

CREATIVE COMMUNITY THINKING

ROSENTHAL'S PASSION FOR OUTREACH HAS BROUGHT THE BOARD TO NEW LEVELS

By Lydie Raschka

November 21, 2008

COMMUNITY BUILDERS

Helen Rosenthal says her mission has been to put the “community” back in the community board. It was community outreach that made her former job, overseeing health care budgets under Mayors Koch, Dinkins and Guiliani, come alive.

“What made it real was going to individual hospitals,” she said, “seeing their working conditions and asking, ‘What would the impact be?’ ”

In her two years as chair of Community Board 7, Rosenthal has acted on her passion for outreach, deftly connecting people and groups to involve them in a process of creative problem solving. She started with the board’s website, adding a Google translator so it could be read in Spanish or English. She poses a “Question of the Week” to get people talking about quality of life issues. She also posted a “Crane Watch” in response to a heightened concern for the risks involved in the use of large cranes on construction sites throughout the neighborhood. And after analyzing the impact of street fairs, she prominently posted the revenue earned by nonprofits in a scrolling box on the site called “Priority Issues.”

“Love ‘em or hate ‘em, street fairs bring in revenue for not-for-profits in our community,” she said.

Furthering this connection, she and street fair producer Mort Berkowitz made nearly 20 free tables available to neighborhood nonprofits at a recent fair on Broadway, giving these groups public exposure and a chance to get acquainted with each other.

A new initiative with Marjorie Cohen, executive director of the West Side Crime Prevention Program, will invite all neighborhood nonprofits to a round table forum. Rosenthal would also like the community board to be “less reactive, more proactive” on affordable housing, which she said is threatened.



Helen Rosenthal has started novel initiatives like a “Green Committee” and a “Crane Watch” on the board’s website. Photo By: Andrew Schwartz

“There are only three remaining Mitchell-Lama units left on the Upper West Side,” she said.

One of those, Trinity House, on West 92nd Street, was built as part of the government-subsidized Mitchell-Lama affordable housing program in 1968. Now that the 40-year mandatory preservation period has lapsed, the owner, Trinity School, is looking to sell the 200-unit building to a developer.

“She has really been a leader in helping the tenants maintain their housing,” said Barbara Adler, executive director of Columbus Avenue BID.

Rosenthal’s “Green Committee,” a novel community board innovation, brings often-contentious groups to the table to find solutions for enhancing the quality of city life.

“The divisions that often occur on community boards, so far, she’s avoided that,” said Berkowitz. “I don’t think the woman has a negative bone in her body.”

Yoga, reading and biking are a few activities that restore Rosenthal, as well as time spent with her husband and her two daughters, ages 12 and 15.

“With the community board, and life in general, it’s a process,” she said. Her goal is to bring people into that process.