

President's Message

Dick Pantanges,
R.E.H.S.



Hi! I'm Dick Pantanges, and I have the pleasure of representing you and the environmental health profession as the president of NEHA for the next year.

Who Is He?

I graduated from college, knew I wasn't going to get drafted, and hadn't been accepted for medical school. My dad cut a job announcement out of the local paper for a "sanitarian" with the local county health department. I wasn't entirely sure what that was, but I applied. I researched the job (no Google in those days!) and took the exam. One of the panel members on the oral part of the exam was Stu Richardson, Sr., and he went back to the neighboring county (Alameda County, California) and suggested that they hire me. I started as a "sanitarian trainee." I thought I'd spend a year and get registered, and then I would have that registration to fall back on in case I needed a job in the future. A year later I took the California exam, became a registered sanitarian, and joined NEHA. After about five years, I left the county to work for the County Employees' Association. After a year and a half of that, I decided that wasn't a good career choice, so I reinstated with the county and spent another 30 years with them.

During that time, I had the opportunity to do a lot of interesting things: supervise an exhumation at midnight under a full moon; rub elbows with some famous inmates in the detention facilities in Alameda County; oversee the installation of the first integrated data management system we had ever had; attend (on duty, of course) the infamous Altamont rock concert in December 1969; and spend about \$5 million developing a state-of-the-art household and conditionally exempt hazard-

Who Is He? What is He Doing Here?

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ous waste collection program, with three facilities throughout the county.

I have also had the chance to see environmental health in the Soviet Union and Russia (the 1991 "revolution" occurred during our visit there!) through my involvement with the California Environmental Health Association (the *original* CEHA!).

I came into the profession when one was expected to join professional organizations, and so I did. In 1974, I attended my first NEHA Annual Educational Conference (AEC) in Cincinnati, Ohio, and last month I attended my 34th AEC & Exhibition in Tucson. At that first AEC, I got enough information to be able to return and revise our county's private sewage disposal procedures. I realized that a lot of information was available at the AECs, and I could make a lot of contacts, too. Sometimes valuable information comes from a casual conversation in the hallway or over a meal with colleagues.

I also quickly learned the importance of "sanitation," as it was called then, and "environmental health," as it is called now. The

prevention of disease and the preservation of healthy conditions are a much more cost-effective means of protecting the public than expensive remediation after the fact. I realized that most of the advancement in public health and the increasing life span of our residents was due to the efforts of "registered sanitarians." I was hooked and remained with Alameda County until I retired.

One of my friends and colleagues, Diane Evans, was a regional vice president (RVP) on the NEHA board of directors. When she decided to run for second vice president, she encouraged me to run for the RVP position that she was vacating. I became the RVP for Region 2 in 1991 and have been on the NEHA board ever since.

You might ask why someone who is retired would be interested in being the president of NEHA. The main reason is that I have the time to devote to it now, and I'm looking forward to this next year.

What is He Doing Here?

I'd like to help with several things over the course of the next year. I realize that one year is not likely to be enough time to achieve finality on many items, but I'd like to continue, or start, several things.

First, I'd like to continue with past president Rob Blake's efforts at marketing "the invisible profession." Environmental health is not well known either by the public or the legislators (whether they're at the city, county, state, or federal level) that approve and control our budgets. Part of the problem stems from the fact that we, as individual environmental health professionals, don't toot our own horns. Another part of the problem is that we, as a professional

continued on page 34

reducing the incidence of chronic disease. A fundamental element of the program includes land use policies and physical changes to the environment. Tri-County and city staff from planning, parks and recreation, engineering, and other departments are working together to promote significant community involvement (residents, businesses, schools, and non-profits) in these efforts towards the healthy redevelopment of the historic city core. The overall program is a collaboration among EH Land Use Program staff, epidemiologists, nurses, nutritionists, injury prevention staff, and others. It presents an opportunity to measure the effect of a coordinated interdivisional effort to promote community-wide healthy behaviors.

TCHD's goal is to continually improve its Land Use Program in terms of the quality of its interventions and relationships and its capacity to offer a more comprehensive program. It does this partly by networking with other LPHAs and monitoring best practices nationally. TCHD's methodical process of expanding its scope and collaboration around how the built environment can impact health has been a necessary component of advancing public health through the built environment. 🐾

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Village of Euclid v. Ambler Realty Co., 272 U.S. 365 (1926).

President's Message

continued from page 4

association, don't toot our own horns. Unfortunately, we're most likely to get publicity when something goes wrong—a foodborne illness, for example. When we do things right, which is most of the time, nothing happens, and we get no notice.

As a part of marketing the invisible profession, I want to see NEHA take a more proactive stand in tooting our horn for the many accomplishments that we have made in the 17 years that I have been on the board. NEHA is no longer relegated to going, hat in hand, knocking on doors of organizations, governmental and nongovernmental, to see if they will meet with us. These organizations are now knocking on NEHA's door! "If you want something talked about, go to organization X, but if you want something *done*, go to NEHA," is what we are hearing now!

Second, it seems clear that accreditation of public health and environmental health departments is on the near horizon, and I want to see that NEHA is positioned to be a key player in that effort. No one knows environmental health as well as NEHA, and we *will* be involved with setting standards for accreditation for environmental health.

Finally, the NEHA board and staff have changed their game plan to take more advantage of opportunities that present themselves. Things are changing so rapidly that there is no point in a strategic plan that says that "we will do x action by y date." Instead, NEHA has a Strategic Thinking document that outlines the significant areas that we would like to expand in as the opportunities are created or as they present themselves.

An example of this opportunistic thinking is our recent involvement in submitting a proposal to assist in developing a food safety inspection system in Saudi Arabia. We were asked by a Saudi Arabian company to partner with them in developing a program to establish an environmental health program, which started with updating a food safety inspection system for Saudi Arabia. This opportunity included payment for submitting a proposal whether or not a final contract was awarded. NEHA was rapidly able to develop an excellent proposal and get it submitted. Unfortunately, the contract was not awarded to the Saudi Arabian company that partnered with us, but again, NEHA was paid for the work nevertheless. Developing an environmental health program for Saudi Arabia is certainly not something we could have foreseen or planned on, but the opportunity came up, and NEHA took advantage of it.

Congratulations on 25 Years of Outstanding Service!

At the AEC & Exhibition in Tucson, Nelson Fabian was honored for his 25 years of outstanding service as executive director of NEHA. Nelson is responsible for the day-to-day operations of NEHA. He hires the staff. The board gives Nelson general guidance and leaves it to Nelson to get the job done. I've known Nelson since he was hired. You could not ask for a more dedicated person or a better representative of NEHA. That dedication and professionalism extends to all the staff that Nelson is responsible for hiring and mentoring and coaching.

There was a time, during my tenure on the board, when we were ready to make plans to cut back to the bare essentials, because we were just about broke. We now have a surplus enough to carry us for more than four months, which is exceptional for nonprofit organizations.

Congratulations and thank you, Nelson!

Well, that's probably more that you wanted to know, but as you can tell, I'm bullish on NEHA. Let me know if there are things you would like me to talk about in this column over the next year, and I'll do my best to accommodate you. Thanks for your support in the coming year. 🐾

Dick Pantano