

Lewes Board of Public Works
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(Updates are underlined and in italics. Article has been reformatted for webpage display.)

Stop! Before you begin to read this article! Think about the Lewes of 2008: brightly lighted streets at night; recently or newly paved streets; a shiny new Second Street business district; tidy well-tended parks, gardens and yards; new and newly restored "older" homes. Now try to imagine Lewes of 100+ years ago: clam-shell or dirt streets; dark night-time streets; smells of fish processing, horses, outdoor privies; and certainly health problems related to sewage disposal and water sources.

On 15 March 1901, an Act of the Delaware General Assembly established the (Town of) Lewes Board of Public Works. This political subdivision, often referred to as Lewes' "second government," was "to establish, control, and regulate an electric light plant, water works, and sewage system to the town." Actually the Board is a limited purpose governing body established for the specific purposes outlined here. In certain areas of endeavor, the city of Lewes must act for the Board: The Board cannot own real property in its own name, the city must do this; the Board cannot borrow money in its own name, the city must do this; the Board cannot sue or be sued, the city must do this; and the Board cannot ask the General Assembly for charter changes, the city must also do this. [Editor's note: At the time of the 1901 Act, Lewes was chartered by the state of Delaware as a town governed by a board of Commissioners. In 1969 a charter revision established Lewes as a city governed by a mayor and city council.]

The term Board of Public Works refers to the governing Board of Public Works, now a directly elected body of five members, and also to the administrative, planning, and service delivery agency functioning to provide the service provided for in the 1901 legislation. The initial Board members were appointed by the Commissioners, but once their terms expired, the members have always had to stand for election by town voters.

What is obvious from the review of minutes of the town commissioners' meetings is the basic administrative nature of the role played by the Commissioners as a group and often as a committee of one delegated by the body to undertake a specific task, usually administrative or often clerical in nature. The minutes show little if any discussion or consideration of policy development or long term planning; this is not meant necessarily as a negative criticism, simply a statement of how the town government functioned in that time, the beginning of the 20th century.

Commissioners dealt with leases for land, sales of building lots, approval and payment of all town bills, determined employee salaries and approved payment of salaries, issued pet licenses, dealt with dog control, directed and approved property tax assessment lists and considered (and more often than not approved) appeals for reduction of these assessments from individuals. Interspersed in these minutes in the years leading up to the 1901 establishment of the BPW were individual cases related to sewage disposal, water service, and street lighting. For example, in

December 1897 Matthew Fisher asked for a "privilege to tap the sewer on South Street (now Savannah Road) for roof drainage only." This privilege was granted for a \$5.00 fee. That month a bill of \$46.58 was paid to C.M. Marshall "for laying sewer across King Street."

On 7 March 1898, the town commissioners approved a motion "to put street lamp at Richardson's property in Front Street, providing Mr. Kruger will keep it lighted free of cost to the town."

In February 1889, a "meeting [was] called to decide what to do about the sewer dug up abreast Dr. Hill's office" and "to get the [town commissioners'] opinion about making some improvements to our sewer system." In April 1889 the town advertised "for bids to dig out old sewer pipes from abreast Hill's office to a well abreast Dr. J.B. Lyons on South Street and replace same with [18-inch] terra cotta pipe."

The more things change:

- in 1905 the minimum electric rate was \$1.00 a month;
- in 1911 street lamps were burned from dark to daylight except on moonlit nights;
- in 1915 lead water pipes were required;
- in 1919 the minimum electric rate was raised to \$1.50 a month and to \$2.00 a month for summer cottages.

Problems with sanitation continued into the 20th century as the Commissioners dealt with "unhealthy conditions" in regard "to sewer on Third Street" and with those "who empty fecal matter from water closets on Arnell Avenue," (now Washington Avenue) and with other public health-related matters.

The town leadership knew of these problems and many others and was dealing with them. It has also been suggested that river pilots especially, often involved in municipal affairs, traveled to and from Philadelphia in the course of their jobs and saw the new utility improvements in that city. It was then a normal question to ask, "Why can't we in Lewes have these new electric lights or sewers and running water?"

