



RIVERDALE NATURE PRESERVANCY

1996 Annual Report

May 9, 1997

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Program Director

The qualities of Riverdale inure to the benefit of all of its residents, and are also a great benefit to the whole City. Since 1974 the natural features of the Riverdale Community have been protected by our designation as a Special Natural Area District.

The Riverdale Nature Preservancy (RNP) is dedicated to the preservation of those natural features, the residential character of the community, and our cultural heritage through the full enforcement of the Special Natural Area District regulations, support of historic preservation, and effective land use planning. The RNP Board sees the potential for overdevelopment as the primary threat to these values.

During 1996 the Riverdale Nature Preservancy made a concerted effort to build alliances with civic groups who share our interest in putting in place a plan and a regulatory structure that will preserve the community's natural, cultural and historic values. At the same time, we continued to act on a number of site specific development issues that have immediate consequences for the community.

Strategic Efforts

To reduce the potential for site specific development conflicts, we are engaged in three strategic efforts to better define the features of our community that we seek to preserve, and to put in place a plan and strengthened regulatory structure. They are:

1. **A 197-a Plan** -- Provided for in the City Charter, a 197-a Plan is a land-use plan which is created by a local community. It must be sponsored by the local Community Board or the Borough President and approved by the City Planning Commission, the City Council and the Mayor. After advocating for the Plan for several years, we now have the support of our local officials and the Community Board to develop a 197-a Plan for Community Board No. 8. The Community Board conducted a hearing on the need for a Plan and formed a Committee to define the scope and resources that this Plan will require. The Preservancy will support the Community Board efforts to develop a plan that encompasses all of Community Board 8 and will work to shape and define the Plan as it applies to the Special Natural Area District.
2. **A Cultural Resource Assessment of the Special Natural Area District** -- It will define the archeological and historic significance of the area, and the special architectural features including the existing Historic District, the twelve designated Landmarks, and approximately 80 sites that have been identified as significant and worthy of further study for landmarking. The draft Cultural

Resource Assessment also identifies the layout of the road system and the rock walls along the roads as worthy of consideration for landmarking. This report will form an important information base for our 197-a Plan. In addition, we will explore the benefits of additional research to identify areas that may lead to a proposal for a second Historic District and will advance the designation of more sites as Landmarks.

3. **The Community Facility Preference of the City's Zoning Resolution** -- The Community Facility Preference is a major threat to our community because it encourages over-development by allowing Community Facilities to construct buildings which are two or three times the size of what is permitted by residential construction on the same site. Over the course of the past year, the Preservancy has worked with other civic groups in Community Board No. 8 to form a coalition of eighteen organizations to support a proposal to remove the Community Facility Preference and give Community Facilities the same development rights that their residential neighbors enjoy. We are in discussion with Community Board No. 8 and the local Community Facilities that would be impacted by such a change. We also met with Joseph Rose, Chairman of the City Planning Commission, and are working with the Commission's staff to define our next steps.

Site Specific Focus

We are working on the following development proposals that affect the Special Natural Area District or our nearby neighbors:

- **Russian Federation** -- The Federation has proposed demolition of its existing building and construction of a new 350,000 square foot residential and office complex that would be fifty percent larger than the existing building. Under the Community Facility Preference the Russians claim the right to build 600,000 square foot rather than the 225,000 square feet allowed for residential construction. Although the site is just outside the Special Natural Area District, it raises the same issues of over-development that we have been working on. We worked closely with the Riverdale Community Association to examine and challenge the Russian Federation proposal. We enlisted support from the Community Board and the local officials with the result that the Federation is back at square one and is rethinking their approach to new development. We also raised legal issues to ensure that any construction that the Russian Federation undertakes fully complies with the Zoning Resolution.
- **The 18 Story Sliver** -- An aggressive developer from outside of our community proposed construction of an 18 story building to provide housing for the well-elderly. Using the mid-town Manhattan tactic of transferring adjacent air rights, the developer designed a building many stories higher than the neighboring structures. Again, the new building is located just beyond the border of the Special Natural Area District. With the borrowed air rights, the developer claimed his proposal met all zoning requirements and needed no local approvals, so the community learned of the plan late in the approval process. The Preservancy joined forces with the local opposition group, the Ad Hoc Committee to Improve Our Neighborhood (ACTION), to challenge the 18 story plan. We were able to identify parts of the plan that were out of compliance and were instrumental in securing an agreement to reduce the building height by four stories.

