

Tiny Leaks. Big Decisions.

By Sue Treiman



(l to r) Plumber Len Williams, property manager Pam Silver and board president Albert Marengo at the Lafayette co-op in Forest Hills, Queens. »

Toaster-oven coq au vin? How about lobster thermidor, hotplate style?

The Situation. Shareholders at the Lafayette co-op in Forest Hills, Queens, have been innovating home-meal preparation since their cooking gas was shut off last January. But with a year-long, roughly \$650,000 re-piping project set to end, there's finally (gas)light at the end of the tunnel – months ahead of schedule.

This adventure began when National Grid's state-mandated inspection uncovered a small leak in a gas pipe – and then another and another. Lenny Williams, owner of McCreedy & Rice Plumbing, initially believed he could fix the breaches. "But when 69 to 75 percent of 128 units showed a leak," he says, "it didn't pay to repair them all."

One Major Adjustment. Gas provider National Grid – extremely cautious after several deadly gas explosions years earlier – immediately shut down Lafayette's cooking gas on January 4, 2019. Luckily, veteran co-op board president Albert Marengo had experience as a real estate development company's finance officer, and senior property manager Pamela Silver of Charles H. Greenthal once handled the same challenge at another property. The seasoned pair assembled a team, considered options, and agreed to seal the 62-year-old original pipes and install new gas lines alongside them – with one major adjustment.



Gas meter room »

"Instead of re-installing a gas meter in every apartment, we decided to connect the pipes to just two meters, one for each side of the building," Marengo says. "Gas bills could be included in monthly maintenance, and construction costs could be dramatically reduced." Eliminating the minimum per-meter charge also trimmed shareholders' bills. The project - with roughly \$450,000 earmarked for plumbing, \$150,000 for a general contractor, \$50,000 for engineering services, and \$12,000 for an architect - was pricey, but Lafayette's healthy \$1.2 million reserve fund could absorb the hit without the need to assess shareholders or borrow money. Marengo and Silver convened the shareholders, unveiled the plan, and promised regular updates. Then they sweetened the deal with a gift.

"We gave everyone a two-burner electric hotplate to boil water and do some cooking," says Silver.

Collaboration Is Key. They explained that the project would require sophisticated coordination. Work teams would proceed up each of Lafayette's 23 apartment lines from the first to the sixth floor, spending about three days in each unit. They would open walls to expose pipes, reposition kitchen appliances when needed, install new piping, and repair and spackle the drywall.

"Most people were cooperative," says Silver. Some were not. Several shareholders hesitated or didn't want crews in their apartments, so Silver pledged to assign a building employee to "babysit" units where shareholders were unavailable. And when a handful still balked, the board got tough.



The Lafayette co-op »

"We issued an ultimatum - a \$1,000 fine per day of delay," Marengo says. "The keys came flooding in."

Throughout the job, inspections and approvals were quick, construction delays were minimal, and mitigating factors - lead or asbestos - were blessedly absent. The initial completion date of March 2020 moved to the current holiday season - three months ahead of schedule, and a scant 12 months after launch.

The team credits collaboration, focus, and weekly project meetings for the success, along with monthly building-wide shareholder sessions, at which residents asked questions and the building team provided honest answers. "My advice to other boards is to coordinate early, stay on top of everything, and find the best contractors, plumbers, carpenters, and engineers possible," says Marengo. "Then check in with everyone regularly."

Some people adapted almost too well to the shutdown. "One woman told me she'd gotten so good on the hotplate, she didn't need her gas oven anymore," Williams says with a laugh. She'll have a working gas oven anyway.