

Inside Citywide Podcast Transcript Episode 7

Michael Santos: You are listening to the Inside Citywide podcast, brought to you by the New York City Department of Citywide Administrative Services. Inside Citywide provides you with a behind the scenes look at some of the work we do to serve the people of New York City.

Nick Benson: Hello, welcome to Inside Citywide. I'm Nick Benson.

Belinda French: And I'm Belinda French. Thanks for joining us.

Nick Benson: I'm really excited about today's episode because it involves Saturday Night Live's Pete Davidson and Colin Jost buying a Staten Island ferry from DCAS. A totally routine occurrence.

Belinda French: Absolutely. Happens all the time.

Nick Benson: But yeah, we sold a big boat, and today we're going to give the listeners a behind the scenes look at that, and the wonderful world of DCAS surplus auctions.

Belinda French: Most people probably don't think about what happens to the stuff a city government owns when it's no longer needed. The surplus auctions DCAS oversees are like a never-ending municipal garage sale. We sell everything from computers to furniture to vehicles and everything in between.

Nick Benson: That's true. We even sold an autographed Mark McGuire jersey recently. Just your average government surplus item.

Belinda French: Today's guests played a key role in the Staten Island Ferry auction and are involved with many of the City's surplus auctions. Our first guest is Larry Siegel, who serves as chief of staff for DCAS's Office of Citywide Procurement. Among many other duties, Larry oversees the team that manages the City's surplus auctions. Thanks for joining us, Larry.

Larry Siegel: Thank you for having me.

Nick Benson: We're also joined by Paul Geosits who works for the New York City Department of Transportation Staten Island Ferry Team. Paul helps oversee \$15 million in inventory that is part of the Staten Island ferry system. He has the important job of keeping track of the parts, supplies, and other bulk goods that keep the ferries afloat. He also oversees salvage operations for the department.

Nick Benson: Thanks for being here, Paul.

Paul Geosits: It's a pleasure being here. Thank you for having me.

Nick Benson: Larry, I want to start with you because your team oversees surplus auctions, but it isn't every day that you sell such an unusual item or have celebrity customers. What was it like when you found out who the buyers were?

Larry Siegel: I was hoping it was not a joke. I know that they're very funny, but ultimately it was something that we're happy we got a lot of publicity for because it's truly one of the unique things that only the New York City Department of Transportation has. And I didn't expect it to kind of reach that far up the up the celebrity food chain, but it did. And, you know, it was it was definitely exciting.

Belinda French: And Paul, I'll start with the same question for you. You have had a hand in the Department of Transportation's salvage work for years, and I'm sure you've never had a situation like this. Were you surprised when you heard who won the auction? And I hear you actually met Colin Jost after the auction. What was that like?

Paul Geosits: Yes, I was very surprised, but I would have been happy anyway for whoever won the auction. And yes, I met Colin. He's a down-to-earth guy. He's a really nice guy.

Nick Benson: Larry, so aside from the unexpected buyers, a Staten Island ferry is an extremely unique thing for the City to sell. Did you think it was going to be challenging to find someone to buy something like this?

Larry Siegel: It's not as much challenging as much as it's curiosity. There are different avenues in which we sell large vessels. Not all of them are to be kind of refurbished into some sort of venue. But there is a considerable market for scrap metal or kind of making use of the parts on the boat. And historically, that's what we have had more experience with.

Larry Siegel: This is, I think, is more surprising in that it's an end user that's relatively different than what we usually handle.

Nick Benson: And obviously, any eligible person can bid on a surplus auction for any reason. But I would think that something like this with such a narrow use would be more likely to end up maybe being sold to some other government or sold for scrap metal. Can you think of a time that something similar like this was sold in recent history?

Larry Siegel: Yeah, there have been a few FDNY fire boats that have been donated as well as sold. We have sold sludge tankers. We have sold marine travel lifts. There was a series of hopper barges from the Sanitation Department that sold in 2014 and even the NYPD sold, you know, through our platform, the jaws of life. So, you know, there are different sorts of precedents that would apply to unusual vessels and vehicles and equipment that the City has put up for auction.

Larry Siegel: I would say this is probably the largest one. But yeah, always every year or so we get something out of the norm that will pop up and it's certainly worth digging into.

Nick Benson: This one was definitely out of the norm.

Belinda French: Paul, you've been involved in a lot of Department of Transportation auctions. Has there been a ferry auction during your time in your role? And what were your expectations when you knew the City was going to auction off the JFK?

