newspaper, readers were promised more about the terms of the 2 chapters of the secretive Trans-Pacific Partnership that have been leaked through Wikileaks. There are 29 chapters in TPP, only 5 (five!) of which are about trade as commonly understood. The others have titles like “government procurement”, “financial services”, “telecommunication”, etc. Issues related to product safety, toxics and labeling come under “technical barriers”. To call this sprawling document a “trade agreement” is misleading.

Wikileaks' own analysis of the environmental chapter was titled “Sacrificing the Environment For Corporate Profits”. It uses words like “consider” and “encourage” when it talks about environmental protection. There are no mechanisms for enforcing standards of environmental protection. In one place, however, it's clearly spelled out: local environmental laws are not allowed to obstruct trade or investment between the countries that sign it. Such laws must “avoid the creation of unnecessary barriers to trade.”

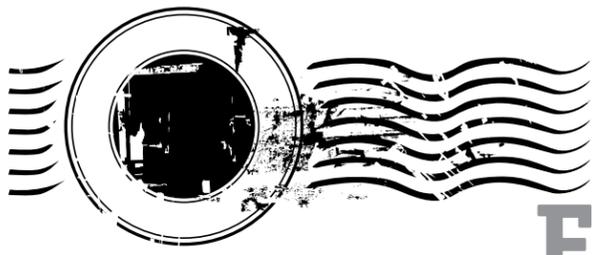
In this chapter and throughout the agreement, the phrase “barriers to trade” is a buzzword for anything that detracts from “expected future profits”. That includes food and product safety, labeling requirements, air and water quality, open internet access, and safe working conditions.

The leaked “Intellectual Property” chapter doesn't just include things that would be covered by copyrights like manuscripts or music. It has wideranging effects on medicines, agricultural chemicals, publishers, services, the internet, biological patents, and civil liberties. Measures national or local governments take

to protect public health or nutrition must be consistent with the provisions of this document. For example, many people are taking medicines they really need, but couldn't afford if not for generics. Various provisions of the Intellectual Property chapter would delay generics from coming on the market. Makers of generics would be barred from using existing safety and efficacy data for at least 5 years from the date of marketing approval. That means small, low-budget companies would have to do all the research already done all over again. Never mind that the original research was often done on government grants, which would not be forthcoming again. Pharmaceutical companies would also be able to extend their patents almost indefinitely, if the formulation is changed slightly, if the drug is put to a new use, etc. Between the two provisions, generics would become rare indeed, if not nonexistent.

The worst feature of all is the approach to “investor-state dispute resolution”. Corporations are already under previous free trade agreements, able to bring suit against governments if the corporation thinks that some law or policy of that entity has reduced its profits. These suits are heard in trade tribunals, not in ordinary courts, by judges on assignment from their regular jobs as corporate lawyers. Since they are outside any other system of jurisprudence, their decisions cannot be appealed. Some of the judgements already handed down in these tribunals have been huge.

There is no room in the TPP for anyone or anything but the sterile, lifeless number at the bottom line. Anyone who might have lifted his or her eyes from it and noticed the possibility of harm or unintended consequences has been excluded from the negotiations. Maximization of immediate profit for large multinational corporations rules supreme. Is this the world we want?



# To The Editor

Folks often say it was World War II that ended the Great Depression.

Hogwash! It wasn't war that did the trick, it was a renewed sense of national purpose. People were willing to work together. Banks released their stranglehold on the money supply – stopped sitting on it and began lending it so employers could hire employees and buy raw materials. Government went into debt to make sure the nation could manufacture and do *what was necessary*, it didn't have to be weapons.

Today there's an equivalent challenge that needs the same strategic planning and same wholehearted, collaborative response, which would have the same effect on both the economy and the people's morale. It's called climate change.

Where should the effort be focused? Changes in individual lifestyles, reduced consumption? More responsible behavior by mega-corporations? Changes in government policies?

This is one place where "all of the above" is actually appropriate.

Yours truly,

*Lavinia Alice Waldron*

Hey Everyone,

I hadn't gotten a chance to look at UnderCurrents' first issue. It looks awesome!