The first Board, led by A.L. Burton, consisted of Robert Waples, James Kelly, Elmer Outten [see also p. 45, Vol. 2 of the Journal] and William Virden. It lost no time in making major improvements and additions to the electric generation and distribution facilities. A second act of the General Assembly in 1901 had been to authorize the town commissioners to borrow money and issue bonds to provide funding for this work. In June 1901, the Board of Public Works advertised for bids for construction of the Power Plant (the original building is part of the present building on Schley Avenue). Four building lots on that street were purchased for \$600. The plant was built for \$50,000; it included two 65 horsepower high speed steam engines, along with eleven miles of electric distribution lines and 42 arc type street lights. Initial charge to customers

was by the number of lamps in a building; for example, one per month was \$.50, two lamps cost \$.75 a month, and up to six cost \$1.60 a month. A bid for a sewer system (directed toward the Lewes Creek, now the Lewes-Rehoboth Canal) was awarded on 7 August 1901. Bids for a six-inch water main extension from Second Street at South Street (now Savannah Road) to Bay Avenue were advertised in May 1904.



The inlaid stone above the door says, "Lewes Light and Water Station 1901." The building can still be identified on its site on Schley Avenue, although subsequently painted and windows bricked in.

Photo from Hazel D. Brittingham Collection.

In those early days of 1901-1904, finances were apparently a problem. For instance on 5 October 1902, the Philadelphia Inquirer reported that the electric light plant would not have to be shut down due to a lack of fuel; the Queen Anne RR Company was willing to loan the Board enough coal to maintain the plant "for some time." The commissioners were said to believe that the plant could be run indefinitely if care was used and the street lights put out at 10 o'clock and all commercial lights at midnight. (The plant was converted to diesel generating units in 1924.) In 1907 the town mayoral election became embroiled in a debate over whether or not to sell the power plant because it was losing money. Mayor James T. Thompson was reelected, and the power plant was retained.

In 1946 a contract was entered into with Delmarva Power and Light to supply the town of Lewes with power to the "industrial beach circuit," for the fish processing plants (then approaching their years of peak fish harvesting and processing) and with enough transformer capacity to carry the entire "city circuit" load in the event of failure of the power plant. By the late 1960s it had become apparent that it was more economical to purchase power from outside than to generate power in the city because of rising fuel and lube oil costs. In 1973 sufficient #2 diesel could no longer be obtained, and the decision was made to put the power plant on standby status. For a number of years the plant was used for peak shaving, or generating electricity only in periods of highest electric demand, supplementing the power bought elsewhere. At present the generators are not used at all due to air quality requirements and are for sale. The deregulation of the electric utility industry has led to major change in the way the Board of Public Works provides

power to its customers. Competition is the name of the game and, as a result of the most recent bidding process, BPW purchases power from Constellation Power (formerly Baltimore Gas & Electric), which is transmitted to Lewes over the lines of Delmarva Power.

Over the years- of the first half of the 20th century, the town commissioners, acting as authorized by the Delaware General Assembly to act for the BPW, raised funds to build specific aspects of the water, sewer, and power systems included in the Board's mission. This included the work in 1903 and 1904 mentioned above; in 1921 to extend and repair sewers, water mains, and fire 'plugs'; in 1923 to construct a coal- fired gas plant and to build a distribution system for the gas used for heat and light. The privately owned gas manufacturing plant was located on Kings Highway next to the former tourist train "Queen Anne" railroad station that was the site of a Superfund clean-up in the late 1990s. Also in 1923 property owners were required to connect their buildings to the sewer and water systems.

Other environmental concerns have faced the Board of Public Works. In 1915 the Board mandated that all new water connections had to use lead pipes; this was a requirement of both the state and federal governments. In the 1930s and ' 40s, sewer and storm drainage mains were to be combined into one drain. Then, in the 1970s, this was reversed and separate drainage systems were established.