Paul Geosits: This was actually my first auction of a ferry as a salvage officer, but my expectations were to start off the bids at a fair price to get as much money as possible for the City. And that's you know, that's what I wanted to start off with that.

Belinda French: Wow. So that was actually your first! That's amazing. And, you know what too though, this auction had to be a bit special for you because you're a Staten Island native and been part of the Staten Island Ferry team for many years. Are you glad that the buyers are interested in rehabbing the JFK and giving it a second life?

Paul Geosits: Yes, I was I was actually very excited about it. Especially when they were telling me what they wanted to do to it.

Nick Benson: So, I know we jumped into the big news about Pete Davidson and Colin Jost, but surplus auctions are a huge undertaking for DCAS that touches every city agency. Most New Yorkers probably don't give it much thought, but eventually what the City buys needs to be sold off or disposed of, and the auctions help generate revenue and give the things we buy a second life.

Nick Benson: Larry, can you give our listeners an overview of how the City manages its surplus goods, whether it's putting them to some other use within city government, auctioning them off, or simply disposing of certain things? And what are some of the other wacky and weird things you've seen auctioned off?

Larry Siegel: Sure. So ultimately, DCAS is mandated by the New York City Charter to handle the disposal, transfer, and salvage of surplus property, and that is relatively broad. So, there is a lot that comes our way. Our first step is always to see if any other agency across the city needs a specific item that is put up, you know, determined by, I guess, the owning agency that is no longer needed for their operations.

Larry Siegel: It's always our goal to reduce waste and, you know, continue to try to be really, really thoughtful with any new spending that the City would undertake. So, for instance, if somebody doesn't need an office chair and we can transfer it to somebody who does need an office chair, that would save the City a new purchase in terms of dollars as well as staff effort.

Larry Siegel: If no city agency is interested in an item, we would put it up to auction and, you know, there's different ways in which we can price items and how they're marketed on the platform and how long that they are there. We also have the ability, based on that charter requirement, to donate or transfer items to other municipalities or nonprofits that the City contracts with or serves.

Larry Siegel: And ultimately, that is a really good way to make sure that items are put to good use. And just because the city government may not need something doesn't mean that it can't help an organization that, you know, really is serving the same people that we do. So after that, if nobody wants an item, we would issue a destroy order for it and we would partner with our good folks at the Department of Sanitation to dispose of it.

Larry Siegel: And then in terms of, you know, items out of the ordinary, you know, we have auctioned off voting machines. We have auctioned off toilet bowls. We have auctioned off a nonfunctioning NYPD bomb diffusing robot. We have auctioned off a Mark McGuire, St Louis Cardinals jersey. And it's something where we've also used this office to transfer upwards of 200,000 bottles of water to Flint, Michigan. Water that was procured by the City for coastal storm planning that was not needed and needed to be rotated out because it was getting close to the expiration.

Larry Siegel: And that's one of the really interesting parts of this kind of aspect of city government is figuring out what's the best way that the City can reduce waste and find the best use for something.

Nick Benson: And one other thing I know a weird landing spot sometimes for our goods is actually the CityStore. And if people aren't aware, it's the official store of the City of New York. You can learn about it in [NYC.gov/Citystore](https://nyc.gov/citystore). But Larry, weren't there like taxi medallions and like the covers of traffic lights, you know, the green, yellow, red and I think they were being marketed as bowls or plates or something?

Larry Siegel: Yeah. Anything the City buys, they replace at some point. And medallions have certainly changed over the years, as have traffic lights and traffic signals. And, you know, it's really nuts to bolts quite literally you know. Everything that a city agency has to handle, you know, there's a finite amount of storage space and if you go through every agency and Paul can certainly talk about what DOT has, but you know some of them are antiques and some of them are just damaged due to the use and yes so things like medallions and traffic lights would come through this office.

Belinda French: Larry, I want to stick with you for a minute. How many items does DCAS auction off each year? It must be a major undertaking given the size and scale of New York City government. What is it like managing the logistics for something like that?

Larry Siegel: So, we have anywhere really between 13 hundred and 16 hundred auctions per year. So those are individual auctions within how many items that accounts for? It's usually upwards of 30,000 to 50,000 items roughly. It really

depends on the year though, because it's a really tough thing to forecast because agencies are constantly shifting operations to make sure they are serving the City the best they can.

