

## The withering of the Greenbelt

**W**hen John and Bobby Kennedy lived at 5040 Independence Avenue, they played tag and tossed a ball in the shade of the maples in front of their house.

Now three of the trees are corpses, and the two that flank them are clearly stressed. The skeletal, leafless branches are what indifference looks like — the indifference of the city's planning bureaucracy to the character of the neighborhoods they are supposed to protect.

George Perkins, the owner of Wave Hill, planted the trees in a formal row along the front lawns of the three homes he built early in the 20th century to house his maiden aunts. They formed part of a living picket fence running from 252nd Street to 249th Street.

The house the future president knew is unrecognizable today. It fell victim to a bitter custody fight when the couple that was remodeling it broke up. Left open to the elements, its shell was acquired by Riverdalian Nicholas Notias, who owns it through a holding company. For 14 years, he has been promising to complete the new building and move in. But despite sporadic progress, work on the house is never finished.

During periods of activity, trucks and construction equipment sat on the maple trees' roots for months. The Riverdale Nature Preservancy and many individual Riverdalian warned that that was a death sentence for the trees, because the heavy equipment was compacting the soil, restricting the uptake of water and oxygen.

In 1996, the Department of Buildings sent someone to look. Looks fine to me, shrugged inspector Fleming Arthur. (His exact words were "No visible damage to trees.") Mr. Arthur may have been an estimable inspector of structures, but he clearly had no knowledge of horticulture.

It takes time to strangle a tree, especially a large, mature tree. But a tree that has been cut off for an extended period from its supply of oxygen, water and minerals will weaken, become susceptible to insects and disease and, ultimately, die before its time.

If the Independence Avenue maples were merely the victims of human error, they would not be especially noteworthy; they matter not in themselves, but as a symbol

of the general conditions in the Riverdale Greenbelt. Although the Natural Area District was created to preserve Riverdale's distinctive plantings and topography, for decades the planning bureaucracy has been ignoring the destruction of the natural landscape its rules are supposed to protect.

Beginning in the late 1970s, Board 8 and local preservationists called for extending the Greenbelt rules to all the properties in the Natural Area District and for closing the loophole that ultimately permitted a developer to devastate Chapel Farm. In 1986, a local naturalist wrote in a professional journal that neither contractors nor city inspectors understood the consequences of construction, a warning taken up by the Riverdale Nature Preservancy, which began calling in 1988 for tighter regulations to safeguard the green heritage that makes Riverdale so distinctive.

Yet not until last February did the City Planning Commission enact new rules meeting those demands.

Moreover, rules mean little without vigorous and intelligent enforcement. The Buildings Department is ill-equipped for the job. It is stretched thin at a time when real estate is sizzling citywide and when the clatter and bang of construction equipment resounds everywhere in Riverdale.

Even before the new regulations applied the Greenbelt rules to hundreds of properties that were previously exempt, Community Board 8 found the department had mistakenly issued permits to homeowners and developers who should have been subject to reviews first.

Builders cut down a stand of trees on 254th Street, and a wooded lot in Fieldston was saved at the last minute, when Board 8 intervened. On Palisade Avenue, builders leveled a slope and piled construction materials on a bluff overlooking the Hudson River before the department realized its mistake. It issued a stop-work order, leaving the property in limbo, to the further distress of both its neighbors and its owner.

The lesson is that we can't relax now that new zoning rules have been enacted. Without the vigorous advocacy of residents who care about our community's distinctive qualities, the rules will not suffice. The future will be won by those who fight hardest for it.

**The same planning bureaucracy that dithered while developers crammed high-rises into central Riverdale has dithered while the Greenbelt suffered.**