

Opinions

Editorial comment

Protecting the Greenbelt

When the Greenbelt law to safeguard Riverdale's wooded and rocky land was enacted in 1975, it immediately sparked intense and long-running struggles over how the largest two tracts in the Natural Area District established by the law would be developed.

In both cases, the Delafield Estate on 246th Street west of the Henry Hudson Parkway, and Chapel Farm adjacent to Fieldston, the law failed to accomplish its purpose. It did not give developers a clear understanding of what they could and couldn't do; yet it did not preserve either the gardens of Edward Delafield or the woodlands of Chapel Farm.

That alone should have alerted the city's planning bureaucracy decades ago to the shortcomings in the law. It argues even at this late date for the passage of the new rules the City Planning Commission finally got around to considering at a hearing last week.

In the case of Delafield, the new law gave Community Board 8 a seat at the table, and as a condition of board approval of his plans, the developer agreed to post a bond to be used to restore the land if he could not complete his work. Instead, years of litigation between the homeowners and a succession of builders left the unfinished project a moonscape.

At Chapel Farm, the community board and the City Council voted down plans for development, but, ironically, that turned out to be just what the developer needed to overcome a quarter-century of opposition. In the event of a rejection, development can proceed as of right, so long as the building lots are sufficiently large.

That's like telling a condemned man the executioner will come in the morning, but in the meantime the cell door is unlocked, the guards are off-duty and there's a car with a key in its ignition just outside.

A law that imposes restrictions and calls for time-consuming negotiations and hearings but incorporates an escape clause from its own requirements makes no sense. As Councilman Oliver Koppell said at the meeting he convened at PS 81 to discuss the proposed changes to the Greenbelt rules, "You can take every rock at Chapel Farm and blow it up." The present situation, he added, is "contrary to the intention of the zoning. It just doesn't make sense."

The battle of Chapel Farm, however, is over. Even the Fieldston residents and

preservationist organizations that deplored the builder's plans have to wish him success in completing his project, now that he has reduced much of the estate to a wasteland of mud and debris. If the onset of weather prevents him from getting his foundations in before the more restrictive new rules take effect, we could see a repeat of the sorry Delafield story in which portions of the property remain blighted for years.

As Riverdalian Hal Dorfman, an architect who opposes the new rules as unnecessarily onerous, pointed out at Mr. Koppell's meeting at PS 81, there are no more large, unbuilt tracts in the Greenbelt. There remains plenty of room to build, however. A plague of McMansions continues to afflict Fieldston, as homeowners obliterate gardens and cut down the trees the original builders carefully preserved. Moreover, it's been 10 years since the Riverdale Nature Preservancy warned that the private schools and

nursing homes in or on the borders of the Greenbelt could add millions of square feet of buildings and parking lots under existing zoning rules.

Since then, Board 8 has called for the expansion of the Greenbelt and for the elimination of a zoning bonus that permits institutions to build more extensively than their residential neighbors, but the planning department has placed expanding the Greenbelt on the back burner and vetoed eliminating the institutional bonus. Armed with the new regulations, Riverdalians and their representatives should turn their attention to forcing the planning department to implement their proposals for enlarging the Natural Area District.

The new Greenbelt rules will help preserve Riverdale's tree-garlanded streetscapes and campuses, and will eliminate such irrational provisions as applying one set of rules for trees on properties developed before 1975, and another for trees on properties developed in the last 29 years.

New rules have been long-sought and are long overdue. Indeed, they are but a first step toward preserving some of the qualities that set our neighborhood apart. They deserve the support of every resident who cherishes what is all too rare in our city of brick and concrete, the sweet song of birds and the cavorting of squirrels in the urban woodland of which we are stewards.

It's too late to protect the largest tracts in Riverdale's Greenbelt, but regulations to protect the landscape can still preserve some of what makes our neighborhood special.