

OP-ED: Squirrels, Solvents, and \$600,000 Boogeymen — A DEC Tale as Told from Elmira's Front Row

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It seems our friends at the New York DEC (Department of Environmental Conservation) have had a rough year in the PR department. Let's not forget Peanut, the infamous squirrel of Elmira, seized from his human caretaker and euthanized despite testing negative for rabies. The public was outraged. There was a mural, a petition, and a heartfelt apology from the DEC Commissioner. "We can do better," they said.

Peanut was just one small mammal. But the story struck a nerve—because it's about how government power, when unaccountable, can trample common sense and citizen dignity.

I know a bit about that.

For nearly a decade, I've been trying to work with the DEC regarding my property at 714 Baldwin Street. Instead of open communication and collaboration, I've been met with folded arms, closed doors, and baffling bureaucratese. The latest public meeting—held recently is a perfect case study in confusion.

Upon arrival at the Steel Memorial Library, the listed meeting on the display sign, was supposedly about **417 Baldwin Street**. That's not a typo, it's a misdirection worthy of a magician. As I walked into the Steel Memorial Library for the actual event, I joked that maybe all their proposed findings, fears, and funds were now tied to someone else's property. Maybe the \$600,000 clean-up plan could follow the sign?

Inside, the room featured a six-person audience: myself and my son, two Elmira locals, DEC Regional Director Tim Walsh, and one baseball-capped mystery man who said nothing, wrote nothing, and (spoiler) never published a follow-up article. Media? Security? Shadow? Squirrel hunter?

Event host **Kira Bruno**, a fresh-faced trainee, had already once forgotten to invite me to the first meeting—delaying the whole process. She started strong, then introduced geologist **Mark Wright**, a mumbling private contractor whose explanation of airborne particles was as clear as a fogged-up mirror, but crystal clear when recommending the solution. When I asked how we arrived at a \$600,000 price tag (up from a previous estimate of \$10K to \$70K), Kira said they'd weighed expert and public opinion.

The problem? The public, all four of us, hadn't spoken yet.

I pressed them to explain the data clearly. Months of reading environmental reports had taught me how hard it is to decipher these numbers. The average resident—those very few neighbors who were asked to “weigh in”—couldn’t make sense of it if they tried. They were terrified. Why not present the facts intelligibly with graphics, analogies, or visuals for the layman?

Silence.

Then came a dramatic warning from NYS health official **Harolyn Hood** about vaporized dry cleaning fluid potentially harming reproductive health. Scary stuff, until she admitted there’s no airborne threat on or in neighboring properties, and none currently detected outside my own warehouse, anywhere...(And by the way, this same cleaning fluid, you can buy by the bucket load, from your local automotive parts dealer under the name ‘brake cleaning fluid’, the stuff mechanics and nut wrenching dudes blast from high pressure spray cans, all over their shops when scrubbing oily and greasy engine parts.) The internal reading came back with hundreds of zeros attached to it making the reading sound terrifyingly deadly, only to realize the reading actually was on an unimaginably microscopic scale.

The thriving ecological environment in and around and underneath the building at 714 Baldwin Street, seemed to have missed the memo. I’ve watched generations of groundhogs through the years come and go without a care in the world that the ‘brown-field’ they had chosen for their underground network of tunnels was detrimental to their health. Yet the field was as green as ye ol’ paddy’s green shamrock clover that blankets the healthy sod. ‘What you don’t know won’t kill you,’ written in ground-hog-eze is proudly hung over the muddied tunnel entrance. Earthworms abound in the rich soil around the property and squirrels, oh yes, lots of squirrels live in paradise at 714 Baldwin St. So much so that I have even considered converting the property into a squirrel sanctuary, called ‘P.E.R.C. — Peanut’s Emergency Rodent Conservatory’

In fact, I’ve had my own blood tested for PERC contamination, you know that stinky stuff your clothes smell of when you get them back from the dry cleaners to wear on your naked body. —it came back clean. No health effects. I’ve even lived in the building despite the apocalyptic tone.

So maybe the DEC can’t save squirrels, but at \$600K a site, they sure know how to scare us with invisible ghosts that they have been slowly searching for the past 30 years.

If we learned anything from Peanut the Squirrel, it’s that public trust is fragile. If agencies like the DEC want to maintain their role as stewards of public health, they need to meet us halfway—with common sense, clarity, with facts, and with respect.

But, the DEC have decided it is their right to proceed with their plan to dig up and seize the dirt in my yard. Somewhere I read that unreasonable searches and seizures of a man’s dirt, or even his squirrel are terrible ideas.

For more information or a tour of my squirrel sanctuary-in-progress, visit:

www.714baldwinstreet.com