

Leaders laud zoning vote

'Estate area' developers face tighter restrictions

By Joshua Payne

The City Council approved the rezoning of Riverdale's so-called "estate area" last week, making official new regulations that restrict development and completing an important step in the community's ongoing struggle to determine its future.

The measure is designed to preserve the existing character of the area, which is west of the Henry Hudson Parkway between 230th and 261st streets. The new zoning prohibits subdividing lots into parcels smaller than 9,500 square feet and allows only single-family homes to occupy those lots.

A portion of the area bounded by West 254th Street, Independence Avenue, Spaulding Lane and Riverdale Park is also recognized as a historic district by the New York City Landmarks Commission.

Basically, the rezoning agrees with the intent of Community Board 8's comprehensive plan — drawn up in 1997 — to ensure that the Riverdale-Kingsbridge area continues to look much the way it does now. It is the eighth neighborhood rezoning approved by the Council for the Northwest Bronx. Five more are under consideration.

While the notion of a community-wide plan had been brewing among local leaders for some time, they were convinced that there was an urgent, concrete need almost 10 years ago

when residents banded together to fight the proposed height of the Atria building, set to rise along the Henry Hudson Parkway near West 238th Street.

Jim Grossman, president of the neighboring Fieldston Garden apartments' co-

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op board, led the fight against Atria and remembers one community board meeting when more than 200 residents showed up to oppose the building.

"That fight against Atria captured the attention of the public and public officials," Mr. Grossman said, "and was in a way the catalyst for the 197-a plan being passed."

Under section 197-a of New York City's Charter, community boards may propose plans for the development and improvement of land within their districts.

Board 8's plan, titled "CD 8 2000: A River to Reservoir Preservation Strategy," took shape when the board, enlisted residents, consultants and the Department of City Planning to envision the area's future and offer suggestions for its evolution. It included guidelines for the neighborhoods of Fieldston, Kingsbridge, Kingsbridge Heights, Marble Hill, Riverdale, Spuyten Duyvil and Van Cortlandt Village.

The City Council approved the entire plan on November 19, 2003 and then considered each neighborhood's rezoning as a separate component when Board 8 and the department of city planning refined the proposals.

Contextual zoning

Van Cortlandt Village, north and central Riverdale, and Spuyten Duyvil have already been rezoned to keep future development in context with the existing environs and an amendment has been passed to strengthen regulations protecting the Special Natural Area District, known as SNAD.

With the Oct. 11 passage of the estate area zoning, Board 8 Chairman Tony Cassino said, "The vast majority of the critical rezoning has been done. Other than extensions of the Special Natural Area District, additional areas for rezoning require further study."

The areas that have been rezoned went into the process with a high compliance rate, meaning their neighborhood characteristics already fit the proposed rezoning. According to Mr. Cassino, they were also the areas "under imminent assault" from developers, who he said often "don't think about squeezing new families and cars into already crowded streets and schools."

Indeed, Mr. Cassino said that the most strenuous lobbying against the plan came from developers, but he was relieved that their efforts gained no favor at City Hall.

"In order to cross the finish line you need the political force and will to do it," Mr. Cassino said. "That's where I think the most critical role was played by the mayor."

Former City Councilwoman June Eisland, who represented District 11 — and chaired the council's land use committee — when the 197-a plan was conceived, agreed with that assessment of Mayor Michael Bloomberg's efforts, saying, "This mayor has led with vision not only for our 197-a plan but for zoning changes throughout the city."

Plenty of credit

Ms. Eisland added that in this process, which requires several bureaucratic hurdles to be cleared for the adoption of each plank in the plan, there's enough credit to go around.

"If just one link had been missing it wouldn't have come to fruition," she said.

As with any deal struck between the city and a borough, shrewd negotiation also played a part.

"In the first version we gave up quite a bit to get it passed," said Lorraine Hockert, who was Board 8 chairman when the plan was first submitted to the City Planning Commission. Early on the plan called for limiting the expansion of institutions such as colleges, houses of worship and hospitals and stronger measures to protect Greenbelt areas, both of which had city-wide ramifications and were abandoned so the plan could proceed at a quicker pace.

Mr. Hockert also attributed success to the fact that "the plan was very well vetted in the community."

The Press published a comprehensive multi-part series on the plan when it was released.

Riverdale, in particular, is an area that has long sought to wrest control of its destiny from those in City Hall 16 miles to the south and from developers closer to home who seek to alter its face in the name of market forces.

As early as 1954 Gilbert Kerlin, president at the time of the Riverdale Community Planning Association, shepherded through the Board of Estimate a plan to guide the area's development and protect single-family homes by rezoning almost 2,000 acres.

"Kerlin was really the first one looking to preserve Riverdale as a less dense community using a comprehensive plan," said Councilman Oliver Koppell, who claimed to be "very gratified" by the 197-a rezoning measures enacted so far.

The next benchmark in the planning saga came in 1968, when Manoussoff Associates, hired by the Community Planning Board 10 — the precursor to Community Board 8 — to provide recommendations for neighborhood improvements, issued its Master Plan for Riverdale. That plan contained many suggestions that are still relevant today, including the creation of more on-street parking and, "The upzoning of specific sections of Riverdale to limit future high density development."

For the next step in the current land use process, Mr. Koppell would like to see landmark status accorded to the Fieldston neighborhood.

Future plans

At Board 8's Oct. 11 meeting Nestor Danyluk, a city planner at the Department of City Planning's Bronx office, said the department has devoted so much time to the Northwest Bronx that it is now swamped with requests from other parts of the borough and needs to address them over the next few months.

Nevertheless, Charles Moerdler, chairman of Board 8's land use committee, is looking to have a session with the department in the next two months to discuss expanding the SNAD regulations.

Mr. Cassino said that future rezonings might apply to Kingsbridge, including Irwin Avenue between 232nd and 235th streets and Corlear Avenue near 230th Street. He also would like to see SNAD protection brought to the Vinmont, Tibbett Avenue and Manhattan College areas.

All the public officials involved in the process stressed the need to continually monitor the streets and lots of the district.

"The 197-a in and of itself does nothing," said Ms. Eisland, cautioning against complacency. "It's important for a community to have a plan that's not piecemeal or haphazard, but it's the action afterward that counts."

Mr. Cassino sees no end to action in the community from either side of the development debate.

"As long as interest rates remain low and housing's a high priority, building will continue," Mr. Cassino said. He then added, "None of the rezoning was meant to stop development, we just wanted to impose some sense and context on the process."