

CROSS WESTCHESTER

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Political Environment

IF you are contemplating a run for higher office — something like, say, state attorney general, or governor, or United States senator — it is not a bad idea to show that you have the stalwarts of the environmental movement on your side.

Thus, on a recent summer evening, District Attorney Jeanine Pirro joined Alex Matthiessen of Riverkeeper at a public forum on fighting environmental crime. Ms. Pirro detailed the role of criminal courts, and Mr. Matthiessen talked about using the federal clean-air and clean-water acts to stop polluters. (Perhaps in deference to the Republican Ms. Pirro, Mr. Matthiessen made only passing reference to the “administration in Washington” and its undermining of the nation’s environmental laws.)

“Environmental crimes are ultimately water crimes as any action can affect the water,” Ms. Pirro told an audience of about two dozen people who gathered Monday at the Beczak Environmental Education Center on an industrial stretch of the Yonkers Riverfront.

Ms. Pirro established an environmental-crimes bureau soon after she took office in 1994, she said, and began prosecuting deep-pocketed corporations as well as willfully negligent individuals for illegal discharges, illegal dumping, oil spills and septic overflows.

Under Ms. Pirro’s watch, the environmental-crimes bureau has prosecuted everyone from mom-and-pop dry cleaners, to messy oil delivery men, to multinational corporations.

In two notable cases, Ms. Pirro described how her prosecutions directly benefited Riverkeeper. In 2004, a paint manufacturer in Peekskill, Englehard Corporation, pleaded guilty to solid-waste violations for accidents that caused a hydrochloric acid cloud and a nitric acid spill. The company was ordered to pay \$20,000 in fines and \$75,000 to Riverkeeper, which distributed the money to a local environmental group, the Hollowbrook Water Watch Coalition.

The next year, Domino Sugar in Yonkers pleaded guilty to endangering the public as a result of an acid leak. The company paid \$20,000 in fines and \$100,000 to Riverkeeper, which distributed the money to Groundwork Yonkers, an environmental group that works to protect the Saw Mill River.

“Jeanine,” Mr. Matthiessen said, “we welcome you to go out and beat up other polluters and send the money back to the community.”

Now there’s an endorsement.