

Concerned Citizens for Open Space, Inc.



CCOS FALL 2007 NEWSLETTER

Edited and produced by Barbara Benjamin and Lynn Huber

A CITY NO LONGER ENTITLED TO CALL ITSELF "THE CITY OF TREES"

Once there was a lovely small city in Westchester, justifiably known throughout the county as "The City of Trees." It began to grow after World War II as young families chose suburbia over urban living. Carefully planned building moved the city forward in a changing world, successfully dealing with the need to build more schools, more parking space downtown and affordable housing without changing the pace of life in the city.

That city no longer exists. It is the victim of those elected officials who neither understand nor care about the environment or very serious health issues involved in pollution from cars and the ability of trees to absorb much of that pollution. The city is also the victim of a developer with a personal agenda who announced he was going to turn downtown into a mini Madison Avenue ignoring the fact that, if residents had wanted to live near Madison Avenue, they would not have moved to Westchester in the first place. The developer could have, and should have, been stopped by the Mayor and Common Council. If those who had the power to do so had adhered to their own rules, nothing could have been built until elected officials developed a Master Plan that included concern for the environment and the wishes of a majority of residents.

The vital issue of meaningful open space was discussed occasionally but never given priority. Every possible inch of open space downtown has become nothing but another target for the developer. The architecture is mundane at best and the disorganized development has placed the city in the same category as Mt. Vernon, New Rochelle and Yonkers. The developer uses generous contributions to gain praise from a few and, at the same time, insists on tax breaks, financial contributions from the city and certioraris along with taxpayer's money from various federal, state and county grants. Most egregious of all, elections in the city are polluted by the infusion of suspicious PAC money that, though bi-partisan, is used to benefit candidates who support continued reckless development.

Unquestionably downtown needed revitalization, and there are some who applaud the changes, particularly the nightlife. But those who applaud what has been done, including the Mayor and some members of the Council, ignore the terrible price residents are paying. Traffic is horrific, parking hard to find and increasingly expensive, air pollution has increased at an alarming rate, commercial and residential rentals are out of sight and taxes keep going up while lack of adequate income from commercial real estate has reduced income for the city by 14% over the last ten years! Open space does not exist downtown unless parking lots and streets are considered open space. Trees have all but vanished. Our so-called "Madison Avenue" has a weird mixture of million dollar apartments, a tower named Trump and a Ritz Carlton Hotel amid lots of discount stores. Not a single supermarket can be found within walking distance for any resident in the entire city, creating additional pollution from excessive use of cars to go marketing. Public transportation for commuters and also within the downtown area does not exist, an unsolvable problem because there is no room in the heavy traffic for a fleet of large vehicles. Worse yet, city-owned open space was sold, killing trees and destroying natural habitats.

When the first tower was proposed, the Planning Commissioner said the infrastructure could withstand one tower, but no more. There has been silence since then as additional towers have been built. Not unexpectedly we are beginning to see signs of infrastructure stress.

New projects are under way and more have been approved! No green open space is planned and trees that absorb pollution do not appear on any agenda. More trees will be coming down in projects on North Street, Westchester Avenue and elsewhere. Residential neighborhoods have been spoiled by towers looming high above trees and the ambience of suburbia is fast disappearing. "Smart planning" is a term used by environmentalists and responsible city planners who view an area carefully and provide well thought out, cohesive plans that protect the ambience of a community, wishes of the residents and environment. The Administration of White Plains left planning to the developer whose only serious planning was his interest in his bottom line.

WHERE HAVE ALL THE TREES GONE?

White Plains is designated as a Tree City by the National Arbor Day Foundation. The standards for this designation, according to the Foundation website, are:

1. A Tree Board or Department
2. A Tree Care Ordinance
3. A Community Forestry Program With an Annual Budget of at Least \$2 Per Capita
4. An Arbor Day Observance and Proclamation

The intent of this designation appears to be partially satisfied because White Plains has a Tree Board, Tree Preservation Guidelines, a budget for an environmental officer and an occasional Arbor Day Observance. It is however, impossible to determine whether or not the budget for the environmental officer and the requirement for a \$2 per capita budget for a Forestry Program are in any way connected.

