

# **NEST: New York City Ecochannel for a Sustainable Tomorrow**

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A proposal for a municipal television channel dedicated to the environment of New York City.

## **New York City is a single NEST for our separate lives**

### **I) History.**

This is a proposal to create a municipal television channel dedicated to the environment of New York City. The name for the proposed channel is NEST, "New York City Ecochannel for a Sustainable Tomorrow." An alternate reading of this acronym is New EcoSystem TV. The purpose of the channel is to monitor and interpret the ecosystems that support New York City, so the citizens of New York can develop ecologically sound policies and practices. This proposal has been prepared by Paul Ryan, a member of the Steering Committee of Environment '90. The sponsors of Environment '90 are Audubon Society (NYC), Cathedral of St. John the Divine, Clean Air Campaign, Coalition for the Bight, Earth Environmental Group, Environmental Action Coalition, Environmental Defense Fund, Environmental Education Advisory Council, Green Guerrillas, Hudson River Sloop Clearwater, Learning Alliance, Natural Resources Defense Council (NYC), Neighborhood Open Space Coalition, New York Public Interest Research Group, Project for Public Spaces, Protectors of the Pine-Oak Woods, Radioactive Waste Campaign, Sierra Club (NYC), The Parks Council, and Transportation Alternatives. The sponsors of Environment '90 produced the first comprehensive platform for New York City, a platform which received the endorsement of over 250 additional groups in the city.

One plank in the platform calls for a city-wide television channel to monitor the city's ecology. The very existence of the extraordinary coalition demonstrates

the need for such a municipal television channel; the coalition proves that there is now a shared understanding of New York City's environmental predicament. This proposal is meant to initiate the process of building an ecochannel for the City of New York that can nurture this common understanding.

Before rationale, programming, and budget for NEST are presented, the Environment '90 platform and platform initiatives relating to NEST will be reviewed. This proposal will then 1) present reasons for dedicating a municipal television channel to the ecology, 2) sketch out sample programming, and 3) offer a budget estimate for operating expenses.

## **II) Environment 90 Platform and Platform Initiatives.**

The Environment '90 platform contains a heading that reads THE CITY MUST PROVIDE ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION FOR ALL AGE LEVELS. Under this heading the platform plank that mentions an environmental television channel directs the city to do the following:

- Conduct intensive media campaigns about NYC's environmental problems and programs,
- Increase environmental coverage on WNYC and WNYE,
- Negotiate with cable TV companies for city-wide channel to monitor city's ecology.

To implement the Platform, the Steering Committee of Environment 90 developed a consensus among the groups cited above about specific initiatives for each plank. The initiatives specific to the above plank include the following suggestions for implementation:

- Initiate environmental programming immediately by directing the Commissioner of Cultural Affairs to provide funds for a pilot project that will develop environmental programming over WNYC and WNYE, study audience response, and make recommendations for ongoing environmental programming.
- Direct the Office of Telecommunications to set up a city wide educational television channel to monitor and interpret the ecosystems that support New York City, so the people of New York can develop ecologically sound policies and practices.
- Commission a feasibility study for the television ecochannel.
- Use WNYC to initiate environmental programming and/or
- Initiate other pilot programming, that can be used to help determine the appropriate programming for the ecochannel.
- Establish a non-profit board of environmentalists, educators, government officials and media professionals to be responsible for the environmental channel. Direct board to choose an overall design for the ecochannel and then function on the model of a “television publishing house” as exemplified by Channel 4 in England, commissioning programming from community groups, educators, environmental groups and independent producers.
- Have the board be responsible for developing training programs for producers in methods of ecological monitoring and interpretation.
- Set up funding from diverse sources such as cable television franchise fees.

### **III) Rationale For NEST**

#### **Why does New York City need to devote a city-wide television channel to the environment?**

New York City is located on the cusp of two large ecosystems: the Eastern Woodlands and the Atlantic Ocean. These systems meet and mix in the Hudson Estuary. Robert Boyle, author of *The Hudson River*,<sup>1</sup> argues that the Hudson is in danger of being destroyed by “a thousand little cuts.” So are the Eastern Woodlands and the Atlantic Ocean. Overdevelopment and acid rain threaten the Eastern Woodlands. Agricultural and industrial pollutants threaten the Atlantic Ocean. New York City itself suffers from problems of unreliable water supply, increasing traffic congestion, shrinking open space, toxic waste, mounting garbage, and the threat of an altered shoreline resulting from the greenhouse effect. If New York City is to avoid recurring environmental disruptions, it must monitor, protect, and restore its ecosystems.

Monitoring these threats to our habitat requires systematic, ongoing observation. Environmental monitoring must be constant and coherent to make sense out of the ensemble of events that constitute our complex ecosystems. These events include tides, changing seasons, shad runs, the migration of birds, leaks from sewerage treatment plants, and thermal inversions that trap pollutants. As citizens in an age of environmental crisis, New Yorkers need an electronic window on city ecologies that provides a shared perception of how these ecologies work as well as an understanding of how not to destroy them. A television channel set aside for this purpose would enable us to monitor the ecology on an ongoing basis.

