



Photo by Alan Zale

THE SECLUDED area behind stores in the Staples shopping center on Broadway is prime real estate for graffiti vandals.

Hoped-for greenway remains an eyesore

By Etanjalie Narraph

Drivers who pass through Kingsbridge on the Major Deegan Expressway would be forgiven for thinking the Bronx has never recovered from the days when it was an internationally-known symbol of urban neglect and decay.

The back walls and loading docks of stores that present a well-kept front to shoppers on Broadway are covered with layers of graffiti. Trash and debris are only partly concealed by the weeds that divide the stores from the highway.

The Sanitation Department has finally taken steps to get part of the area cleaned up. Many of the storeowners in the Staples Shopping Center on Broadway between West 233rd and 234th streets have received a summons and a \$1,000 fine because of the trash behind the stores, said Dr. Scott Luckow, who has owned Broadway Animal Hospital in the Staples center for more than two decades.

Dr. Luckow, who agrees the area is filthy and that something needs to be done, said he plans to fight the summons in court, arguing that he hasn't dumped the trash, and may not even own the property in question. CSX, the freight railroad that inherited the right-of-way of the New York Central railroad's Putnam Division, owns much of the property between the Deegan and the Broadway stores.

For years, the Parks Department, backed by local community leaders, has envisioned transforming the Putnam line to a greenway, a plan that at its most visionary called for plantings, benches and a bike path along the route; community gardens and a playground at the Marble Hill Houses; and an indoor recreation center in the rehabilitated shell of an old power house at West 225th Street.

The greenway would replace the abandoned tracks of the commuter railroad that ceased operation half a century ago. The old rail line is already a greenway through Van Cortlandt Park and from Hastings-on-Hudson to the Westchester-Putnam County border. Plans call for completing a 40-mile trail with a Yonkers link.

But although the Parks Department began talks about the portion south of Van Cortlandt in March with CSX, little progress has been made. Meanwhile, most of the area along the tracks festers and the sale of a portion of the property has cut it

off from the greenway plan.

"It's so filled with garbage it's disgusting," said Assemblyman Jeffrey Dinowitz. "The actual trail could be turned into such a great asset for the Bronx," he added.

"It's a little bit, out of sight out of mind," said Community Board 8 chairman, Tony Cassino. It's one of those sites that's not well maintained," he said, partly because "it's not visible. It doesn't get much attention."

So far efforts to persuade CSX to clean up have been unavailing. The undertaking would be huge, Mr. Dinowitz said, but, he added, "They own the property; they certainly have to maintain the property."

The Parks Department warns that acquisition of the land won't come soon. The state Department of Transportation assigned preferential rights to New York City to purchase the right-of-way along the highway from 230th to 231st streets and 233rd to 237th streets, but the sale would be subject to a land review process that could take one to two years, said Ashe Reardon, a spokesman for the Parks Department.

Target, the anchor store in the River Plaza mall, decided to take matters into its own hands last spring. It purchased the land behind the store on West 225th Street from CSX and has cleared the area of trash and graffiti.

But privatizing the land complicates the possibility of linking the Putnam trail to the proposed Harlem River trail to the south and to the triangle of land where the tracks meet the Harlem River, a parcel that the committee of local residents appointed by elected officials to study greenway routes envisioned as a large, new park.

Target "wanted to clean it because it wasn't good for their store and that was a priority for them," Mr. Cassino said, but he said the board had held "some early discussions" about access with Target, "and they're very willing to work with us."

It is not clear why the block between the West 231st and 232nd streets is not included in the Parks Department's preferential rights. The area near the West 232nd Street overpass is particularly neglected. Stairs lead to a stretch of land where trash has accumulated for years. A foul order rises from the dump.

CSX did not return calls asking whether the company plans to clean up the right-of-way.