Sadly, the spirit of the designation is not being met. Serious oversight is completely missing and The Tree Preservation Committee is in the Logging House (i.e., the fox in the henhouse). The members of the committee are the Commissioners of Public Works, Planning and the environmental officer who, as employees of the city, are required to follow orders from city hall.

There are numerous examples of the folly of not having rules with teeth. If the Tree Preservation Guidelines had been followed, the high school tree tragedy would never have happened and the Railside fiasco construction license, which allowed the developer to cut down anything he wished, had the approval of the Tree Board but did not meet the requirements of the Guidelines.

Over the past two years storms have destroyed huge numbers of trees that have not been replaced, possibly because many home owners are not aware that the city will replace trees within six feet of the road if asked to do so by the home owner. The lack of oversight and the neglect has resulted in a very large loss of trees. It would seem that the City Administration is very selective in regard to which developer is required to follow the Tree Guidelines. The Guidelines require that the city be notified before a tree can be removed. Trees must be catalogued so that timely replacement can occur even when loss is a result of either age or wind. Negligence should require restitution of trees and financial penalties. There has been no indication that the city did anything to require that the state carefully monitor the wanton destruction of trees in the rebuilding along Route 287. It is long past time for the city to start planting tall trees instead of tall towers.

RAILSIDE FOLLY-- ADMINISTRATION PROMOTES SALE OF TREASURED, CITY-OWNED OPEN SPACE, KILLING TREES AND DESTROYING NATURAL HABITATS

Eight wooded lots on Railside Avenue contiguous to the Greenway, plus an additional lot on Railside and a lot on nearby Commerce Street, were offered for sale by the city for \$3,727,333 following the 2006 vote by the Common Council to sell them, despite overwhelming objections by residents. As a result, in March 2007 Moody's Investor Services cautioned White Plains that its

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credit rating was threatened by the practice of selling property in a one-time effort to fill a budget gap. As it turned out, only two of the ten lots were actually conveyed at that time.

The two lots were ravaged as trees were bulldozed and excavations dug for foundations for houses much larger and out of character with long existing houses in the neighborhood. As predicted by local residents, the RAILSIDE water problem emerged and foundations flooded and re-flooded, requiring workmen to pump water out onto nearby vacant lots and into the woods. The Mayor continued to insist there was no water problem on RAILSIDE. The developer concluded that the huge natural rock formation would prevent planned construction on the Commerce Street lot. The original buyers were not happy and withdrew, particularly when they discovered the proximity of their property to the contaminated city dump, a small detail no one had bothered to mention.

Early in 2007 the city quietly tried to re-sell the remaining eight lots in an obscure motion on the Consent Agenda, listed only by lot number codes. However, vigilant citizens were not fooled and succeeded in forcing the Council to hold a public vote. Despite tremendous public objection, Councilmen Bernstein, Boykin, Hockley and the Mayor voted to re-sell the remaining lots.

This re-sale closed in May 2007 at a loss of \$1,227,333, thirty three percent less than the original price, and definitely not a good deal in the real estate market at that time. The gross income for the ten lots on RAILSIDE and Commerce was only \$2,500,000, so the gross income for the eight wooded RAILSIDE lots contiguous to the Greenway was actually less than that.

Construction proceeded in spite of the stench from the adjacent dump and the resident wildlife was forced to look elsewhere for new homes. For many days neighbors were startled and babies jarred awake at 7am by the chiseling sounds of city-employed workers installing storm drains on RAILSIDE to alleviate the water drainage problem the Mayor still insisted did not exist.

According to city staff, the cost to taxpayers to install the RAILSIDE storm drain system was approximately \$180,000. In addition a new RAILSIDE cul-de-sac and new granite curbing was estimated to cost \$75,000. Old fencing separating RAILSIDE Avenue from the dump was removed and replaced by a surreal-looking 8 1/2 foot high, ugly black fence around three-fourths of the cul-de-sac, at an estimated additional cost of \$10,000. The estimated cost for "improvements" by the city totaled \$265,000 plus the cost of labor.

At most the city netted only \$2,235,000 from the sale and subsequent destruction of ten heavily wooded lots, not even almost worth the loss in perpetuity of this valuable, wooded, green open space and more trees than anyone can count. It would almost seem that White Plains is doing everything possible to destroy the environment rather than save it.