Also I didn't know there were plans of putting it online. That was definitely a nice surprise! It will be a great way of reaching more people, especially friends...plus in an environmentally friendly way!

Great work everybody!

*Adrian Arrivillaga*  
via Email

[www.undercurrents.webs.com](http://www.undercurrents.webs.com)

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Life is what happens while you are  
trying to figure it out. – *A Friend*

If money is speech, does that  
mean speech is no longer free?

– *Anonymous*

When exposing a crime is treated  
as committing a crime, you are  
ruled by criminals. – *A Patriot*

**In** our previous issue, we established that "Plattsburghians" must consume fluoride in their tap water unless they take expensive steps to avoid it. Fluoride's virulent toxicity was also considered.

So, the public water supply is contaminated with a known toxin. How did we come to be in a situation where a primary component of insecticides, pesticides and sarin gas is deliberately added to our drinking water by the very officials who are charged with public safety?

Very briefly, fluorides are a toxic by-product of aluminum production, and at the end of WWII, industry leader Alcoa engaged Edward Bernays, the leading propagandist of his time, to devise a campaign to convince the public of fluoride's safety and dental benefit, thus turning a costly liability into a marketable commodity. Other interests were involved, such as the fertilizer industry and, of course, the U.S. Government. The fluoridation story is fascinating and convoluted, but space here limits the details.

The fluoride compounds added to our water, silicofluorides, far from being pristine pharmaceutical products, are unpurified industrial byproducts, often scrubbed from the smokestacks of phosphate (fertilizer) plants, containing significant traces of arsenic and other impurities. It is even common that silicofluoride is imported from Chinese industry to be used in American drinking water! Such statements seem incredible, but they can be confirmed by a simple internet search, especially at [www.fluoridealert.org](http://www.fluoridealert.org), or by consulting "The Fluoride Deception" by investigative journalist Christopher Bryson.

A survey by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2010 found that for the preceding 30 years tooth decay rates declined just as rapidly in non-fluoridated western countries as they did in fluoridated western countries. The critical factor was improved dental care, rather than fluoride. Fluoride can cause a mottling of the teeth, called "dental fluorosis", which, aside from being



# Rethinking Water Fluoridation

by Gerald Carpenter

unsightly, is an early indicator of systemic fluoride poisoning, suggesting that similar concentrations are present in the bones and elsewhere.

Fluoride is (nominally and officially) a medication added to the water, but there is no control of dosage, since consumers may drink eight or more glasses daily. There is also no selection of consumers, and people with kidney impairment and infants, two groups especially susceptible to fluoride poisoning, may also drink from the fluoridated supply. In 2006 the American Dental Association advised that infant formulas be mixed using *only* fluoride-free water! Makers of fluoridated toothpaste are required to include a seriously scary poison warning on the label. (Please read your toothpaste tube!)

The controversy over fluoridation can become strangely heated, though I fail to understand why proponents of fluoride are so adamantly entrenched in their increasingly untenable position.

However, adherents of both camps would agree that any possible benefit is best obtained by topical application, as opposed to the current systemic ingestion method. Topical application is readily available via fluoridated toothpaste for those who wish to be fluoridated. If there is even a *slim* chance of causing harm by fluoridating water, wouldn't it be prudent to decrease that chance to zero by ceasing mass fluoridation?

So—we could have a quadruple-Win situation: 1) Unfluoridated water for those who don't want fluoride, 2) Fluoridated toothpaste (topical) for those who do want fluoride, 3) Zero chance of causing harm, and 4) the city saves \$10K or so annually by eliminating fluoride expense. The controversy? Leave it to the researchers. If the contaminant is removed, the debate becomes academic. This plan seems an elegant and sensible solution which eliminates a tiring,

contentious, passionate debate. Everyone gets what they want, and the Mayor can cut the budget. Why pay for unnecessary (toxic) chemicals?