- **Chapel Farm Proposal** -- Various plans to develop housing at the Chapel Farm site at the north end of Fieldston have been proposed over the past twenty years. Recently, a new plan that would subdivide the property and create fourteen building lots has surfaced. The Preservancy is cooperating with the Fieldston Property Owners Association (FPOA) to review the current proposal. Our initial look indicates that the proposed construction would destroy about 700 trees, remove substantial rock outcroppings, and construct a very steep road on the north side of the property. We will continue working with FPOA to monitor the course of this proposal.
- **Kennedy House** -- Construction and renovation of the Kennedy House has been underway for approximately five years. Repeated efforts to encourage the owner to maintain the site in decent shape and complete the work have had little effect, prompting the Preservancy to ask an architect, a lawyer and tree expert to assess the situation. They concluded that the house exceeded residential zoning limits by 5,000 square feet. In addition, they found that the retaining walls along Independence Avenue and 252nd Street had been built in a mapped street and were therefore illegal. Also, change of grade on the property violated the Special Natural Area District Regulations. A tree expert reported that the retaining walls and the grade changed had damaged three linden trees, nineteen horse chestnut trees and eleven maples. We have filed letters of protest with the Buildings Department and the City Planning Commission. We have also approached the current owner to discuss his signing a covenant to run with the land that would ensure single family use and prohibit conversion of the house to a community facility.
- **Blackstone Development** -- Ten new houses near Independence Avenue and 252nd Street were built on lots subject to the Special Natural Area District Regulations and under a covenant that prohibits the destruction of certain trees and set limits on grade changes. One owner removed protected trees, built illegal fences, and changed the grade without proper authorization. At the Preservancy's request, the Buildings Department stopped the work on the site. The owner is now applying for permits on his prior actions and to remove more trees and make further grade changes. We are working with the Buildings Department, the City Planning Commission, the Community Board and the neighbors to alleviate the problems caused by these changes and to ensure that the Special Natural Area District Regulations are enforced.
- **The Campagna Estate** -- After the Yeshiva of Telshe and the Preservancy reached agreement on a design proposal that provided requested space for dormitories and a Bais Midrash and would minimize the impact on the Community, the Yeshiva submitted the plan for approval to the New York City Landmark Preservation Commission. The Commission rejected the plan, saying that it impacted the architectural integrity of the Landmark. The Commission held that it was not responsible for evaluating the impact on the surrounding community and refused to consider those effects. This prompted the Preservancy to file an Article 78 Proceeding against the Landmark Preservation Commission, arguing that it is subject to the State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQRA). SEQRA requires that impacts on the local community be considered. This proceeding has been pending for the past two years because the Yeshiva had not submitted all of the detailed drawings that the Commission requires. The Preservancy was recently advised that the Yeshiva has submitted the outstanding drawings and we expect that the court case to become active in 1997.

- **The Croton Filtration Plant** -- The New York City Department of Environmental Protection proposed construction of a large industrial-type filtration plant at Jerome Park Reservoir. Although the site is located outside the Special Natural Area District, the decision whether and where to build is important to all residents of Community Board No. 8. The Preservancy worked with local community groups and the Community Board to get the City to reassess its plans. The City is now evaluating sites in Van Cortlandt Part, Yorkers, mid-Westchester and the original site at Jerome Park Reservoir. The City also agreed to examine the need for water filtration. We will continue to monitor the process and cooperate with the community but we do not expect to spend money on it.

Financial Report

The financial position of the Riverdale Nature Preservancy continues to be strong. As you can see from the 1996 financial report (see below) the year ended with a positive cash balance. This gives the Preservancy two years with a positive year-end balance. The 1997 budget includes new expenses for a Program Director and an office bringing the 1997 revenue requirements to \$110,000, a \$12,000 increase over 1996. The existing cash balance is important to keep on hand in case one of the above situations merits court action.

Contributors

Below is the breakout of individual contributions during 1994, 1995, and 1996 and our goals for 1997.

Riverdale Nature Preservancy Contributors

AMOUNT CONTRIBUTED	NUMBER OF HOUSEHOLDS			
	1994 Actual	1995 Actual	1996 Actual	1997 Budget
\$ 5,000 or More	9	8	8	10
\$ 1,000 - \$ 4,999	24	14	9	10
\$ 500-\$ 999	9	7	7	20
\$ 250-\$ 499	21	13	7	20
\$ 100-\$ 249	49	27	44	50
Less than \$ 100	<u>44</u>	<u>28</u>	<u>75</u>	<u>90</u>
TOTAL CONTRIBUTIONS	156	97	150	200

Riverdale Nature Preservancy Financial Report (\$)

REVENUE	<u>1995</u> Actual	<u>1996</u> Actual	<u>1997</u> Budget
Contributions	67,222	59,033	75,000
Foundations	35,000	36,500	35,000
Interest	740	770	-
Environmental Bond	-	1,990	-
Other	-	9	-
TOTAL REVENUE	102,962	98,303	110,000
EXPENSES			
Land Use Planning	678	3,226	
Cultural Resource Assessment	1,167	8,780	
Landmark Preservation Suit	8,920	310	
Sub Total STRATEGIC	10,765	12,316	15,000
Russian Federation	-	17,336	
Campagna Estate	5,470	-	
Blackstone Development	2,368	4,785	
Hebrew Home	-	1,750	
Chapel Farm	-	730	
Kennedy House	1,068	8,756	
Salanter Akiba Riverdale	-	542	
3718 Henry Hudson / 18 Story Sliver	-	3,957	
Railroad / 154th Street	1,238	-	
Environmental Bond Act	-	1,990	
Croton Filtration Plant	666		
Other Projects *	4,848		
Sub Total PROJECTS	15,658	39,846	40,000
Program Dir. Salary/Expenses	-	-	45,000
Administrative Expenses	18,890	12,437	10,000
Sub Total ADMINISTRATIVE	18,890	12,437	55,000
TOTAL EXPENSES	45,313	64,599	110,000
Net Income	57,649	33,704	0
Starting Fund Balance	(8,682)	46,331	80,035
Ending Fund Balance	46,331	80,035	80,035

* Hebrew Home for the Aged (Johnson Avenue), Jewish Federation, Hoffman School and other Small Projects