Larry Siegel: So, we in some years are busier than others and some years we are handling, as I mentioned earlier, hopper barges, which it's not a normal procurement in terms of doing it on a yearly or bi yearly basis. Same with voting machines. Roughly though it's about 1300 to 1600 auctions. And then the logistics behind that is we really lean on our other agencies, our sister agencies to work with the individual bidders or help transfer items to other city agencies.

Larry Siegel: I want to give a special just shout out to the team here. It's relatively small. We have Elaine Richardson and Ismael Malave and Lisa Velasquez and the whole team at the DCAS Central Storehouse which really manages the logistics for this operation. It's really hard at sometimes because we have to cover a lot of ground and you know, sometimes people bid on something and then they don't show up and we have to go through the process again.

Larry Siegel: But ultimately, our agency salvage officers and our agency partners are extremely helpful and are very committed to making sure that the process goes as smoothly as possible.

Belinda French: That's great because I would have never thought that we do 1600 auctions a year and 30,000 plus items. So definitely kudos to you and kudos to the team.

Nick Benson: Paul, we mentioned that you've worked with the Staten Island Ferry for years, but you have a really cool story because you started as a deckhand, became a marine oiler and then came into your current role. Looking back, what has it been like to touch the ferry system in so many different ways and to have grown in your role with DOT and the Staten Island Ferry?

Paul Geosits: It was something I never expected from the beginning because I started my career in 1994 as a, as a deckhand on a tugboat, and then for ten years, then I started this job at the ferry in 2004. In order to get into a position, you know, they asked me why are you going as a deckhand and not as a marine oiler? I said because I have to get my foot in somehow, correct? And they were like, okay. So, from there everything was over from there and I actually bettered myself and my career in the whole transportation industry, you know, from tugboats now to ferrying people and now supplying parts for the ferries and terminals and everything else there. You know, it's been a great road and plenty more years ahead to finish it.

Nick Benson: Yeah, it's one of the things I really love about city government and public service is you just have an opportunity to grow. And if you're ambitious and you want to better yourself and better your city, there's so many opportunities for people and you're just a wonderful example of that.

Paul Geosits: Thank you. And I love doing it. I love my job, and I love working for the City of New York and DOT.

Belinda French: What's interesting in talking about DCAS overseeing salvaging in surplus auctions is that we are not only there when it's time to say goodbye to something the City owns but we're also the agency that buys most of it. Larry, in addition to overseeing the team that handles surplus auctions, you are the chief of staff for DCAS Office of Citywide Procurement, which handles over \$1 billion in purchasing for the City each year.

Belinda French: Tell us a little bit about the DCAS Office of Citywide Procurement and what it's like having a hand in the full lifecycle of many of the things that the City buys.

Larry Siegel: So, the Office of Citywide Procurement is comprised of a few teams, including our citywide procurement team, which sets up what are called requirements contracts for all city agencies to be able to use and leverage for economies of scale. We have nearly 1200 requirements contracts that usually process about \$1.8 billion worth of shared goods and services for city agencies per year.

Larry Siegel: And that ranges from fire trucks to fuel to asphalt to toilet paper. It's really everything a city agency would need in order to provide services and support the staff that work at those agencies. We also do the procurement for DCAS as a whole. So we have construction contracts and, you know, other kinds of really complex and important agreements that help our staff maintain our buildings as well as administer our civil service exams, among other things.

Larry Siegel: We also have our Bureau of Quality Assurance, which inspects everything that is purchased off of a citywide requirements contract. So, they go out in the field and make sure that fuel is up to the highest standards. They inspect the food that is purchased by the agencies that house people, and they will inspect vehicles at the point of manufacturing to ensure that errors are caught before it's too late in the process of the City loses valuable time in the procurement process.

Larry Siegel: And we also have our Central Storehouse, which is an end-to-end warehouse in Middle Village, Queens, that serves all city agencies and provides delivery and logistic services from items like PPE and COVID testing kits to everyday cleaning supplies and facilities, products that are needed in any city office. And there are a few other programs that we oversee. And I think the surplus aspect of what we do, it helps us really ask a lot of questions at the beginning of the procurement process so that when it gets time to replace items or it gets time to the dispose of items, we have more information and can rely on some data and examples in order to make the best decisions, whether it's developing specifications for an item regarding expiration dates or disposal methods or how things should be stored. And so, they don't spoil on time. You know, we've seen it all in this office. So, the surplus aspect of things helps us put in those safeguards at the beginning of the procurement process, to ensure that the items that we're getting don't go to waste.