## They Put What Where?

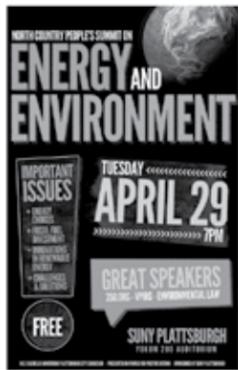
*An occasional column...*

As if plastics haven't become ubiquitous enough... Where's the very last place you'd expect to find plastic? No, not exactly – try again ... How about in your gums? Yep, that's right. Apparently, Procter and Gamble decided to put pretty little blue microbeads of plastic in some of its Crest toothpastes to add a little sparkle. Dental hygienists are now dislodging them from their patients' gums. That's what my dental hygienist just told me. Those pretty blue sparkles are Polyethylene. No joke. You won't find the ingredients on the toothpaste label, but it is available online, and one of the inactive ingredients is listed as polyethylene, or PET. (Citation: <http://dailymed.nlm.nih.gov/dailymed/lookup.cfm?setid=fbe1298d-77b1-4866-9883-5d744b184042>). That's the stuff in #1 plastics (PET). We're not supposed to reuse #1 plastic containers, because PET breaks down over time and apparently releases the toxin DEHA (a "plasticizer" - di(2-ethylhexyl) adipate). (Citation: <http://www.medicinenet.com/plastic/page2.htm>) Yet it just sits there in our gums for eons. They put #1 plastic in our gums? Are they kidding? To read more from the hygienists' point of view: <http://www.dentalbuzz.com/2014/03/04/crest-imbeds-plastic-in-our-gums/>

# In Local News

by Mary-Alice Shemo

## Energy & Environment Summit Just the Beginning



From her window at Lake Forest Senior Retirement Community, just 200 feet from the tracks, Betty Gregory watched the long trains rumbling by and counted the oil cars. Then she came to a People For Positive Action (PfPA) meeting in the library of the building and voiced her concerns.

Another member, Fred Balzac, had already been sharing concerns about the Vermont-Ticonderoga pipeline. Rupture of a pipeline passing under Lake Champlain could devastate the entire region's water.

Little information was available to the public on either topic. So PfPA decided to organize a community forum on the subject. It began by reaching out to various organizations that focus on these and related issues.

"The project took on a life of its own," several members of PfPA agreed later. It grew into the "North Country People's Summit on Energy and Environment", held April 29 in Yokum 200 on the SUNY Plattsburgh campus.

The program included Emily Reynolds of Rising Tide VT, who spoke about the Vermont-Ticonderoga pipeline; Sandy Steubing of People of Albany United for Safe Energy (PAUSE) who spoke about the "bomb trains"; and Julia Michele of VPIRG who spoke about energy choices. J.T. Lukens of 350.org spoke about divestment from fossil fuels, and Plattsburgh's own long-time activist Tim Palmer, a graduate student in

Environmental Law & Policy at Vermont Law School, wrapped it all up and shared some ways people are taking action.

City Councillor Rachelle Armstrong chaired the event. Curt Gervich of the Environmental Studies department at SUNY was the faculty sponsor. (See Citizen's Climate Lobby, <http://citizensclimatelobby.org>, for more on how to get involved.)

The overarching theme of the event was the urgent necessity for switching to renewables at a much faster pace than has happened until now. Neither the pipelines, nor the the explosive trains, nor climate change can be successfully dealt with until renewable energy sources replace fossil fuels in serving our energy needs and until energy efficiency is fully deployed.

The day after the Energy Summit, a training session on activism and nonviolent direct action was conducted by the team from PAUSE, using their experiences opposing the "bomb trains" as examples. PAUSE organizer Susan Weber took the lead.

By chance, it was the very next day that one of the trains derailed and exploded in Lynchburg, VA. That, plus the summit, stimulated the Plattsburgh Common Council to take up the subject of the trains at its regular meeting the following day. Director of Emergency Services Eric Day was present to answer questions.

The Summit was a good start, but much remains to be done. Groups need to form to explore specific relevant topics or avenues for action, gather information, and plan responses.

For example, a group could look into the obstacles that have been slowing the growth of renewables, some of them deliberately placed. What can be done to take those barriers down? Energy is forming around uniting communities along the rail line in opposition to the "bomb trains". A group could work at town/campus divestment and reinvestment.

The creative folks in the North Country can surely think of other ways to get involved, as well. What will you do?

Some may feel that speaking out is "too political", but silence is every bit as political because it allows

destructive forces to operate unopposed. Then too, speaking out is how democracy works.