## **Could a public access channel be used to monitor the environment?**

Public access is designed to extend First Amendment rights of free speech to television programming. This is important. However, access is structured to allow many groups to “get their message” out to the public. The orchestration of programming appropriate to this electronic extension of free speech could not be mixed with monitoring since monitoring requires an uninterrupted and coherent system.

## **Why can't we rely on commercial television news to monitor the environment and educate the public?**

Although some commercial news departments are beginning to do exemplary programming, it is unrealistic to expect profit-making entertainment organizations to provide us with an ongoing reliable interpretation of environmental issues. Beside the fact that the “news” is increasingly managed for entertainment value, commercial management would be presented with numerous conflicts of interest. For example, the automobile industry, one of the most environmentally culpable in our industrial consumer culture, will spend over three billion dollars in television advertising this year. One can hardly expect automobile manufacturers to replace those endless images of the latest model cars speeding down lovely country roads with serious environmental programming.

## **Why should this ecochannel be an educational channel?**

The channel will provide the diverse language and cultural groups in this city with a shared perception of the place we live in. Also, the ecochannel will offer the generation raised on television a way to understand environmental issues in

their own medium. It will generate and nurture environmental intelligence for all groups in the city.

### **Will anybody watch the channel? How will it compete for an audience in the New York City market?**

It is worth remembering that in national polls, Americans consistently rate the environment as a very high priority. The channel will help citizens engage this priority by integrating programming with the activities of the community, as described below. Moreover, some of the programming could become part of an environmental curriculum in the schools.

As far as programming based on systematic monitoring, the expectation is that people will turn the channel on for long periods without necessarily focusing on it. As interest in “keeping an eye” on the environment grows, some people may choose to use a second television set for the ecochannel. Whenever environmental issues directly affect citizens, they will be able to turn to the ecochannel for access to the most reliable information. The channel will become an important link between people and the ecology, eventually acquiring the kind of prestige now given to Cable News Network.

### **How will the channel be managed?**

The most appropriate management structure for the ecochannel England. Of course, a critical review of their experience would be necessary before the model would be actually adopted.

## **IV) Programming for NEST**

The purpose of the ecochannel is to monitor and interpret the ecosystems of New York so that policies and practices for a sustainable city can be developed. In keeping with that purpose, the station would carry three main types of programming.

### **1. Monitoring Programs.**

Fixed remote cameras that observe tides, sunrises, sunsets, heat patterns in the city (infrared cameras) etc. Data recorded by remote electronic sensors about air quality and water quality, to use two examples, would be translated into intelligible graphs and images appropriate for television presentation. Satellite scanning of the region would be shown regularly using real time and time lapse techniques. Also, small production crews trained in monitoring the ecology would create systematic programming on the ecologies in and around the city.

### **2. Policy Programming.**

Public debate and discussion about environmental policy would use the information provided by monitoring as a common reference. The programming would be structured to support an informed consensus about proper responses to environmental concerns among private citizens, community groups, community boards, various government agencies, the Borough Presidents, the City Council and the Mayor.

### **3. Cultural Programming.**

For New York City to become a sustainable city it must shift from being a culture of waste to become a culture of recycling. Moreover, it must grow from a disparate culture of immigrants representing every continent on the earth into a mosaic of peoples who know how to live in this place without destroying it. The ecochannel would support this shift with programming that weaves the cultural traditions of the peoples of New York into practices that are in accord with a sustainable city.

To suggest how these three broad types of programming would appear on NEST, a description of an ecochannel series about a hypothetical, but quite possible, tree planting project in Brooklyn is described below. This series of programming is given as an example because several planks in the Environment' 90 Platform call for planting trees because of very real benefits to be gained in the character of open space, the reduction of ozone, dioxide and other air pollutants, and the cooler summer temperatures for city streets.

### **Sample NEST Programming**

This is a hypothetical series of programs about a tree planting project called Trees Grow in Brooklyn. The series would include:

- Interviews with the people who initiated the project.
- Documentation of Urban Conservation Corps members from the Parks Council planting trees and school children's participation in the program.
- Interviews with neighborhood senior citizens who have agreed to care for the trees and report regularly on their progress.

- Techniques of tree maintenance
- Discussions with people in different ethnic neighborhoods about the trees in their country of origin and the trees that are being planted in Brooklyn. Imported footage and family photographs are used to present the differences. Also included is footage of the different trees that grow along the Hudson River Valley.
- Edited footage that followed and supported the building of borough wide consensus on the project from its initiation with a community group through discussions with the Parks Department, community boards, and the Borough President's office.
- A program in which the Mayor discusses tree planting with environmentalists and people from different neighborhoods.
- Report on a court case that developed when a neighborhood group tore up a sidewalk to plant trees.
- Investigative piece on the suppliers of plant material.
- Report on a new, community-initiated development in Fort Greene in which the architectural plans included preserving old trees, planting two stands of new trees, and rooftop gardens . The program would include video of the process of consensus that operated throughout the project.
- Coverage of the remote sensors of air quality in Brooklyn.
- Discussion with scientists, supported by clear graphics, about how the planting program will improve air quality, lessen carbon dioxide, and play a part in the Global Releaf effort to reduce the greenhouse effect.
- NOVA special on the greenhouse effect.
- Discussion with scientists about how trees cool the temperature in the summer accompanied by infrared video studies of the heat patterns that surround different trees.

