

Bird Damage

Urban pigeons are "messy, dirty, unpleasant birds," says Kevin Sluka, director of public works for Jersey City, New Jersey, population 240,000. Of the 27 public buildings that he and his staff of 250 maintain, one structure was an especially vulnerable and venerable target: city hall, the city's primary administrative building housing all official records. Designed like a traditional old school with a central courtyard, city hall occupies an entire city block. Over the years, it had become a magnet for pigeons.



"Birds were nesting and hanging out over almost every entrance," Sluka describes. Pigeon droppings hit the sidewalks, to be tracked inside on people's shoes. This created an intolerable condition, says Sluka, who worried about the public health issues. Besides 500 city employees, about 50 citizens come to city hall each day to pay bills, check records, and conduct other business.

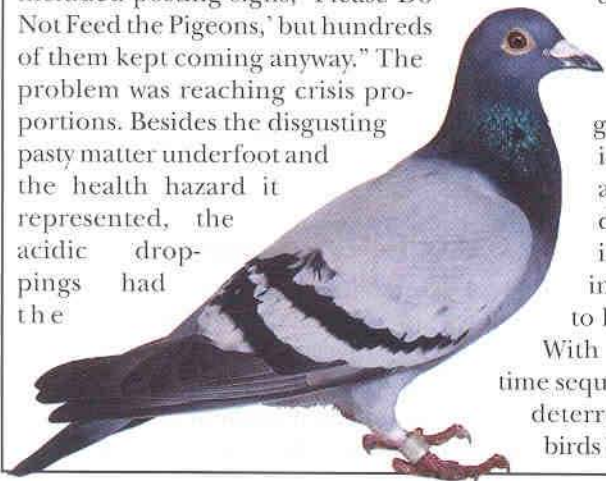
"My concerns were cosmetic at first," says Sluka, who has been Jersey City's director of public works for six years. "But as I researched the problem, I learned that the toxins in pigeon waste can present serious health hazards to humans." The droppings harbor microbes that can cause illness and disabling diseases.

To combat the daily effects of perpetual pigeon droppings, Sluka's department dispatched one custodian to mop the steps every day and conducted frequent costly power washings of the historic brick structure, which dates from 1896. But the root cause of the problem continued unabated.

DISRUPTING THE PIGEONS' POWER BASE

"We tried using owl replicas to scare the pigeons away," Sluka recalls. The owls did nothing, he reports. "In fact, the owls became the pigeons' partners," he jests. Then Sluka and his staff tried using scented material to ward off the birds—to no effect.

"Next, we reduced the availability of food and increased the annoyance factor," Sluka continues. "This included posting signs, 'Please Do Not Feed the Pigeons,' but hundreds of them kept coming anyway." The problem was reaching crisis proportions. Besides the disgusting pasty matter underfoot and the health hazard it represented, the acidic droppings had the



The BirdXPeller PRO pictured in this Florida installation by the Hillsborough Area Rapid Transit Line is the same type unit used by Jersey City to eliminate its pigeon problem at city hall. The programmable BirdXPeller replicates birds' distress cries to frighten infesting birds in their own language.

power to erode city hall's historic stone steps and walkway. Sluka asked the larger neighboring city of Newark what it had used to deter birds. He learned that Newark's method was more than the city wanted to spend.

That's when Sluka's attention turned to an advertisement he had seen for a product called BirdXPeller PRO, an electronic device made by Chicago-based Bird-X, Inc. (www.bird-x.com), that replicates birds' distress calls. BirdXPeller PRO is a programmable species-specific sonic deterrent that operates on standard 110 volt electricity or via battery. Its directional speakers broadcast precise reproductions of birds' distress cries as recorded by a major U.S. university and create a perceived "danger zone" that frightens infesting birds

away—in their own language. The programmable bird sounds include a choice of any or all eight varieties, depending on the type of infestation. The choices include predator sounds to help scare all the birds. With variable volume and time sequence controls, the sonic deterrent unit fools nuisance birds into fleeing the area.

"We had our doubts," Sluka confesses, "but we went ahead and purchased two Super BirdXPellers." The price tag was easy on the city's budget, he noted. And it was a humane method of discouraging the birds without harming them and without raising the concerns of animal rights activists.

The XPellers were installed three summers ago, and the company gave the department technical support, he says. The results were instantaneous. "Right away, the pigeons responded to the threatening noises and vacated the premises." Pigeons have not bothered city hall since. "They're happier somewhere else," Sluka attests.

"The only change I would make is to begin using the device in the winter, when the windows are closed, so people inside aren't disturbed by the distress calls." Overall, he says, it is a good trade-off. When city hall employees understood that the recorded distress calls were getting rid of the messy pigeons, they were supportive and grateful.

"I used to worry about kids dropping candy on the ground around City Hall and putting the candy back in their mouths," Sluka says. "I have young children myself." No more pigeon droppings. No more public health hazard. **PW**