Comments are welcome at [editorundercurrents@primelink1.net](mailto:editorundercurrents@primelink1.net)

## UnderCurrents' PEOPLE AND POLICIES

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# Politics, North Country Style

by Bill Cowan

(The following is Part 2 of an article which appeared under the same name in the first issue.)

## Sometime

before mid-November, 2013 elections, Clinton County Legislator Mark Dame, a Republican, apparently filed a complaint with the Plattsburgh police. And apparently he charged violation of NY Election Law, because ten days after the general election, one Working Families Party (WFP) worker was met at her door at 7:00 a.m. by a police detail, told to get dressed, and accompany them to the Police Station for questioning. She refused, and shut the door.

City Mayoral Candidate, Democrat Mark Tiffer, was met at his door at about 8:00 a.m. on the same day by a police detail and taken to Police Headquarters for about an hour of questioning. He reported later that adjacent cubicles were also filled with people talking about absentee ballots.

Bill Cowan, a WPF enrollee who had worked on the absentee ballot initiative, was also greeted at his door mid-morning on that day by Detective Edward S. Smith and an unnamed companion detective, whose role was apparently to act as a witness. Cowan invited the two detectives in and settled them around the dining room table. Then he pulled out a portable tape recorder, turned it on, and asked for their questions. Their questions and his answers from that 15-minute interview are all on tape.

Cowan repeatedly asked Detective Smith who had initiated the interrogation. Smith refused to answer until the end; then, when Cowan asked one last time as they were leaving, Smith handed Cowan his card after writing the name of his superior, Lieutenant Rascoe, and the Police Dispatch phone number, (518) 563-3411, on the card. "Call him," Smith said. Twenty minutes later Cowan tried, leaving his own phone number and a request for a return call.

Lt. Rascoe never returned the call.

Finally, one other matter deserves mention, if only to show the extent to which Republican officialdom may have been involved in this affair. A number of public housing residents reported that shortly before the election they had found a "Notice to PHA Residents" on their doors. Written on Plattsburgh Housing Authority letterhead, but unsigned, the message said: "It is our understanding that several residents may have inadvertently signed absentee ballots ... Please be advised that there are specific conditions that an individual must meet to vote by absentee ballot."

Then the notice stated: "The Plattsburgh Housing Authority community can be vulnerable to individuals, groups or organizations looking to exploit our community. The housing community consists of a large number of people living in fairly close proximity which potentially leads to certain individuals and/or groups taking advantage of our population."

Finally, it said: "Please be cautious anytime a non-Plattsburgh Housing Authority employee comes to your residence, especially if they ask for your signature or a payment of any type. No Plattsburgh Housing Authority will ever ask for a payment at your door."

The Plattsburgh Housing Authority, of course, like the City police, was under then Republican Mayor Kasprzak's authority. It was later confirmed that the same message was carried verbatim on the PHA website.

All of the foregoing adds up to some serious questions that should concern local citizens. The following are only the most obvious. We hope you—our fellow citizens—will explore their meaning and take steps to exercise your rights of citizenship. If you don't become involved, if you don't question, if you don't exercise your rights, this democracy won't survive.

Questions for reflection:

1) Assuming that there were election law violations, are those violations a matter for police investigation?

2) What constitutes harassment and intimidation?—specifically, are the Democratic and WFP efforts to register new voters and provide absentee ballots harassment or intimidation? Can the Republican invocation of police power on the doorstep be considered harassment or intimidation? Where do you draw the line between legitimate and illegitimate political campaign activity?

3) What should concerned citizens do about these and related questions of what appears to be attempted voter suppression?

We don't know who, or how many other area residents, may have been interrogated by the local police. But if you—a local voter—received similar treatment, you might want to tell us about it.

## In a Nutshell ...



*pithy poems, prose, politics and prayers*

"As activists, we set out to  
SAVE THE WORLD!  
And find that task a little daunting..."

Perhaps it's time to change and say,  
As activists, we go out to  
SERVE THE WORLD!"

Submitted by your correspondent,

*Anne* (would you like a little cream and sugar  
with that?) **Mousse**

Quote overheard in the rafters of the  
community barn dance, from a lady dancing  
by a little left of center.