- Satellite scanning of Brooklyn's vegetation during the project.
- An artistic, music video interpretation of trees.
- Coverage of a multicultural festival in Prospect Park celebrating the Project.
- Time lapse studies of sunlight on new and old trees

## **V) Budget for NEST**

### **Total Operating Budget: \$14,156,496.**

Even in this time of budgetary constraint, NEST is a sound investment in New York City. Besides encouraging small business and creating jobs, **NEST** is a preventive fiscal program that will contribute to the city's long term financial stability.

### **Supporting Small Businesses and Creating Jobs.**

With a total operating budget of \$14,156,496, over sixty percent of this budget will go to small businesses, i.e., independent video production companies who produce original programming for the channel. Since this kind of video production is labor intensive, these contracts for independent producers will create over two hundred private sector jobs. Moreover, these contracts will contribute to creating a qualified work force for the telecommunications industry.

### **A Preventive Program.**

As it becomes increasingly clear that sound ecological policy makes sound economic sense, the potential fiscal savings for the city are enormous.

Monitoring the city's ecology is a prevention program that will save the city

large sums of money in the long run. For example, NEST could create a context in which water conservation and recycling levels would increase dramatically. This would save the city the expense of developing new fresh water supplies and some of the cost of garbage disposal. Another obvious case is waterfront development in the city. How can such development proceed without solid information on how the greenhouse effect will change the shoreline? NEST could provide that information. The database developed by NEST would also lessen the cost of Environmental Impact Statements.

### **Costs in Perspective.**

To put this budget into perspective, the total is less than thirty percent of what the cable companies pay the New York Yankees during a season. This is to say that the cost of the entire ecochannel is roughly equivalent to what the cable companies pay for the rights to cablecast forty-eight regular-season New York Yankee baseball games. Another instructive comparison is the advertising budget of the automobile industry which, as mentioned, will exceed three billion dollars this year.

### **Funding Sources.**

The logical source of money for the municipal ecochannel would be the pool of monies paid by the cable companies as franchise fees to the City of New York. Investing in a sustainable city makes sense for the cable companies. If New York City becomes increasingly uninhabitable, their assets suffer enormously. The value of a communication's cable passing an abandoned house is zero. Presently the value of a cable franchise in the city is placed at over three thousand dollars per subscriber. The cost of the ecochannel would be less than three dollars per New Yorker.

Unfortunately, such logic has legal impediments. The Federal Communications Commission presently limits the amount the city can charge a cable company to five percent of the fees they collect. In New York City, this money is allocated directly to the general treasury. Unless these legal conditions are changed the money for the municipal ecochannel would have to come out of the general treasury and other monies. The city-owned WNYC channel gets three million of its fourteen-million-dollar plus budget directly from the city. The rest is raised in various ways. Perhaps a similar funding pattern could be developed for the ecochannel.

It may also make sense to tax the telecommunications industry that operates in the city. Other sources for funds would include the Job Training Partnership Act, the Board of Education Budget for collaborative environmental educational projects, private foundations, and penalty fees from companies found out of compliance with environmental legislation by the ecochannel.

### **Budget Calculations.**

The budget is calculated on the basis of producing twenty-four hours of original programming each week for fifty-two weeks. Production contracts would be drawn up with independent videomakers trained in ecological monitoring and interpretation. It is estimated that properly trained production crews could keep the cost of an hour program under \$7,200 an hour. This low figure presumes a methodological way of producing the tape that is more cost effective than the usual production, and using newer low cost video equipment. The normal yearly contract would be for a one hour per week production worth \$ 374, 400.

## **Programming:**

Besides the twenty-four hours a week of original productions, other programming would be provided from the following sources:

- 1) Programming originated by local non-profit community groups, environmental groups and educational institutions.
- 2) Programming obtained through exchange with ecochannels in other cities.
- 3) Fixed cameras set up in remote locations, electronic sensors and regular transmissions from satellites overhead.
- 4) Quality environmental programming relating to New York City, produced by the Public Broadcast System, Commercial Networks and Independents that could be purchased outright by NEST.
- 5) Repeats of prior original programming in accord with seasonal changes and the natural history of the region. Examples: running last year's first snowfall along with this year's first snowfall. Doing a history of drought conditions over the past ten years, drawing on the archives.

In summary, NEST would provide all New Yorkers with a way to relate to their common ecology, regardless of their separate lives.