Belinda French: Thanks for explaining that, you know, for all of our listeners. They wouldn't realize the City can't run without its goods and services and you literally have a hand in helping the City do its job. So, thank you for that.

Nick Benson: During your introduction, Paul, I mentioned that you oversee \$15 million worth of parts, supplies, and other items that are used as part of the Staten Island Ferry system. But tell us more about your work and what is your day to day look like? What do you do each day?

Paul Geosits: Well, I start off the day usually at eight o'clock in the morning till 4:00. So, starting and submitting orders for all the trades for them to do all their repairs that you need to do, make sure all the inventory is correct and have all the reorder points for future repairs as needed. A lot of expediting orders, a lot of inventory on that, and on top of that, finishing up whatever inventory we don't use for years and years and years, like the JFK stuff I put out in the public surplus and sell it off for the City.

Paul Geosits: You know, there's a lot to it. Like what Larry was saying about the Central Storehouse. I deal with them. Great team. I dealt with a lot of the requirement contracts, dealing with purchasing off of them with MSC Granger and all of them. You know, I've been doing it for a little while. Dealing with *PassPort*, which DCAS started.

Paul Geosits: That's about it. You know, it's day to day. It's ordering and making sure everything is inventoried and everybody's happy.

Nick Benson: And a lot of times we say the cars were the backbone of city government. We're here to support everybody else. And, you know, nobody else can do their jobs without our support. So, it's kind of behind-the-scenes work, but very important stuff that helps you guys, you know, deliver on your missions.

Paul Geosits: Yes, they do.

Belinda French: So we have one final question for each of you. And Larry, I'm going to start with you. As our listeners know, this podcast is all about giving New Yorkers a behind the scenes look at city government, how it works, and the public servants who make it all happen. It doesn't have to tie back to surplus auctions, but what are you most proud of in being a public servant?

Larry Siegel: Working for, you know, my neighbors and my family and, you know, everybody I see on the street. I really enjoy learning about new things and meeting people like Paul and dealing with processes that are very unique to the City of New York. It's certainly an honor and a privilege to kind of be involved with, you know, making sure that services are provided.

Larry Siegel: And I think I'm most proud of, you know, having at least a little bit of an impact on the day to day on how this city runs. And a lot of the great people that I've

been fortunate enough to work beside and work for and work with, you know, learning about them and really better understanding why things are the way they are and how to make them better and finding those people that are equally committed to fixing things that don't make sense is really what I think I'm most passionate about.

Larry Siegel: But also, you know, most proud of in seeking that out throughout my time at DCAS and in city government.

Nick Benson: Paul, same question for you. You've had great success working your way up in your career and have really important responsibilities. What are you most proud of in being a public servant?

Paul Geosits: Well, I've been a New Yorker through and through. I've spent 47 years of my life on Staten Island. It's been a privilege to be part of the D.O.T. and Staten Island Ferry family. I'm proud of being a City employee and working for this great city. And I thank every day that I could be able to support the City and the ferry needs.

Nick Benson: That's what it's all about. Well, thank you so much, Paul. And you, too, Larry. It's always an honor to talk to people who take pride in the work they do, serving their fellow New Yorkers. The Staten Island Ferry sale was certainly a lot of fun and quite entertaining, but you both do very serious work, as do your entire teams.

Nick Benson: Larry, I've worked with you for four years now, and I know how hard you work and the great energy, intelligence, and passion you bring to everything that you do. You truly care and you represent the very best in public service. So thank you for your excellent work and taking the time to join our conversation.

Larry Siegel: Thank you for having me. It's always you know, a real kind of treat when I get to talk about, you know, some of the surplus and salvage that we deal with and, you know, thanks to you and Belinda and Paul, it's really been an honor to work with all of you in different capacities.

Belinda French: I completely agree, Larry. Paul, I really, really enjoyed this conversation. I have so much respect for the work that you do and the many hats that you have to wear. It's people like the both of you that show up and deliver every day for their fellow New Yorkers. So, thanks again. And I'm so glad that you could join us.

Paul Geosits: Thank you for having me. It was a pleasure meeting you both and especially Larry. Instead of seeing you on the phone, I finally get to see you in person, you know?

Nick Benson: All right. Well, thank you guys so much. As always, we want to thank all of our listeners for joining us. If you enjoyed our conversation, you can like and subscribe to Inside Citywide on Spotify, Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen. If

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