

Opinions

Editorial comment

Growing pains

Stand in the middle of Riverdale — in the West 230s on Riverdale or Johnson or Oxford Avenue, say — and look up. See Riverdale's new skyline, where skeletons of steel and garish walls of glass claw upwards.

Soon more than a thousand families will occupy those buildings. How old will their children be? How many of them will go to neighborhood public schools? to Catholic schools? to Jewish schools? to the hilltop private schools?

How many cars will each new family add to the stream of traffic here? How many new garage spaces are being built along with the new apartments? (Not enough, we know already, but how many more cars will be jockeying for street parking?)

How many of the new Riverdalians will commute to Wall Street? how many to Midtown? East side or west? Will they drive to work or use mass transit?

Riverdale will almost certainly be getting younger, but will many more adolescents be living here? If so, do our community centers offer the right mix of programs, and do Riverdale Community Center, Riverdale Neighborhood House and the YM-YWHA have the space and the funds to serve the needs of a burgeoning group of young people?

No definitive answers can be given, of course, until the buildings are completed and our new neighbors move in. But planners can make some pretty good guesses. And that's what we need now, before the influx: planning.

Consider the strains already being felt here and reflected in angry words exchanged on the street between residents and traffic agents; at meetings about the expansion of Horace Mann, SAR Academy and

Fieldston School; in heated statements from elected officials about express bus service, traffic issues, and which children get to use the classroom space in the Whitehall apartment building.

More neighborly but no less urgent discussion has already taken place over how soccer players and Little League and high school baseball and softball players will share Seton Park's fields, and over how often school and college teams should be able to monopolize Seton's and Van Cortlandt Park's tennis courts.

For the better part of a decade, Community Board 8 was preoccupied with curbing Riverdale's growth spurt. It wasn't easy. The city's planning bureaucracy creaked and equivocated and dawdled over the board's carefully-drawn blueprint for the future. It rejected important initiatives that, along with the delays, allowed too many

buildings to rise too high here.

That the board wanted a breather after pushing through its rezoning proposals three years ago and signing off on tightening the Greenbelt regulations and the Fieldston Historic District early this year is understandable. But precisely because the rezoning was too little too late, Board 8, along with Riverdale's many grassroots organizations — its homeowners and block associations, school parent associations, the Association of Riverdale Co-ops, the Jewish Community Council, the Riverdale Nature Preservancy — need to resume the work of shaping our neighborhood's future from the ground up.

The alternative is that developers will continue to shape it for us, with little thought to what life here will be like when they're done.