HUDSON VALLEY COMMUNITY OPEN SPACE PRESERVATION BILL

Last August CCOS Board Members France Jones and Carry Kyzivat attended a meeting in Katonah to honor and thank State Assemblyman Adam Bradley and State Senator Vincent Leibell for their sponsorship and hard work getting the Hudson Valley Community Preservation Act passed.

The meeting was sponsored by Environmental Advocates for New York and was attended by several legislators as well as representatives from many of the environmental groups in Westchester and Putnam counties.

This bill provides residents in both counties the power to raise funds to protect local natural and historic sites, including open space and parkland, when local voters choose to do so through a referendum.

Thanks to the efforts of State Assemblyman Bradley and State Senator Leibell, the measure was approved in both houses and subsequently signed into law by Governor Spitzer.

ONE LAST CHANCE -- A STATION IN A PARK!

Although White Plains is in the suburbs, the downtown has become about as urban as you can get. Experts universally agree that the more urban a city is the more need there is for a park. When cities are rated, invariably the cities that have green open space receive the highest ratings. "Smart" planning is a term used by professional city planners who understand the all-important need to provide every city with green open space. The lack of green open space in downtown White Plains is a serious detriment to the quality of life in the city. There is absolutely nothing the downtown area of White Plains needs more than it needs a beautiful tree-filled park.

The railroad station is located at one of the two major entrances to the city, a place where thousands of cars must squeeze under the railroad tracks to get into the city every day. The station is admittedly old and far from attractive and the surrounding area is hardly a good choice for a picture postcard. Considering the amount of traffic that goes under the tracks onto Main Street, it has to be the most polluted place in the entire city.

Is there anything we can do about it? One thing we can't do is to widen the opening under the tracks, nor can we reduce the number of cars. However, wonder of wonders, the land around the station belongs to the city. It is the only remaining significant undeveloped land in the downtown area. Even better, the Bronx River runs through it.

This property is the last chance White Plains has to create something of real beauty downtown. The city-owned property can and should be turned into a beautiful welcoming park, filled with pollution consuming trees. All economic indicators warn that this is a very risky time to continue a building boom.

Jog your memories just a little and think about the fact that at the end of the previous building spree in White Plains, when several office buildings were built, White Plains became famous for having the highest percentage of unoccupied office space in the entire world! Surely this is not the time to allow Mr. Cappelli, or some other builder, to put up several new office towers and add thousands of additional cars in the most polluted place in the city.

Really "smart" planning is long overdue. The Council should develop a plan that includes what most residents want, not what Mr. Cappelli wants. The station belongs to Metro North; the land around it belongs to the city. Mr. Cappelli already owns most of the remainder of the downtown area. He doesn't need any more towers and neither do we. We need a downtown park, and the station is the appropriate and only available place to put it.

LONG WAIT FOR VETERANS' MEMORIAL PARK

Almost a decade after a vacant, city-owned, 1.5 acre property at the foot of Battle Hill was designated as parkland, local veterans, historians and open-space advocates, with CCOS at the fore, are asking why there has been no movement on a proposed Veterans' Memorial Park that was to be built there.

Wayne McGrath, a retired Marine Corps colonel and organizer of the city's annual Memorial Day parade, noted in a letter to the Journal News that, "The city seems to be supportive of creating a meaningful Veterans' Memorial Park, but when we presented our proposal to the Mayor and asked him to appoint a formal committee to move things forward, nothing happened."

Representative of several veteran groups, Jack Harrington, former president of the White Plains Historical Society, and Alan Teck of CCOS, met several times in the past year. An architect drew preliminary plans depicting a walkway with thirteen stone monuments, one for each war the United States has fought. Each monument would have a bronze plaque describing the war and a list of White Plains soldiers who had been killed in each one. Jack Harrington said, "Our idea is to keep the park simple and make it a place where students and others could learn

about the contributions White Plains citizens have made to the nation's history." Jack Harrington also said the Historical Society would pay for bronze plaques. In addition, the group discussed several ways to finance the park "without cost to taxpayers."

