

The State of the Association

By Ellen Gulbinsky

“Slow and steady wins the race.”

As the year moves toward an end it is important to take stock of our accomplishments together as an association. Often those accomplishments are quietly accomplished so as not to bring on the wrath or embarrassment of legislators or public agency officials. Dedicated knowledgeable members spend time problem solving issues and discussing them with agency staff. We should not identify them and their specific tasks because that would be counter productive. I will just say a general thank you and those active members know who they are.

We started off the year with Commissioner Lisa Jackson departing NJDEP and making the important decision to allow authorities to enter into **demand response** contracts with power providers. This option is an important tool in holding power expenses down. The stimulus funds brought about the ability of authorities to have energy audits. The audits directed the managers to investigate options for reducing consumption or finding ways to flat line energy expenses and perhaps even create some revenue from wind or solar or upgrades to processes.

AEA held our first hands on **workshop regarding solar**. Members brought site plans and energy consumption data from their facilities and were able to talk with BPU staff and the staff at Atlantic County Utilities Authority who have already been through the learning curve. Katie Vesey and associates were there to answer questions and direct members to resources. All who attended said the 6 hour event saved them weeks of calls and effort to get their projects ready. The association hopes to have more of these timesaving events.

On the permitting front AEA worked to get **sound science** used by regulatory agencies with regard to nutrient permit limits. The recently proposed Surface Water Quality regulations incorporated a much better nutrient policy than the state used in the past.

In the legislature, AEA is still watching the mandatory **QPA bill** which is on the Governor's desk but has not been signed; the **water tax bills** which are pending but awaiting the outcome of the public question on the ballot; the **alternate bids bill A3698** which prescribes how you can bid for projects with alternate segments; the **mandatory fluoridation bill** which seems to have quieted down and many others that affect authority management practices.

Monitoring and screening proposed legislation is a full time job and actively voicing the opinion of the members is extremely important. The tag team work of the AEA Legislative Committee, staff and Dave Smith of Princeton Public Affairs Group continue to serve the association well. The recently established VoterVoice process which allows members to easily contact their legislators in less than five minutes has helped get the authority message out. The water authorities also used a VoterVoice contact web to allow their customers to contact state legislators and oppose the idea of using a water tax for funding open space. The association believes that water tax dollars should be used for water infrastructure to address the \$21 billion water and wastewater need of NJ.

Challenges before us

The Robert's bill continues to haunt the sustainability of authorities and the infrastructure. More members report that municipal governments have requested authority unreserved retained earning. These funds should be earmarked for the \$21 billion infrastructure need of NJ. The NJ Clean Water Council agrees with AEA that our financing model of including a portion of the

water and sewer rate toward renewal and replacement of the system is necessary and important to the future sustainability of the NJ economy and environmental protection. Yet, the recession has created short term thinkers who want to liquidate all dollars now for budget shortfalls.

The authority challenge is to stand up to the short sighted thinkers and continue to find ways to reduce costs and manage more efficiently. AEA dedicates our conference programming to these types of best management practices.

The authority management system which focuses the financial resources from the utility on the operation and maintenance of the utility is a far superior management model than those local governments that use financial practices which move dollars around to cover line item shortfalls in other agencies unrelated to the utility.

The items above demonstrate a few ways that AEA addresses the fifteen objectives of the association.

On a day to day basis, the staff screen state information and gather the most relevant items into E-newsletters that Executive Directors can distribute among their staff. The various technical committees **review countless rule proposals, reports,** and materials and **take appropriate action on behalf of all the members.**

These efforts **save business managers time.** Managers know that when AEA sends the information, it affects authorities and it needs to be read. The AEA staff does its best to send specific information to the appropriate members and does not package everything for everybody.

Associate members also receive E-newsletters with information that affects their clients. Keeping those who support AEA up on the trends is important to the association. This is why members need to encourage their service providers to join AEA. The association will make them better at serving you. We also need the input and perspective of professionals to guide the decisions of the association. For this reason, ***the association is having a membership contest to encourage regular members to get their consultants and vendors to join. For every application that comes in with an authority's name on it, the dues of that authority will be reduced by \$100. So, please save some money and enrich your association with more professionals.***

Under austere budget circumstances, some authorities have decided to restrict and reduce their attendance at educational conferences. While it seems to be "politically correct," it is also counter productive. You need to get away from your desk and hear what others are thinking and doing even more so when times are tough. I don't know why the press assumes that conferencing implies carousing, but do not let them make you short sighted. The energy presentations that AEA has been bringing members have had real bottom line results. With your advice on topics, the association will do more of this.

And most importantly, I hope you will continue your investment in your association; the only association for authorities. A number of members have become municipal utilities and most have remained in membership. Next year could be even more difficult than this one. We truly need to hold together.

Stay with us and ask your vendors and consultants to join AEA.

AEA's Objectives for 2009 & 10

1. Coordinate association constituent groups with the main stream issues of the association.
2. Establish an association constituency group to link the interests of specific member groups.
3. Delegate specific directors or volunteers to serve as liaisons to affiliate groups and state advisory committees who will report the issues of importance in those meetings.
4. Identify and reward forward thinking management, excellence and extraordinary effort among members.
5. Create linkage between committees, directors and members.
6. Encourage competitive thinking and management excellence at authorities and develop a plan for several years
7. Identify regulatory and legislative objectives annually
8. Encourage an additional 10% of executive directors to become actively involved in AEA .
9. Coordinate the long and short range planning using continuous methods of communication with members.
10. Implement the long and short range plans throughout the association budget
11. Focus effort on improving the authority budget process and using financial data to improve the management of authorities.
12. Emphasize the role of IT in BMPs and cost savings to public managers.
13. Continue the associations' relationship with NJDEP.
14. Develop a NJ based education program for authority managers.
15. Encourage DEP to embrace a peer review process before writing new rules.