

Below Greenwich St., Sewer is Star of Underground Video

It will be a year at least before public officials gather with gleaming shovels on Greenwich Street to scoop up little symbolic mounds of dirt and kick off construction on the narrowing and landscaping of Greenwich between Hubert and Chambers.

But let it be recorded that the real groundbreaking on the project, known as the Greening of Greenwich, took place last month — March 12 at 4:15 p.m. to be exact — by two sewer workers named Doug Hamblin and Bob Stark.

It was then that the men lowered a giant arm-like hose coming from the tank of a truck into the catch basin at the corner of Hubert and Greenwich Streets, flipped a switch on the front of the truck and, with what sounded like a chorus of 100 vacuum cleaners, began sucking up seven feet of dirt, debris, chunks of concrete and an inordinate number of Evian bottles.

"You can always tell the class of a neighborhood by the number of Evian bottles in the basin," said Brian Wiprud, who is the construction supervisor on the Greening of Greenwich.

No one knows the innards of Greenwich Street like Wiprud, who works for the RBA Group, the engineering consultants hired by the city to plan and oversee the Greening of Greenwich. Wiprud has mapped the labyrinth of sewer, electric, gas and phone lines that snake beneath the street and which, ultimately, will determine where a curb can go or a tree can be planted.

But that day last month, and for some weeks following, Wiprud's attention was mostly turned to 2,500 feet of sewer pipe beneath Greenwich Street.

When the city goes to the



(Above) In mobile studio, Brian Wiprud, left, and Bob Stark observe video transmitted by sewer camera beneath Greenwich Street. (Right) At Hubert and Greenwich Streets, Stark sprays basin, wetting debris sucked up by giant vacuum held by Doug Hamblin. After cleaning, the basin was photographed.

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expense of doing street work, as it will be conducting on Greenwich Street, it routinely uses the occasion to make repairs to sewers and catch basins. The mission of the men working last month on Greenwich Street was to put together a picture, literally, of the sewer and basins for the city's Department of Environmental Protection so the agency can determine the condition and amount of repair or replacement that will be required and, of most interest to area residents, the amount of disruption to the neighborhood.

While catch basins can be documented with a simple Polaroid, the sewers are another matter.

Only about four feet in diameter, the pipe is videotaped remotely by a special camera that travels a damp path during "low tide." But to get a good picture, the sewer is first flushed out by a nozzle that is propelled by 80 gallons per minute of high-pressure spray. The water is

then sucked back into the truck — or "honey wagon" as the workers facetiously call it.

"I think I'm going to move upwind," Wiprud said as the first blast of water began stirring things up 12 feet below Greenwich Street, between Hubert and Beach. Dennis Flores, who was operating the hose, stood above the manhole, unphased. "So many years working on this thing, you get used to it," he said.

"It's time for the show," said Bob Stark, seated before a TV monitor, microphone and yellow keyboard and control panel.

"Grab your pop corn and peanuts," Brian Wiprud added as he took a seat nearby.

In the compartment of a truck, between the cab and cargo, is the sewer inspector's version of a mobile studio. Watching the screen, the two men have a rat's eye view of the pipe beneath Beach Street, just

before it turns onto Greenwich. The video camera bringing them the picture is a low-slung machine, called a "crawler," with oversized, deeply grooved tires, four eyeball-like lights around its lens and a neck that can stretch taller when the water rises higher. The crawler appears to have adapted to sewer life through genetic mutation.

Flipping a switch, Stark sets the camera in motion. As the tape rolls, he gives a play-by-play into the microphone, announcing what he sees. Any cracks, offset joints, or sagging pipe will be noted as the camera crawls along the old pipe, built at the time of the Civil War.

On the screen, the stream of water that was at the bottom of the picture is now on the side. The camera, which has non-turning wheels, had tried to make a right under Greenwich Street. "Obviously, we flipped over," Stark announces into

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the microphone. He attempts some maneuvers and the water now hovers at the top of the screen.

"Okay, we're completely flipped," he says.

In the days that followed there would be many delays, with the big, noisy honey wagons making themselves a more lasting presence on Greenwich Street than anyone expected.

There's good news, however, in the preliminary findings gleaned from their work. According to Wiprud, "the pipes look to be in

good shape. I haven't seen any collapses or breaks." If the luck continues, that means no open trenches on the street after the Greening of Greenwich roadwork begins.

But Wiprud was struck by a discovery of a different sort, a kind of sewer miracle. He says that deep within the 130-year-old brick pipe on Greenwich Street, near the Tribeca Grill, he saw a plant growing.

"How it could live down there, I don't know," he says. "I guess each day a little beam of light comes through the manhole."

He laughs. "And they say there's no life on Mars."