By 1957, when it was apparent that a new sewage disposal plant was necessary, the current site off Savannah Road on American Legion Road was selected. (A site that was considered and rejected was that of the Canalfront Park now under construction.) Bonds totaling \$1,000,000 were sold in 1959 and 1961 by the town and the plant was completed; its level of treatment was sufficient until the 1980s. When the next upgrade was needed in the late 1980s, it was determined that Lewes was in a no-growth zone and the permitted capacity was 750,000 gallons per day. After several years of exceeding the capacity on numerous days and problems thus with the state Department of Natural Resources and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, a new upgraded treatment plant with double the capacity of the old one was planned, financed by State Revolving Funds low interest loans and bonds, built, and put into service in 2008. This plant removes significant pollutants and nutrients so that its discharge can be piped into the Lewes-Rehoboth canal. During this period, the operation of the water treatment plant was privatized with a contract with the English firm Severn Trent, which also provides technical assistance for meeting regulatory permit standards. The new Water Reclamation Plant was dedicated on 25 April 2008 to the memory of the late Howard Seymour, a long time environmental specialist, former Board member, and Board employee.

Upgrades to all of the utility systems are ongoing and require much planning and community involvement. The electrical distribution system, for example, has been upgraded to a 12 kilovolt system over the past decade, eliminating substation and considerable other expense while providing increased reliability. Work related to the 300,000 gallon water tower built in 1951, the five production wells on Kings Highway next to Cape Henlopen High School, and replacement of water mains throughout the city have led to, among other things, Lewes winning the Best Tasting Water in the state award in 2006 and 2008.

Board officials point to the direct election of governing Board members as a way of keeping the organization directly related and responsive to its consumer customers. The authors have witnessed citizen action directed at the Board that resulted in change that probably wouldn't have been possible in an investor-owned private utility or in an agency of a local government. One recent instance comes to mind. Tall metal poles to be used in the upgrade of the 69 kilovolt electric transmission line for the power plant on Schley Avenue, across town on Third Street to what was known as the Burton Avenue Substation were delivered to Lewes. Citizens quickly responded that this type of pole was not desirable through an historic area, and after several meetings with these citizens, the Board had the project redesigned. This ultimately ended with the removal of the substation as well as the transmission line from that area, thus eliminating the need for these poles.

The Board of Public Works over the years has existed for the citizens of Lewes and, where possible and feasible, the concerns of the citizens have been considered and in most cases given favorable resolution.

Note: Since 1957 the day-to-day management responsibilities have been delegated to general managers. These have included:

Bayard Coulter 1957-1968

Joseph A. Rickards 1968-1975

Eleanor Joseph 1975-1977

John P. Curtin 1977-1980

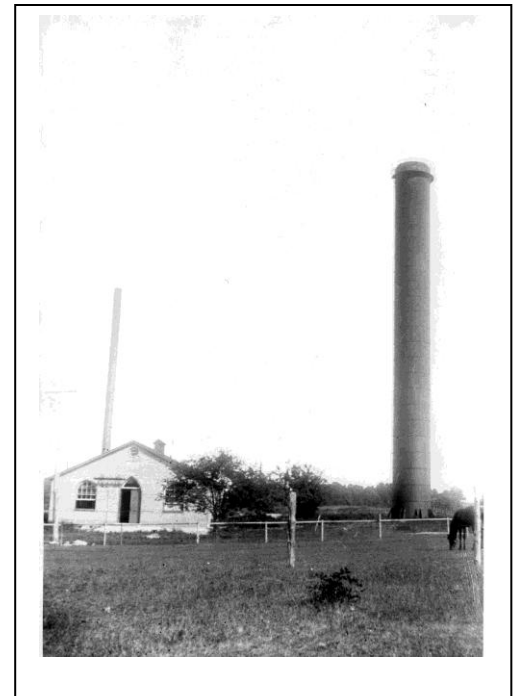
Jay Collars 1980-1982

Ronald Donovan 1982-1997

Ruth Anne Ritter 1997-2005

Kenneth Mecham 2005 to 2011

Darrin Edward Gordon 2011 to Present



BPW Plant. 10 September 1902. Note the height of the chimney stack and the even taller city standpipe.

Photo from Hazel D. Brittingham Collection.