Development of a Memorial Park at this time would be an especially meaningful public gesture. It would provide timely recognition of all men and women currently serving in the nation's armed forces around the world.

EFFORTS TO DESTROY VETERANS' MEMORIAL PARK ARE THWARTED

A few months ago, at the request of the Mayor, the newly appointed co-chair of the Mayor's Open Space Committee, Councilman Hockley, met with a developer to discuss ways our representatives in Albany could be persuaded to remove dedication of land that had been set aside for a Veterans' Memorial Park so apartments could be built on part of the property. It was reported that the Mayor's Chief of Staff, Paul Wood, was at the meeting and promised to go to Albany to see what could be done to get State approval to remove the open-space dedication. CCOS contacted our State representatives and was assured this would never happen.

LARGE SCALE DESTRUCTION OF TREES AND OPEN SPACE AT WP HIGH SCHOOL

On August 3 the Superintendent of Buildings and Grounds for the Board of Education decided, without consultation or approval from anyone, to cut down dozens of full-grown hardwood and pine trees on the grounds of the WP High School. The destruction included more than twenty hardwood trees two feet or more in diameter and dozens of large pine trees that had served as a buffer between neighborhood homes and the high school property. To make matters even worse, the huge tree trunks that were of considerable value were chipped for use as mulch in other parts of the city.

Timothy Connors, Superintendent of WP schools, and members of the Board of Education, none of whom knew about the project until it had been completed, met with members of the community to express their dismay about what had happened. They promised that the land would be restored to its original state as much as possible, acknowledging that it will take at least thirty to forty years before the newly planted trees reach the height of the trees that were cut down. The new trees will include a buffer of pine trees and many hardwood trees on the decimated property. Timing for the replacement of trees has been vague enough to imply that, although they "hope" to replant this fall, they are not prepared to commit to a fall replanting. That would be unforgivable.

In addition to expressing distress about the cutting of trees and the wanton destruction of wild life habitat, members of the community were critical about the lack of appropriate oversight and control that could have allowed an action of this type to be the unilateral decision of one person. There was also anger about the lack of communication between the Board of Education and the residents who were so dramatically and seriously impacted by the removal of their entire buffer area.

Once again, the official guidelines for the care of trees in WP have been ignored.

C.C.O.S. SCHOLARSHIP AWARD FOR HIGH SCHOOL SENIOR

On June 6, 2007, Emily Boshi became the fourth recipient of the annual C.C.O.S. Scholarship Award. C.C.O.S. treasurer, Lynn Huber, presented her with the \$500.00 award during Senior Awards Night at the White Plains High School before an enthusiastic audience of students, families, teachers, and supporters.

Each year the award recognizes a student whose academic work and extracurricular activities best exemplify commitment to the preservation and care of open space and the

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environment. It also encourages environmental responsibility in students. Boshi was chosen as the 2007 recipient because of her academic record and her commitment to protection of the environment. Starting in sixth grade, she has been chosen to be on the Honor Roll numerous times. Since the ninth grade, she has been a member of the Advocates for the Earth, an organization at White Plains High School.

While Boshi's plans for the future include the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts in North Adams, Mass., and a career as an elementary school teacher, her heart is still very much attuned to the environment. In a recent essay, she stated, "I feel caring about the earth is as simple as caring about yourself."

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REMEMBRANCE OF DON WILSON. THE FOUNDER OF CCOS

Don Wilson, our founder, died in December 2006. CCOS will be holding a Tree Planting Ceremony in his memory on Friday, November 9 (rain date is November 16) at 10:30am.

Everyone is invited to join us.

To attend, go to the Gedney Way entrance to the Greenway. Walking shoes are strongly recommended

For further information please contact Midge Sanchez at 949-3406.

Please use this tear-off coupon to make sure we register your tax-deductible contribution. Your generous gift will help us continue to protect the quality of life in White Plains.

Concerned Citizens for Open Space

Tax-Deductible Contribution:

___ \$35 ___ \$50 ___ \$75
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Please MAKE CHECKS OUT TO OSI and mail your contribution to Lynn Edward Huber, CCOS Treasurer, P.O. Box 345, White Plains 10605. Thank you!