

AROUND TOWN

All washed up?

As Earth Day nears, the city reviews its liquid assets By **Keith Mulvihill**



HIGH RES After a year of drought, the New York reservoirs, including the Ashokan Reservoir in the Catskills (pictured), are brimming over.

Environmentalists and scientists generally agree that the world is facing a water crisis. "When the world population tripled during the 20th century, the consumption of water increased sixfold," says Marcia Brewster, senior economic affairs officer at the United Nations. As a result, a predicted two thirds of the world's population will be facing some sort of water shortage by 2025. In an effort to raise awareness, the U.N. named 2003 the International Year of Freshwater, and events for Earth Day, Tuesday 22, are echoing the theme (see "The green scene," page 60).

Here in NYC, water scarcity isn't an unfamiliar problem—11 out of the last 40 years have seen droughts. But that's only one of the challenges facing the New York City Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), which oversees our water-supply system. Issues of conservation, contamination and the upkeep of our aging network are equally important.

"Essentially, New York City has a miraculous but very fragile water-supply system," says Eric Goldstein, a senior attorney at the Natural Resources Defense Council, a national environmental watchdog group. "We have a total of 19 upstate reservoirs that supply water to 9 million people." During last year's drought, those reservoirs were dangerously low at 57.5 percent capacity. However, thanks to rain and

snowstorms pummeling the city regularly this winter (and spring), New York City's cup runneth over: As of last month, the water reserve was at 101.1 percent.

Although Mother Nature has provided this time around, the DEP is focusing on how to conserve the H₂O we have. Water consumption peaked in 1991, when New Yorkers were using about 1.5 billion gallons every day—roughly 204 gallons per person. Since then, city laws, such as the requirement of low-flow

"New York has a miraculous but fragile water-supply system," says activist Eric Goldstein.

toilets and showerheads, have saved more than 300 million gallons a day, according to DEP Commissioner Christopher Ward.

One challenge to keeping the coffers full is that New York's water-supply system is old and leaky. The largest fissure in the system is in the Delaware aqueduct, which spews up to 39 million gallons of water a day. Commissioner Ward promises that his department's \$16 billion ten-year capital plan will fund the renovation of the aging facilities, leaks and all. This money will come primarily from water and sewer revenues and so is not subjected to budgetary cuts. But prior to the 1980s, this income was often allocated to

other agencies, stalling the DEP's needed improvements. For example, the city has two water tunnels connecting reservoirs to local mains, and at 86 and 67 years old, they are both in need of repair. The tunnels can be drained for renovation only upon completion of the long-awaited Tunnel No. 3—started in 1972, and projected to be finished in 2008.

But according to Goldstein, the most serious long-term problem for the water supply is development, which has been heaviest in the Croton system's Putnam and Westchester counties. Sewage-treatment plants inevitably pop up as suburbs grow, and the treated waste water they discharge (purified of only 85 percent of its contaminants) eventually finds its way into the reservoirs. "Because the watershed is so huge and so immense, it has been able to absorb some small level of contamination [and the city does add chlorine to kill microbes]," Goldstein explains. "But there is a tipping point, and we are getting pretty close to that."

In fact, the tipping point of the Croton watershed is near enough that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, which regulates the quality of drinking water, has required NYC and Westchester to erect a filtration system, insuring the continued quality of this water, which is supplied directly to areas in Manhattan and the Bronx. But the facility isn't expected until 2010, and at the moment, Bronx and Westchester are in a fierce NIMBY battle over which lucky county gets to host the site.

Thanks to slower development, the Delaware and Catskill systems are in much better shape, for now. By purchasing land around the watersheds to prevent commercial real-estate use, bringing septic systems in the regions up to current regulations and supplying money to modernize sewage-treatment plants, the DEP hopes to stave off filtration requirements (thus saving itself an estimated \$6 billion dollars). Confident of his agency's work, Ward says, "We can deal with infrastructure problems and watershed-management issues over time, but we also need everybody in the city to always be aware of the preciousness of water." ■

Listings

IF YOU WANT TO BE LISTED

Submit information by mail, e-mail (aroundtown@timeoutny.com) or fax (212-673-8382) to **Billie Cohen**. Include details of event, dates, times, address of venue with cross streets, nearest subways, telephone number and admission price, if any. **Deadline is 6pm on Monday, ten days before publication date.** Incomplete submissions will not be included, and listings information will not be accepted over the phone.

★=Recommended

Thursday 17

Urban affairs

America in a Time of Crisis

All Souls Church, 1157 Lexington Ave at 80th St (212-535-5530). Subway: 6 to 77th St. 6:30pm; lecture free, dinner \$15. Amnesty International USA executive director William Schulz, Georgetown University law professor Father Robert Drinan and All Souls senior minister Forrest Church discuss human-rights issues and—what else?—the war in Iraq. A Q&A session and optional dinner follow the talk.

Dance for the Cure

Roxy, 515 W 18th Street between Tenth and Eleventh Aves (866-468-7619 or www.ticketweb.com). Subway: A, C, E to 14th St; L to Eighth Ave; 1, 9 to 18th St. 10pm, \$50-\$175. Repurpose your usual weekend party plans—i.e., dancing for the cure for your single status, job stress or sobriety—at this benefit boogie-down production, which raises cash for 1 in 9, the Long Island Breast Cancer Action Coalition. Sponsored by WKUTU-FM 103.5, the fete is hosted by the station's Vic Latino, Diane Prior and Little C., and the music is provided by DJs and live performers including Amber, Mike Rizzo and Johnny Budz. Look, the other option is staying home and sweatin' to the oldies, but even Richard Simmons needs to get out once in a while.

★Dante's Inferno Marathon

Cathedral of St. John the Divine, Amsterdam Ave at 112th St (212-316-7540). Subway: 1, 9 to 110th St-Cathedral Pkwy. 9pm-midnight. FREE Frank McCourt and Bishop Paul Moore Jr. lead Cathedral poets-in-residence in a reading of the *Inferno* during the hours Dante intended the events of the epic poem to take place.

Food for Thought: Lunch-Hour Theater

National Arts Club, 15 Gramercy Park South between Irving Pl and Third Ave (212-362-2560 or www.foodforthoughtproductions.com). Subway: 6 to 23rd St. Thu 17, Wed 23, Thu 24 1-2:30pm; \$40. This lunch-hour reading series of one-act plays presents works by well-known writers. Each reading is accompanied by a light lunch and a Q&A session. Today's installment features Susan Charlotte's *The Squeezee Man* and Edgar Allan Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart*.

J.T. Leroy and Friends

Joseph Papp Public Theater, 425 Lafayette St between Astor Pl and E 4th St (212-239-6200). Subway: N, R, W to 8th St-NYU; 6 to Astor Pl. 7-10pm, \$30-\$60. Free and free-wheeling Winona Ryder hosts a night of readings of new work by writer J.T. Leroy (*The Heart Is Deceitful Above All Things*). Other readers include Debbie Harry, Bijou Phillips, Liz Phair, Rosario

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